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**The Mong American Families***Paoze Thao, Ph.D.**California State University, Monterey Bay*

*This article features the structures of the Mong American families. It consists of three parts. Part I provides information on the Mong American family life, the social, political, economic, spiritual, educational, linguistic, and aesthetic structures of the Mong American families. Part II discusses the social and education problems of the Mong American families, provides information on a bill that spurs debate over the Mong/Hmong identity following by a response to an emerging radical feminist movement to change the structure of the Mong/Hmong traditional patriarchal culture (Foo, 2002). This article will end with Part III with recommendations followed by a conclusion.*

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**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Southeast Asia is a region consisting of ten countries and one state: Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, and one state, which is Singapore. This means that the Southeast Asians encompass so many ethnic groups coming from Southeast Asia. In the context of this article, the author wants to limit the definition of Southeast Asians to those who have arrived from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to the United States since 1975.

Since 1975, over a million Southeast Asian refugees have arrived in the United States since the fall of the Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese governments to the Communists in 1975 (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1993, A2-A3). From Cambodia, are the Cambodians and the Chinese Cambodians; from Laos, are the Lao, the Mong, the Thai Dam, the Mien, and the Lahu; and from Vietnam, are the Vietnamese and the Chinese Vietnamese. In particular, this article will focus on the Mong American families in the United States.

The Mong as a people have a history of over five thousand years. Having no writing system of their system of their own until the 1950s, their early history was recorded by Chinese and western scholars dating back to 2497 B.C. (Savina, 1924; Bernatzik, 1970) that they inhabited in San-Wei, Southern Kansu, China (Quincy, 1988 & 1995). History tells us that the Chinese had made many attempts to completely Sinicize the Mong into Chinese culture; whereas the Mong opposed assimilation and full integration. Therefore, the Chinese and the Mong had been fighting since the Hoang-ti Era (2497 B.C.) to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Quincy, 1988 & 1995).

As a brief background, the Mong migrated from China reaching the northern parts of Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand around 1810-1820 (Mottin, 1980). In Laos, the Mong assisted France during its Colonialism through its Post-Colonialism from 1893-1960 and then, assisted the United States in its "U.S. Secret War in Laos" against the Communists during the Vietnam War from 1960 through 1975. When the United States withdrew its troops from Southeast Asia, the Mong were singled out for political persecutions (Thao, 1999a).

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

In the past, several terms have been coined for the Mong by the Chinese, their neighbors, and Western scholars. The term 'Miao' was historically used by the Chinese and was loosely translated as 'barbarian' (Bernatzik, 1947). This term is related to the Annamese word, 'Meau' transliterating for cat. The term 'Mong-tse' was also used by the Old Chinese historical work Schudjing, which compared Mong language with the howling or the cry of the hyena. Terrien explained the meaning of the Chinese character for 'Meau,' transliterating a cat's head. When agricultural activities are involved, the term 'Meau' in Chinese character, consists of two parts: 'Miao' for 'plant' and the bottom part 'tse' for 'field;' whereas 'tse' is translated as an ethnicity. As a result, 'Meau-tse' means the 'son of the soil, the farmers, who do not belong to the Great Nation.' Schotter referred in the Chinese Kweichow province to designate 'Meau' as all non-Han people (Bernatzik, 1947, p. 7). Other researchers used the spelling of 'Meo' as called by their hosts, the Laotians and the Thai (Barney & Smalley, 1953; Binney, 1968; Haudricourt, 1972; Savina, 1924). However, all the terms mentioned above have negative connotations.

Originally, our people have been culturally and linguistically classified into two groups. One group is the "Mong Leng" (Moob Leeg) who always identify themselves as Mong, spelled "M-o-n-g" with the initial "M" and another group is the "Hmong Der" (Hmoob Dawb) who always identify themselves as Hmong, spelled "H-m-o-n-g" with the initial "H." The Mong and the Hmong are not subgroups of each other, but both groups have lived and have co-existed for centuries on an equal basis; other classification of the Mong and the Hmong (e.g. Black Mong, Striped Hmong, etc.) is based on the colors of their costumes; however, culturally and linguistically, they all fall under the Mong and the Hmong groups. The population of the Mong and the Hmong groups are substantially comparable equal in terms of numbers throughout the United States and throughout the East and Southeast Asia. The Mong speak, read, and write the Mong language and the Hmong speak, read, and write the Hmong languages. The linguistic similarities and differences between the Mong and the Hmong languages may be compared to the linguistic similarities and differences of the Lao and the Thai languages. The spelling term "Mong" was derived from the spelling and written word "Moob" in Mong and "Hmong" was derived from the spelling and written word of "Hmoob" in Hmong. These two spelling terms "Mong" and "Hmong" refer to the people as well as their languages. Due to the misinformation and miseducation, the Mong have been lumped into the Hmong language group which is a truly misrepresentation of the Mong group. This misrepresentation has marginalized the Mong language. In 1950s, missionaries developed the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system, which is phonemic-based. As a result, two writing systems were developed: the Mong RPA and the Hmong RPA. Therefore, the Mong RPA writing system cannot write the Hmong language, and the Hmong RPA cannot write the Mong language.

The term "Green Mong" (*Moob Ntsuab*) has been used to call the Mong Leng. However, the term "Green Mong" or "*Moob Ntsuab*" is not the appropriate term because it has negative and pejorative connotations. Those Mong Leng identified by "Green Mong" or "*Moob Ntsuab*" find this term objectionable and offensive and are intimidated by its use. The "Green Mong" or "*Moob Ntsuab*" is a small group of Hmong/Mong with small numbers. Historically, this group anachronistically practiced a cult of cannibalism (Thao, 1999a).

The Mong Leng are proud of their true name which translates to "Veins of the Mong," implying that the Mong Leng carry the lifeblood for the Mong (Thao, 1999a). The term "White Hmong" refers to the color of a ceremonial dress, and no negative connotation is attached to the term. When the two terms Mong/Hmong or vice versa appear side by side next to each other with a slash, the definition encompasses both of the Mong/Hmong groups.

The decision to use the spelling 'Mong' is not new. Researchers, such as Lyman (1974 & 1979), Xiong et al (1983), Thao (1994a, 1997a, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a & 2000b), Yang (1999a) and Thao (2002c), have used the spelling term 'Mong.' In addition, the spelling 'Mong' will simplify library listings. Furthermore, researchers tend to examine their literary search with the initial spelling 'm' for 'Mong' rather than 'h' for 'Hmong.' The Mong and non-Mong/non-Hmong would spell the term with an initial /m/ sound rather than /h/, when they hear it for the first time.

In the past, the public has been misinformed and has been miseducated about the Mong Leng and the Hmong Der. As a consequence, the spelling term "Hmong" has been widely used to represent both the Mong Leng and the Hmong Der groups. However, the spelling term "Hmong" only represents Hmong Der (White Hmong). In fact, this spelling term "Hmong" has misrepresented the Mong Leng and does not represent the "Mong."

It is difficult to estimate an accurate account of the two Mong/Hmong. However, the Mong (Mong Leng) and Hmong (Hmong Der) populations are substantially comparable and may be roughly equal in terms of numbers in the United States. The linguistic similarities and differences between the Mong and the Hmong languages may be compared to the linguistic similarities and differences between the Lao and the Thai languages. The two

Mong/Hmong groups have interwoven their bonds through intermarriage for centuries, but surprisingly, they have preserved their linguistic and cultural homogeneity, and have respected each other's differences. Both groups have lived with each other harmoniously for centuries. In fact, their patterns of interaction constitute a system of check and balance within the Mong/Hmong society. The social, religious, educational, and political system has its own dynamics that is absolutely symmetrical within the Mong/Hmong society. The bottom line is that the Mong Leng call themselves "Mong" and the Hmong Der call themselves "Hmong."

The author is a Mong American and will use the spelling term 'Mong' over any other terms, such as "Hmong." The terms 'Miao,' 'Meau,' 'Mong-tse,' 'Meau-tse,' and 'Meo,' have historically negative connotations. Through extensive literature review, the spelling of the term 'Hmong' only occurred in Laos (Garrett, 1974 & Yang, 1975b) and was based solely on sociopolitical and economic factors rather than on sound academic disciplines, such as linguistics. For the purpose of this chapter, the spelling term "Mong" will be used exclusively throughout this chapter (Thao, 1999a).

This paragraph will elaborate on the rationale for the use of the term "Mong" based on the science of linguistics. Because there is no obstruction of the airstream in the oral cavity in the articulation of the sound [h] (a pair of [ ] is used to denote phonetic symbols), it is classified as a voiceless glottal and is used as a consonant by itself or as a glide combining with other sounds. With the articulation of the sound [h] in English, there is an aspiration of a small puff of air that occurs immediately following the articulation of the oral stops /p/, /t/, and /k/ (a pair of slashes // is used for phonemic representation) if they are syllable initial preceding a stressed vowel as in pin [ph], tick [th], and kin [kh] and thereby are aspirated voiceless stops. If these three oral stop sounds occur after syllable initial /s/, as in spin [p], stick [t], and skin [k], they are unaspirated voiceless stops. The pairs of sounds [p] and [ph], [t] and [th], [k] and [kh] are the allophones (the predictable phonetic variants) of the phonemes /p/, /t/, and /k/ respectively. Because of this, linguists generally consider this aspiration a minor aspect in the American English phonology. This means that aspiration does not change the overall phonemic representation of the phonemes /p/, /t/, /k/ within the broader phonological context (Fromkin et al, 1993, 1998 & 2003).

By the same token, in Mong phonology, there are four pairs of nasal sounds used between the two Mong/Hmong languages (Blue Mong and White Hmong) that share the same aspiration feature as in English. These pairs of sounds consist of [m]/[hm], [ml]/[hml], [n]/[hn], and [ny]/[hny]. The Blue Mong (Mong Leng) use the full voiced nasals [m], [ml], [n], and [ny]; whereas the White Hmong articulate devoiced or voiceless nasals [hm], [hn], [hml], and [hny]. Compared to English, though these pairs of sounds are spelled differently by the two Mong/Hmong, they are the predictable phonetic variants or the allophones of the same phonemes /m/, /ml/, /n/, /ny/, respectively. Thus, the aspiration feature for these four pairs of sounds does not change the overall phonemic representation of those phonemes in Mong/Hmong.

## **PART I: MONG AMERICAN FAMILY LIFE**

The following paragraphs will provide a panoramic view on the social, political, economic, educational, linguistic and aesthetic structures of the Mong American families in the United States.

### **1. MONG AMERICAN FAMILY LIFE**

The Mong American family is the basic nurturing institution. The Mong family, in fact, is the most important unit in the Mong society. It consists of all the people living under the authority of the same household. It is often referred to as the extended family. One of the most distinctive characteristics of the Mong family is that it is organized strictly from the patriarchal side or from the father's side in a patrilineal clan system. This means that when a Mong child is born, he or she automatically takes on the father's clan name.

However, when a Mong woman gets married, she is detached from her clan and loses all the rights provided to her from her original clan. Though she still has connection with her own family and her clan, she will assume a new identity within her husband's new clan. She will be embraced in the new family and clan, and will enjoy all the privileges and rights that are guaranteed to her under the auspices of her husband and his clan. Even though some families still practice this tradition in the Mong community today, some have adapted and have changed from this tradition to the individualistic approach of the mainstream American life. The following paragraphs will provide information on the division of labor, approach to life, Mong New Year Celebration, wedding, conflict resolution, and funeral for the traditional Mong in Laos as well as in the United States.

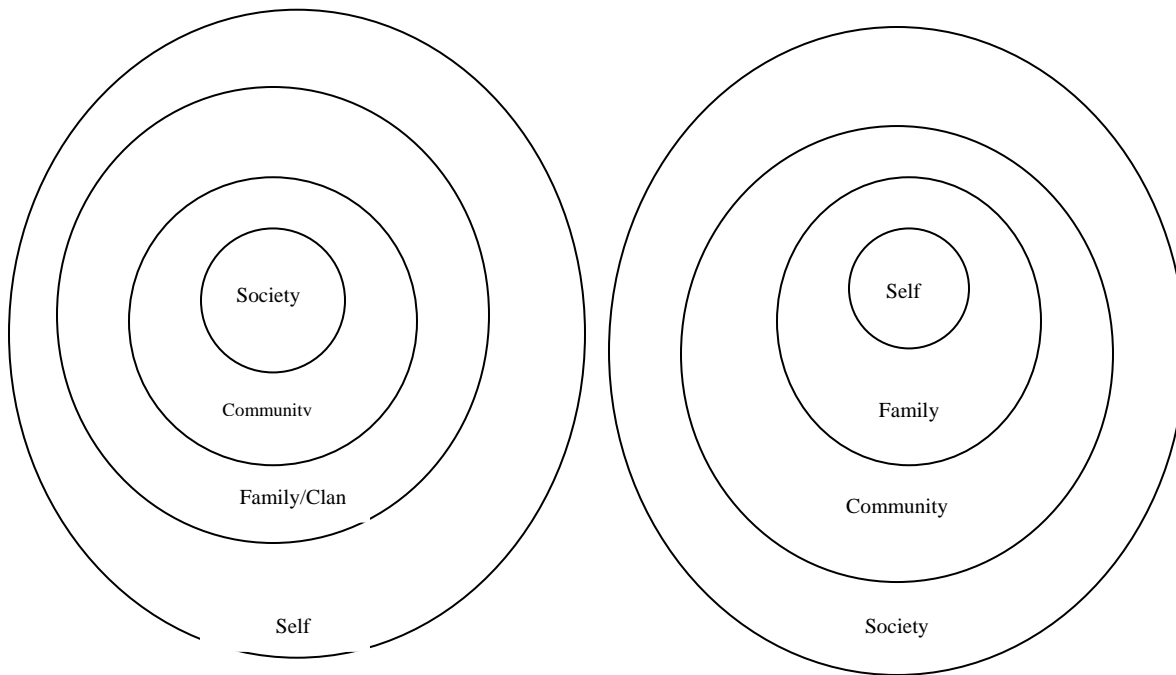
***Division of Labor***

Back in Laos, the notion of division of labor is obviously very important within the family, between members of the villages, and between villages and villages. This is closely related to the social and political patterns of the Mong. Each member of the Mong family has specific tasks to perform with different roles, but everyone works diligently to contribute to the welfare of the family: the male for breadwinning, the wife for housework, children for tedious and simple manual labor work, and grandparents for child caring and educating the young. They all take part in the production of crops, such as cultivating the land, planting the crops, weeding, harvesting, and storing food (Thao, 1999a).

When the Mong arrived in the United States, they have changed their way of life from family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based to the individualistic-based approach to life. With regard to the notion of division of labor, even though the concept still remains in tact in the Mong community, their life style or way of life has changed to be compatible to the life style in the United States. For some families, there is a role-shift between the male and the female in terms of breadwinning depending upon the educational background of the couples; children no longer taking part in tedious and simple manual labor work, but going to school and working part-time in fast food restaurants or some other jobs to help themselves, and some grandparents even though still doing childcare, but no longer educating the young, but leaving this task to the educators and public schools. Coming to the United States has changed their way of life.

***Approach to Life***

In Laos, decision-making and their approach to life are family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based rather than individualistic-based approach. Decision-making is done collectively rather than individually. The decision making is first to achieve and safeguard harmony of the society, which is always the center of the decision making, then the community, the family before the self as opposed to the individualistic approach where decision-making starts with self, to family, to the community and to the society.



Family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based approach (Mong society)

VS.

Individualistic-based Approach (American Society)

In Laos, the Mong were used to the decision making process where it is trickled down from the provincial chief to the *Chao Muong* (Mayor), to the District Chief (*Nai Kong* and *Tasseng*), to village chief (*Nai Ban*) or the community leaders to the head of the household (Family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based approach) as opposed to the individualistic-based approach. This system is highly centralized based on the European model. More detail will be provided in the political organization section of the Mong American families later in this article.

When the Mong have arrived in the United States, there has been a clash between the family-, clan- and community- or consensus-oriented approach and the individualistic approach to life in the United States. The Mong communities have struggled with these two approaches to life during the past three decades since 1975 to the present. Even though the structure of the family-, clan-, and community-, or consensus-based oriented approach still remains intact in some Mong families, many Mong families have changed their approach to life to the individualistic approach to life.

### ***Mong New Year Celebration***

In traditional Mong culture, two terms are involved with the Mong New Year Celebration. One term is "*Pebcaug*," transliterating to "Thirtieth" in English and "*Noj Tsab*" as "Celebration." "Thirtieth" coincides with December 30<sup>th</sup> of the lunar calendar or the last day of the year and "*Noj Tsab*" for three days. However, alteration has been made for Mong Christians. Furthermore, when the Mong arrived in the United States, their New Year celebration has been changed based on the weather condition in certain states and the availability of the location and facilities. Today, in the United States, the Mong celebrate their New Year starting from October through New Year's Day in various cities across the nation.

If the Mong are still animists, during the evening of "*Pebcaug*," they slaughter a chicken per family to perform a New Year ritual. This ritual is limited only to members of the immediate family to wish one another a Happy New Year. In the following day, which is the New Year's Day, each Mong family slaughters their "*Npua-tsab*" pig that they raise throughout the entire year just for the special New Year Celebration. Each family invites the whole people in the village to dine with them one family after another.

Throughout the year, everyone works very hard to contribute to the welfare of their family. The only period that the Mong have some leisure time is during the Mong New Year Celebration. During this time, Mong young men and young women will dress in their newest traditional Mong costumes with their beautiful decorated silver necklaces in the village quad in Southeast Asia and in public parks or fairgrounds in the United States, where they have the opportunity for courtship and meet their future spouses. Because they are very shy to greet one another, a tossing ball game was created for them. Then, relationship will develop; vows may be exchanged and then, later they end up in marriages.

### ***Mong Wedding***

After the New Year celebration, if the relationship between the young men and young women develop, they end up in marriage. A Mong young man must carefully select his spouse from other clans – exogamy system. It is a taboo for him to marry someone from his own clan. Instead, he must bring in someone from the outside. Selecting the right spouse is the most important aspect for a young Mong because the elders from his family need to give consent for the marriage. After all, he does not only marry to his spouse, but to her whole family and her clan. A marriage certificate does not mean as much as the bond between the two families that will act to guarantee the marriage of the couple. That is the reason why there was a low rate of divorce in the Mong society back in Laos. The core values of the Mong marriage center around love, respect, faithfulness, loyalty, and everlasting relationship. Therefore, before a young man gets married, his elders always remind him of a Mong proverb as follows:

*Tau Teb phem tes kaav ib cim;*  
*Tau quaspuj phem tes taag ib sim;* (Phaj Thoj – *Paajlug Moob*, 1982, p. 21)

Translation and Meaning:

Having a bad rice field, you waste a year meal;

Having a bad wife, you waste your whole life;

This Mong proverb may be compared to the following verse in the Bible:

The man who finds a wife finds a good thing;  
She is a blessing to him from the Lord (*Proverbs 18:22*)

There are four different kind of wedding for the Mong: (1) Formal wedding, (2) Eloping wedding, (3) Forced wedding, and (4) Marriage of the divorcees, widowers and widows (Thoj, 1984).

**(1) Formal Wedding** “*Qhebrooj tuamntsa,*” “*Tshoobcoj,*” or “*Tshoobzawj*”)

For this type of wedding, the groom’s family comes to the bride’s family and formally requests her parents for their daughter’s hand in marriage through a go-between (“*Mejkoob*”): one go-between per family – a very respectable way to approach the bride’s family. In Mong culture, it is considered very impolite for the parents of the groom and those of the bride to communicate their intention directly. Therefore, the go-betweens for both of the families must communicate the messages back and forth between groom’s family and the bride’s. They continue to negotiate and recite wedding poems “*zaajtshoob*” back and forth while the negotiation is in session until all the messages are properly conveyed and each message is ended up with a ritual drink to complete the deal throughout the ceremony. This traditional formal wedding is the preferred wedding for the Mong.

**(2) Eloping Wedding** “*Tshoobhaub*” or “*Tshoob togqws*” (*siscaum*).

Eloping wedding will take place if the groom and the bride really love each other, but their parents do not give their consent for the marriage to take place. Eloping wedding is one way to get their parents’ consent for the marriage, but brings shame to the bride’s parents. This type of wedding is an easier way for the groom to elope the bride.

**(3) Forced Wedding** “*Tuavteg Thoobxu*” (*nteg, nqug, yuam*).

In this type of wedding, the groom forces the bride to get married against her will. Sometimes this is known as “Kidnapping for wife.” This type of wedding took place in Laos, but is no longer practiced. The Mong communities also sanction against this type of wedding.

**(4) Marriage of the Divorcees, Widowers and Widows** “*Nam ib ntaa, Txiv ib ntaa*” “*Nam txaistog, Txiv txaisntaa*”

In this type of wedding, both the groom and the bride are divorcees or widowers and widows. This type of wedding applies to both of the parties when they have already been married at least once.

In Mong wedding, the go-between carries an umbrella tied with a white striped turban band from the groom’s house to the bride’s house followed by a bestman “*phijlaaj,*” an assistant with all the wedding gifts “*tug risnraa,*” a bride’s maid “*nam txaisntsuab,*” and the groom “*tug nraugvau*” (Thoj, 1984, p. 10). After the marriage takes place, all the blessings for their future life from both of their families are ingrained into the tied umbrella, which is brought to the groom’s house and to be opened on the bed of the groom after the recitation of a blessing poem “*zaajtshoob*” by the groom’s go-between.

For the Mong animists, upon the arrival of the bride to the groom’s house, the father of the groom conducts a ceremony “*lwmsub*” by using a chicken to swing over the daughter-in-law’s head to welcome her into the groom’s house, embraces her into his family’s rituals, dwarfs evil spirits away from her and bless her a happy marriage. This ceremony is followed by a “Soul calling” ceremony (“*Hu-plig*”) (Miller et al, 1992 & 1993). The “Soul calling” ceremony is part of the Hinduist belief that there are thirty-two mobile souls presiding over human body. The head or king soul presides in the head and the lowest souls are in the feet. This is one of the reasons why the Mong animists do not want their heads to be touched. They believe that, when three or more souls leave someone’s body, that individual will eventually die. Normally, the most senior member of the family leads this “Soul calling” ceremony (*Hu-plig*). He distributes several white yarns to all the attendees. After dwarfing the evil spirits away from the bride and the groom, the senior member of the family with the rest of the attendees start to bless the bride and groom by tying the white yarn around their wrists. Tying the knot symbolizes an effective return of the absent souls (Chhim et al, 1994). According to the Mong rituals, the groom and bride should keep these

white yarns tied to their wrists for at least three days. For the Mong Christians, they follow the Christian way of marriage ceremony.

### **Conflict Resolution**

The Mong have an old saying: “*Qaumhlua yog mej tuav, qaabhlua tseem yog peb tuav*” (You hold the top of the string; we hold the bottom of the string). This means that when a woman has a concern, she brings it to the head of the household of her husband’s side to resolve the conflict. In turn, the head of the household will hold a meeting between the husband and the wife and/or between all those parties involved and then resolve the conflict. If the matter is still not resolved, she will bring her concern over to the head of household from her parents’ side, but this rarely happened in the old days. If she is still not satisfied with the outcome, she may bring her concern up to the village chief (*Nai Ban*), to the *Tasseng* (District Chief), to the *Chao Muong* (Mayor) and to the court of *Chao Khoueng* (governor), respectively. If the patriarchal system of the Mong tradition is still intact as it was in Laos, a Mong female is not quite as afloat as other Southeast Asian females. If this conflict happens to a Mong male and between a male and another male, this system of conflict resolution is also applied.

However, since the Mong have arrived in the United States and continue to make some adjustment in their lives, the patriarchal system of the Mong culture experienced some changes and disintegration to certain extent. The family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based approach to life has been challenged and has clashed with the individualistic-based approach in the American society. Even though the structure still remains intact at the superficial level, it is not quite effective as it is used to be like in Laos. Now, the Mong have to depend on the American legal system to resolve the conflict.

### **Funeral**

Traditionally, when a Mong family member dies, a gun is fired three times and their family members wail to announce to the public about death. Then, water is boiled to wash and dress the deceased in special burial clothing. The members of the family, known as “*Tsev xyomcuab*,” will notify their extended families. Key individuals who conduct the funeral rituals include:

- (1) A spiritual Guide “*Tug tawkev*” (Thoj, 1984) who will slaughter a chicken, takes out its heart, roasts it, sacrifices it and lays it above the head of the corpse (Thoj, 1984; Lewis & Lewis, 1984). Then, he would guide the soul of the deceased to return to their birthplaces of their ancestors for reincarnation with the guidance of the chicken (Thoj, 1984; Lewis & Lewis, 1984; Miller et al, 1992 & 1993);
- (2) A “Feeder of the Corpse” (*Tug Cuabtsaav*) who is responsible to conduct rituals to feed the corpse and informed it about the numbers of animals that are sacrificed to the corpse (Thoj, 1984);
- (3) A “*Qeng*” musician (*Txiv qeej*) who is responsible to blow the mouth organ (*qeej*) throughout the remaining of the funeral (Thoj, 1984; Lewis & Lewis, 1984);
- (4) A drummer (*Txiv nruag*) for beating the ceremonial death drum (Thoj, 1984; Lewis & Lewis, 1984; and Miller et al, 1992 & 1993);
- (5) An individual chosen to be responsible to settle the debts of the deceased to assure that it is debt free in the next life (Lewis & Lewis, 1984);
- (6) Others are assigned as funeral director, coffin maker, firewood, cook (*Tshwjkaab*) (Thoj, 1984), finance in charge of contributions and donations and many other tasks.

“*Mo qhua-txws*” (the last night) is considered to be the most important night of the funeral. If an older person dies, several generations of the deceased must be present and sit in front of the corpse the entire night until dawn. One of two individuals will recite poems known as “*Txivxaiv*” (a form of rich oral literature in the Mong culture only performed at the funeral site) to counsel or sermonize the family members of the deceased to be good law abiding citizens (Thao, 1997) and bless them with poems known as “*Foomkom*” (another form of rich oral literature in the Mong culture, again, only performed at the funeral site) to bless the family members of the deceased (Thao, 1997a). Then, the following day, the corpse will be buried. Please note that the Mong Christians no longer practice these types of funeral rites, but follow their Christian way of funeral services.

To sum up this part, the purpose of the funeral is to guide the soul of the deceased to return to their birthplaces of their ancestors for reincarnation with the guidance of the chicken.

## 2. SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Besides the importance of the concept of family and extended family, the Mong place emphasis on the clan system that originated from a common ancestor. The clanship is considered the basic social and political organization in the Mong society. A Mong at birth automatically takes his or her father's clan name and remains a member for life, except for the Mong women who get married and assume new identities in their husbands' clans as discussed previously. However, the origin of the clan remains a mystery. The Mong legends refer to the clandestine origin to a child of incest born from a brother and a sister dating back to the Great Flood. Shaped like an egg, the offspring is cut into twelve different pieces by its parents. The twelve pieces became the twelve different Mong clans.

The traditional Mong consists of twelve clans that correspond to the name of their rituals. Mong rituals are directly related to Mong religion. Because there is no standardization in Mong religious practices, Mong religious rituals among the clans vary from clan to clan and also from family to family, meaning that only those Mong families considered to be close or extended family with relatives could share the same rituals. The Mong have an old saying: “*Tug tuag tug tsev tau*” (One can die in another person's house). This means that only close relatives, mainly those who are of the same lineage from the same family, can die in their relatives' homes. Those who allow other Mong clan members or distance relatives to die in their homes will need to face with the consequences of misfortune and even death to their own families and to their own clans. This is the reason why Mong rituals cannot be standardized, can only be practiced within the close-knit family and extended family members who share the same familial lineage. These religious practices need to be adhered to very strictly and are extremely important for traditional Mong who still practice animism as part of their religion.

The following paragraphs describe the original rituals that are constantly referred to, by their Mong clan names. These names have some close connections with the geographical areas or regions where the Mong had settled in China. Each of the original twelve clans has their own distinct rituals, including family rituals with the same ancestors that correspond to their clan names. The names of the rituals are only written in Mong and cannot be translated into English. For the time being, they carry a lot of implications and meanings for the Mong themselves, but may not mean much to the non-Mong who is not accustomed to the Mong culture. The Mong rituals are very dynamic, interesting and complex and the author encourages further studies in this field. The following are the original twelve Mong clans with the names of each clan corresponding to their distinct rituals:

	<u>Clan Names</u>	<u>Rituals in Mong</u>
1.	Chang (Chun)	<i>Nrig</i>
2.	Hang	<i>Taag</i>
3.	Her (Herr)	<i>Dluag</i>
4.	Kue	<i>Nkug</i>
5.	Khang, Phang*	<i>Pluag</i>
6.	Lee (Li, Ly), Lor*	<i>Cai</i>
7.	Moua (Mua)	<i>Zaag</i>
8.	Song	<i>Koo</i>
9.	Thao (Thor)	<i>Dlub</i>
10.	Vang, Cheng*, Fang*, Vue*	<i>Vug</i>
11.	Xiong	<i>Mob</i>
12.	Yang	<i>Yawg</i>

The following historical interpretations discuss the development of the origin of the twelve clans of the Mong and the subsequent branching out of the twelve into eighteen Mong clans today. Even though the origin of the clans of the Mong still remains unknown, a possible explanation may be deduced from historical accounts. During the early Chou Dynasty (1028-257 B.C.), the Mong appear to have enjoyed a positive and close relationship with the Chinese. This was evidenced by the Mong's willingness to take on the Mandarin clan names.

This significant incident of accepting Chinese Mandarin clan names must have taken place during the Chou Dynasty but before Confucius' time, which was around the second century B.C. (Hanhoe, 1984). Savina reported: "At the time of Confucius...there were still twelve noble and powerful family" (Savina, 1924, p. 131). These twelve noble and powerful families described by Savina could have been the twelve clans of the Mong. A Chinese legend stated that the Mong assisted King Wu, the first king of the Chou Dynasty (1028-257 B.C.), to fight against the last emperor of the Shang Dynasty. Though history did not mention how King Wu rewarded the Mong, after his victory, King Wu and the Mong may have had intensified their positive relationship. They may have taken an oath (Haus dlejlaab - Taking an oath by water) to assist each other as brothers in times of need. This relationship was reflected in the Mong's term "*kwvtij*" (brothers). The Mong referred to themselves as "*tij*" (older brother) and to the Chinese as "*kwv*" (younger brother). When the two words compounded as "*kwvtij*" (brothers), the relationship between the Mong and the Chinese may have developed to the level of an intimate brotherhood. The term "*kwvtij*" also existed in Chinese Mandarin, which means the reverse of the meaning in Mong. In Chinese Mandarin, "*kwv*" means older brother and "*tij*" younger brother.

Another Mong legend states that a Mong went to pay tribute to the tomb of his ancestor once a year. The Chinese paid the same tribute to the same tomb once a year but at a different time of the year. One year the Mong and the Chinese came to pay tribute to the same tomb at the same time. Then, after a conversation took place, the Mong and the Chinese found out that they were descendants from the same ancestor. This is the reason why the term "*kwvtij*" meaning brothers, was coined for both Mong and for the Chinese and existed in Mong and Chinese Mandarin.

As time passed, the distance between the Mong and the Chinese became greater. Though history does not disclose such details, the subsequent emperors of the Chou Dynasty may have forgotten the oath by water taken with the Mong in the old days. The historical record is inconclusive as to the reasons why the Chinese repeatedly tried to eradicate the Mong in China. Quincy indicates that Chinese Mandarin scholars were sent out to live with the Mong and to learn their ways in order to control them during the late Chou Dynasty (Quincy, 1988).

Another interesting observation concerns the branching out of the Mong clan system from twelve to eighteen clans. This evolution of the clan system may have occurred during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The Ming desired to trade with Southeast Asia, and thus needed to annex Yunan province to create a passage to Burma (Myanmar). Military zones and administrative districts were created to capture new lands to form the new provinces. Each province was administratively divided into three Prefectures "*Fu*," four sub-prefectures "*Zhou*," and seventy-five cantons "*Zhang-kwang-si*." Local chiefs were employed as "*Tu Si*" (officers) and "*Tu Kwan*" (tax collectors) by all the administrative units under the "*Fu*" to handle military and civil affairs at the local levels (Mottin, 1980, pp. 20-21).

Quincy asserted that the Lolo tribe was granted "*Tu Si*" and often appointed Mong as sub-officials to maintain peace among their people during the Ming Dynasty (Quincy, 1988, p. 44 & 1995, p. 51-52). The Mong term "*Kabtoom*" or "*Katong*" was perhaps derived from "*Cantons*" meaning the chief of cantons. In order to justify to Chinese authority by increasing the numbers of "*Katong*" positions in the Mong tribes, the notion that "*Tu Si*" appointed one "*Katong*" per clan. By branching out the Mong clans, the Vang would have been entitled to four "*Katongs*" under Vang, Cheng, Fang, and Vue; the Khang to Phang and the Lee to Lor; and other clans to one "*Katong*" per clan.

### 3. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Traditionally, the Mong had a fairly complex hierarchical political system that reflects the former political system of the Mong kingdom existing around 400-900 A.D. According to Quincy, the Mong political system was a "loose federation of tribal heredity monarchy" (Quincy, 1988, p. 38 & 1995, p. 44), that defied absolute

power but exhibited certain democratic, participatory, and republican features since the real power was decentralized to the localities. The people would select the successor of the Mong monarch among the Mong princes (Quincy, 1988, p. 38 & 1995, p. 44). The Mong monarchy was based on the natural leader's ability to rule rather than on a continuum of an organized political structure. This means that the entire political and social structure was centered on the monarchy. Due to their illiteracy, when the Mong natural patriarch died, the monarchy collapsed. Thus, the full scope of the traditional Mong political system has not been fully developed into a full-fledged one.

When the Mong migrated from China to Laos in the early 19th century, some alterations in their political structure were made under the auspices of the territorial organization of the Royal Laotian government. The following discussion may be helpful to explain that particular political hierarchy and organization. A typical Mong village was comprised of, between six to thirty families that formed a village headed by a "*Nai Ban*" (headman or village chief) who served as the village representative to handle matters for all members in his village. Several villages formed a canton and its chief, "*Tasseng*" (a district chief), was elected. However, "*Tasseng*" was often appointed by the "*Chao Muong*" (Mayor) based on the recommendations of several "*Nai Ban*" (headmen or village chiefs).

Another higher layer of civil tribal administrative officer beyond the "*Tasseng*" was the "*Nai Kong*" whose authority corresponded to the "*Tasseng*." The "*Tasseng*" was responsible for the coordination of the affairs of several villages under his jurisdiction. His responsibility was to collect taxes and to enforce the law. The "*Tasseng*" reported directly to the "*Chao Muong*" (Mayor). Theoretically, "*Nai Kong*" was a civil tribal administrative officer that was higher in rank than the "*Tasseng*" and was supposed to be a collection of several district chiefs. However, in terms of practicality, "*Nai Kong*" was more of a "floating" or "at large" position. The "*Nai Kong*" was mainly responsible for recruitment of soldiers for the military. The "*Chao Muong*" was a collection of several districts and was appointed by the "*Chao Khoueng*" (the Provincial Chief which is equivalent to the governor). Seven or eight "*Muong*" (cities) formed a province headed by the "*Chao Khoueng*" (provincial chief) appointed by the Minister of the Interior and Social Welfare (Roberts et al, 1967, pp. 163-164).

Despite these hierarchical layers, the strongest basic unit of the Mong political system remained with the patrilineal clan system at the local level. The members of the same clan referred to one another as clan brothers or clan sisters. Due to this clan orientation, the idea of grouping or clustering the members of any clan in one particular area into an enclave or a community is typical for the Mong society. The underlying rationale for the Mong enclave or a community is to provide mutual assistance to one another in time of need, such as marriages, celebrations, funerals, and problem resolutions. The clan system was considered the integral part of the cornerstone of the Mong authority.

G. Linwood Barney, a missionary to Laos during the 1950s asserted that the Mong political authority involved the concept of respect for the elders (Barney, n.d., pp. 28-29). The Mong placed a high value on older people. It is customary for young people to pay respect and express gratitude towards the elderly. The elderly have more life experience than the young and thus their views were honored. The hierarchy of respect usually proceeded from the child to the older brothers, parents, grand parents to "*Tug tsawsntug*" (the head of the household) who has the final authority in familial matters. Before a decision was reached, a thorough consideration of the best alternatives was assessed. A Mong male was answerable to his family, his clan, and particularly to the head of the household who maintained peace and harmony within his family, clan members, and members of other clans. Therefore, the Mong political system was closely tied to its clan system and even today remains strongest at the local level where most of the decisions are carried out.

#### 4. ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

As economically agrarian self-sufficient farmers, the traditional Mong grew rice as their main crop in paddy fields in the basin of the Yellow River and the Yangze-kiang River in China. "*Laj aj tebchaws*" ("Paddy field country") was well known by the Mong for centuries. After the Chinese invasion, the Mong were driven off these fertile lands to the remote mountains (Quincy, 1988 & 1995; Thao, 1999a) so they became mountain dwellers. As mountain dwellers, they were forced to survive on a traditional agricultural economy "*Ua-teb*" (farming) at the subsistence level. They grew rice, maize, potatoes, pumpkins, cucumbers, watermelons, and other crops. Adequate food was grown for their families and they grew some extra for sale. The Mong also

raised livestock, such as chicken, pigs, cows, ducks, and fish for protein, water buffaloes for the cultivation of land and for farming, horses for transportation and fighting bulls for entertainment. The Mong brought this agricultural economy with them when they migrated to Laos in the early nineteenth century (Thao, 1999a). The Mong always volunteer to provide mutual assistance to one another flowing within the family to members of the villages extending to other villages. This free labor exchange has long existed within the traditional cultural realm of the Mong (Thao, 1999a).

A few Mong families also grew poppy as a cash crop. Poppy cultivation probably originated in Cyprus around 1500 B.C. during the late Bronze Age. Opiates may have been sent to Egypt, Greece, and Rome as a painkiller. Opium was recognized as a pain reliever as early as the fourth century B.C. (White, 1985, p. 114). Geddes (1976) indicated Arab traders brought poppy to China about the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. for medical purposes. However, it was not extensively used in “China and countries to the South” until the eighteenth century (pp. 201-202).

Based on this historical account, an inference could be made that it was the Chinese who probably introduced poppy cultivation to the Mong as a cash crop. Mickey (1947) asserted that the chief crop in Kweichow, China was opium (p. 5). However, not all the Mong were content with poppy cultivation. Kemp reported that the Mong (“Miao”) in Kweichow were compelled to plant a certain proportion of poppy when they rented the land from the Chinese and that Mong Christians were persecuted for refusing to do so (Geddes, 1976, p. 166).

It is assumed that the Mong possibly brought poppy seeds with them when they migrated to Southeast Asia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. They grew it mainly as a cash crop to pay their taxes to the French and to supply to the French opium monopoly during the French colonial administration in Indochina (Quincy, 1988, pp. 100-111 & 1995, pp. 81-83). Despite the Mong’s dissatisfaction and opposition to poppy cultivation, Larteguy, in *La Fabuleuse Aventure du Peuple de l’Opium (The Fabulous Adventure of the People of Opium)*, still stigmatized the Mong as the people of opium (Larteguy, 1979).

## 5. SPIRITUALITY

The Mong Americans were traditionally animists. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines animism as “any of various primitive beliefs whereby natural phenomena and things animate and inanimate are held to possess an innate soul (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1982, p. 111). Hackett defines the term as “the belief that all life is produced by a spiritual force, or that all things in nature have souls” (Hackett, 1984, p. 23). However, researchers have not reached a consensus on the elements of animism to date. Based on a study of the religious change among the Mong in San Diego, Scott finds that the traditional Mong religion is comprised of three interrelated elements, which are animism, ancestor worship and shamanism (Scott, 1982). The author contends that animism is a belief system that comprises all three elements or more. It combines the one or two supernatural power, ancestor worship, superstition, and spirit (“*dlaab*”) worship and shamanism.

Traditionally, the supernatural power was referred to “*Yawm Saub*” (God). Ancestor worship of “good” spirits was used to provide protection to Mong families. Spirits of nature, such as “*Ntxwgnyoog*” (Satan) and others *dlaab* (evil spirits or devils), were believed to be able to cause physical and psychological harm to the Mong in the form of illness, nightmares, and, to a certain extent, death. Shamanism was viewed as a means of maintaining communication between the Mong and the spiritual world. Mong shamans perform rituals to find out the cause of illness in order to treat the effects. By performing rituals within animal sacrifice, the shamans related the message from spirits to the individuals involved and vice versa. There are also times when shamans have to perform exorcism of evil spirits as well. Though standardization in Mong religious practices does not exist, Mong rituals tend to center around the practices that their ancestors have passed onto them from generation to generation. Clan and lineage variations also occur between and within clans because rituals are traditionally handed down from generation to generation within the context of oral tradition (Bliatout, 1989, pp. 8-9). Therefore, you will not see any temples, churches, or Mosques like the Buddhists, Christians or the Islams.

The Mong also believe in life after death or reincarnation. With proper guidance from the Mong musicians who perform the funeral ceremony, the Mong believe that the souls of the deceased will return to their ancestors for reincarnation, where their new bodies will become new members of the Mong families back

to their birthplaces. This is one aspect of the religion in which the Mong's differs from the Chinese's. The Chinese actually worship their dead ancestors while the Mong do not (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1981).

For practical purposes, of the three religious elements, the Mong focus primarily on superstition and spiritual worship. In a study on *Mong Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome (SUDS)*, Bliatout asserted that the Mong religious beliefs are closely related and interwoven with their beliefs on illness and death (Bliatout, 1982). Being extremely fearful of the evil spirits' constant demands for taking the souls of their loved ones, the Mong constantly offer larger animals for sacrifice to the spirits. For the sake of the health of their family members, the Mong believe that they have only two options, which are to either to become Christians or to continue practicing spiritual worship. Those who continue to practice spiritual worship, need to fulfill the demands of the evil spirits by offering animal sacrifice once their family members are recovered from their illnesses ("fivyeem"). Those who chose to become Christians accept Jesus Christ as their Savior to protect them from the power of the evil spirits (Thao, 1999a).

Another aspect of the Mong religion is ancestor worship. It is relied upon from time to time in circumstances where a family member is deceased. The Mong believe that proper guidance to the soul of the deceased is necessarily for the safe return to his or her ancestors. To the author, most of the Mong believe that "ancestors" refers to God. With the passage of time, the Mong tend to remember two elements of the religion, which are shamanism and spiritual worship (Thao, 1999a).

With respect to religious change, a substantial numbers of the Mong have been converted to Christianity. Thao (2000a) conducted a study on the history of the Mong Christians. Thao's findings revealed three phenomenological periods where there were massive conversion of the Mong to Christianity within a time span of fifty years between each period:

The first period took place in China between 1904-1915 where 10,000 Flowery Miao (Miao Hwa) became Christians in the Province of Yunnan and Kweichow through the mission of the China Inland Mission of the United Methodist in England (Pollard, 1919 & Hudspeth, 1937). The second period happened in Laos when 5,000 Mong/Hmong and 2,000 Khamu became Christians in the province of Xieng Khouang through the mission of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (Thao, 1999a; 1999b; 2000a & 2000b). The third period took occurred in Northern Vietnam where 40,000-330,000 Mong became Christians through the radio ministry of the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) between 1989-2000 (Thao, 2000a & 2000b). In the United States and throughout the world, the numbers of Mong converts to Christianity have been substantially increased in numbers.

## 6. EDUCATION STRUCTURE

Little is known about Mong education in China during the pre-historic period up till the eighteenth century. It is the author's assumption that the first Mong inhabitants in China made their living through a self-initiated type of informal education system, consisting of small scale farming, domestic animal keeping, hunting, and trapping. As time passed, guilds, such as blacksmith, silversmith, craft making, clothes making, shamanism, and related customs and rituals were developed. These skills then were passed on informally from father to son, from mother to daughter, and from generation to generation within the familial context. Gutek referred to the informal aspect of education as "the total cultural context in which persons are born, nurtured, and brought to maturity. Through the process of enculturation, they acquire the symbolic, linguistic, and value patterns of their culture" (Gutek, 1972, p. 9).

History reveals that the Mong had received some formal education from the Chinese. Between 1801 and 1804, a concerted effort was made by the Chinese to Sinicize the Mong in the province of Kweichow, China. The Chinese civil authorities during the Manchu Dynasty forced the Mong "children to attend Chinese schools" (Quincy, 1988, p. 50) "to learn to read and write and to absorb Chinese culture" (Quincy, 1995, p. 58) "and prohibiting their traditional celebrations (Quincy, 1988, p. 50).

In Laos, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, King Setthathirath founded the first official Buddhist schools in Laos (Roberts et al, 1967). Through this Buddhist influence, pagoda schools were always centered in the village Buddhist temples. Prior to the arrival of the French, which was 1893, monastic education was the sole system to provide education to boys. There is no historical evidence suggesting that the Mong participated in the pagoda schools or in any of the subsequent schools until the arrival of the French in 1893.

During the French Colonialism, though the French imported their educational system to be implemented in Laos, the Mong benefited very little from it. Only a few Mong had the opportunity to attend school (Roberts et al, 1967, pp. 131-146). The Mong began to have access in education beginning in 1958 through 1975 and the numbers of Mong students grew to 10,000 in 1969 (Yang, 1975b) to about 20,000 in 1975 through the support made possible by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Seying, 1992).

## 7. LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

Linguists classify the Mong language as a subgroup in the Sino-Tibetan language family of Asia. Arlotto (1972) indicated that Mong is one of the pre-Sinitic languages. Arlotto asserted that “Within China itself, among the few remaining pre-Sinitic languages, we have the Miao-Yao family, spoken by scattered remnants of what once undoubtedly was a widespread and flourishing family” (p. 52). This means that the Mong existed long prior to 1300 B.C. In addition, Kun Chang indicated that the term “Miao” existed as early as the Book of Documents and the “Miao” [Mong] people had been in contact with the Chinese at least since the Shang-Chou Dynasty (Chang, 1972).

Several linguists have classified Mong as a mono-syllabic, tonal, and harmonious language, but this is not true. The Mong lexicons consist of monosyllabic words as well as polysyllabic words. The orthography currently used, was based on a refinement of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system developed by American missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) Linwood G. Barney (known as “Thanh Mong”) and William A. Smalley and a French Catholic Priest, Father Yves Bertrais (known by the Mong as *Txivplig Nyaj Pov*) during the 1950s.

The Mong language consists of fifty-five (55) consonantal phonemes consisting of 16 single consonants, 21 double consonantal blends, 14 triple consonantal blends, and 4 quadruple consonantal blends), 14 monophthongs (single vowels) 4-5 diphthongs, and 8 different vocal tone markers (Thao, 1999a & 1999b); whereas the Hmong language has 57 consonantal phonemes, consisting of 17 single consonantal phonemes, 22 double consonantal blends, 13 triple consonantal blends, 3 quadruple consonantal blends, 13 monophthongs, 5 diphthongs and 8 tones. Though these two RPA systems are closed, they are distinctive in both the pronunciation and written forms. Due to its phonemic-based construction, if a passage is written in Mong, it is completely written in the Mong language and can only be read in Mong. If a passage is written in Hmong, it is completely in Hmong and can only be read in Hmong. This is the reason why the original Mong and Hmong primers were developed in two versions, one in Mong and another in Hmong. In addition, the Bible, hymnal books, and other Christian literacy materials have been developed and have been translated into two versions as well. It is predictable that almost the entire Mong lexicons end with tone markers represented by the letters –b (high tone), –j (high falling tone), –v (mid-rising tone), – (mid tone), –s (mid low tone), –g (mid low breathy tone), –m (low glottalized tone), and –d (predictable variant of –m low glottalized tone) (Thao, 1999a and Thao, 1999b). These letters at the end of each Mong lexicon are tone markers and the tones are not arbitrary. The tones in Mong are considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of the Mong language for some non-Mong who have attempted to master it.

## 8. AESTHETIC STRUCTURE

The Mong are very well known for their arts and crafts, e.g. the “*Paajntaub*” (pronounced “Pan-dau,” meaning arts and crafts). The Mong women probably first observed the patterns used in cross stitch embroidery and appliqué in the design of the Cowrie Shell from the shape of animals and plants in China (Mickey, 1947). These patterns have been incorporated into costume design, such as caps, jackets, baby carrying cloths, aprons, skirts, turbans, bags, men’s sashes, flower cloths, quilts, baby carriers, covering for altars and beds, pillows cases, etc.

Nowadays, Mong “*Paajntaub*” has become one of the most distinctive features of the traditional Mong culture. Most of this work has been fully illustrated by the work of Lewis and Lewis (1984). From 1968 to 1984, they extensively gathered the arts and crafts from six of the culturally and distinct minority groups in Thailand: Karen, Mong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, and Lisu along with over 700 photographs in color. Their work featured one of the most complete documentation of the fascinating colorful Mong clothing and ornamentation exhibited through their arts and crafts (Lewis and Lewis, 1984).

## II. SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS OF THE MONG AMERICANS

Before examining these two problems, the author wants to review the status of the Mong Americans based on a study done based on the 1990 U.S. Census and their contributions to the American economy. Then, the author will examine the social and educational problems facing the Mong American families and discuss how state officials responded to the crisis in Mong education. Two specific evolving contemporary dilemmas will also be covered in this part. The first one is a debate over the Mong/Hmong identity regarding Assembly Bill (AB 78) Hmong Education and the second is the changing role of the Hmong/Mong women with a response to Lora Jo Foo's report (2002).

### STATUS OF THE MONG/HMONG IN 1990

Lewis examined *A profile of the Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese people in the United States* for the National Association for the Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese (NAFEA) based primarily upon the data from the 1990 US Census. This report revealed that the Mong are a very young population. Over 60% are age 17 and under; and 43% have more than four children. Almost 72% of the Mong adults have less than a high school education, and over half reported no formal education at all. This lack of formal education in Laos contributed to a low U.S. labor force participation rate of 30%. About 34% of Mong households reported income under \$12,000, 31% between \$12,000 to \$20,000 and 35% above \$20,000. These higher figures are often wages for two or three wage earners per household. About 1.3% of the Mong Americans aged between 18 and 24 have a bachelor's degree or above, and 3.2% of those age 25 and over. In terms of socio-economics, 63% of the Mong families are still living below the poverty line, so they are unable to provide their children with the basic needs (Lewis, 1994).

### MONG/HMONG CONTRIBUTIONS

Yang (1975b) reported that in 1971, approximately 340 Mong attended public and private secondary schools in Vientiane, Laos, and 37 studied abroad in various universities in foreign countries: 25 in France, 4 in Canada, 4 in the United States, 1 in Australia, 1 in Italy, 1 in Japan, and 1 in the Soviet Union (Thao, 1999a, p. 23).

In retrospect, since arriving in the United States, the Mong Americans have made tremendous progress in terms of education attainment, employment and economic status. Vang (2001, August 24) researched the Mong population and education in the United and the world and reported that since 1972 to 2001, 126 Mong received their terminal degrees in their respective disciplines; more than 3,500 hold their B.A. and B.S. degrees and more than 350 received their M.A. and M.S. degrees from colleges and universities in the United States.

In terms of economic status, 66% of the Mong still live under poverty rates; 29% participate in labor force for those older than 16 years old with a mean wage and salary income of \$14,364 considering the fact that 73% still do not speak English very well category and 56% are linguistically isolated (Hmong National Development, 2003).

However, the Mong Americans continue to make history and their marks in the political arena. At the national level, Lee Pao Xiong was appointed by President Clinton to serve on the Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (Hmong Cultural Center, 2003). In Minnesota, Choua Lee and Neal Thao were elected School Board member in St. Paul (Hmong Cultural Center, 1999, Nov. 16); Mee Moua as State Senator for District 67 in St. Paul (Hmong Cultural Center, 2002, Nov. 16); Cy Thao as State Representative for District 65A in St. Paul (Hmong Cultural Center, 2002, Nov. 16); in Wausau, WI, Ya M. Yang as school Board member, councilman and county supervisor (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2002, July 28), for example.

In education, Mong students have made their ways to various Ivy League universities across the nation and several Mong Americans have secured tenure-track faculty, administrative, and staff positions at various colleges and universities, including principal, teacher and staff positions at various school districts in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Furthermore, the Mong professionals (e.g. in medicine, dentistry, engineering, law, technology, chiropractic, psychology, human services, theology, etc.) continue to make impacts in the field of studies to the mainstream America as well as in the business and private sectors.

In terms of employment status based on 1990 Census, the Hmong National Development, Inc. (HND) reported that the Mong have done proportionally well with 4% in managerial, 9% in professional, 7% in technical & sales, 12% in administrative support, 20% in service, 2% in farming, forestry & fishing, 14% in

precision production, craft & repair and 32% in operative & laborers (Hmong National Development, 2003). Yang (2000c) also reported that the annual sale of crops produced by the Mong in Fresno amounted to about 35 million dollars in fresh vegetable and strawberry farming. Mong Entrepreneurship in restaurant business continues to flourish in Michigan as well. Thao's (2000a & 2000b) study on the *Mong Christian History* revealed that thirty-three of the eighty local church affiliates of the Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance own their own churches and parsonages. From 1978 to 2000, the total value for their properties is estimated at 60 million dollars (p. 181).

Despite all the successes mentioned in Part I, the Mong still have to face with two major problems. Those that are associated with the social and those that are related to the educational problems of the Mong American families in the United States.

## **1. SOCIAL PROBLEMS FACING BY THE MONG AMERICAN FAMILIES**

In the United States, the Mong were exposed to the American family lifestyle and customs. Since the Mong culture is diametrically different from the United States, they experienced "culture shock" and other adjustment problems. Koschmann and Tobin (n.d.) define "culture shock" as "a phenomenon when one finds himself/herself in the middle of a new culture in which cues are difficult or impossible to interpret which produce feelings of disorientation, inadequacy, and isolation" (p. 4). The effects of culture shock were increased when the Mong obtained information only through interpreters. Many Mong expressed this cultural shock through depression, crying, and to certain extent, an unusual phenomenon experienced by Mong males between the age twenty and fifty-five years old referred by the Mong as "Tsaugzug tuag" (Sleeping Death) or what some experts named "Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome" (SUDS).

SUDS is a striking and horrified phenomenon associated with the migration and the Mong during their transition to become Americans in the United States. Sherman (1988) reported that about 115 Mong in the United States had died mysteriously in their sleep (p. 587-610). The author estimated that over 200 Mong males have died from the SUDS phenomenon by 2003. One of the critical issues in the Mong community is in the area of mental health. The Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services (1986) asserted that depression and anxiety reaction are the most common mental health problems and those aged between 19-35 were at the highest risk.

Westermeyer et al (1984) discovered that there are high rates of psychological distress in the Mong/Hmong population - a rate of 2-4 times greater than those for the U.S. population. To him, the Mong continue to sustain a high rate of depressive symptoms 3.5 years following migration (1984). In addition, Kinzie and Mason (1985) found major depressive disorder in 48% of Southeast Asians compared to 23% of American patients. In addition, Thao (1999a) indicated that the social problems encountered by the Mong American families included secondary migration (p. 77), lack of knowledge and access to jobs (p. 78), family reunification (pp. 78-79), vocational adjustment and gender role adjustment (p. 80).

## **2. EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS FACING BY THE MONG AMERICAN FAMILIES**

Lewis (1994) examined a profile of the Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese people in the United States for the National Association for the Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese based primarily upon data from the 1990 U.S. Census Bureau and revealed that the Mong were a very young population. Over sixty (60%) percent are age 17 and under; and 43% have more than four children. Almost 72% of the Mong adults have less than a high school education, and over half reported no formal education at all.

Due to their lack of formal education back in Laos, the Mong American families as a group have gone through a period of sporadic changes since migrating unexpectedly from Laos through Thailand to the United States and through the third country in the West. They have experienced tremendous changes in almost every aspect of their lives. They are forced to change their way of life and to adjust and adapt quickly to the social norms of the new society. Their acquisition of knowledge needs to be accelerated at an unprecedented rate as they begin their new lives in the "Information Age" in the highly technological U.S. society.

The Mong have been faced with some of the most crucial social and educational problems during their adjustment from Mong to Mong Americans in the United States. For example, the Mong have gone through a period of vocational adjustment and gender role adjustment. In Laos, one's professional and vocational status was intertwined with his identity, social respect, and self-esteem. In the United States, adjustment in the new culture meant an adjustment to a new self-identity. Many former high ranking military officers who were

illiterate had difficulty coping with vocational adjustment by accepting minimal paying jobs, e.g. custodians and blue color jobs. Many Mong males also experienced the evolving gender role adjustment. Men were traditionally the breadwinners for the families. However, this was no longer true in the United States. Financial circumstances require two or more incomes to support a family. In several cases, Mong women have become the main breadwinners for the families.

Thao's study found that the Mong who came to the Chicago area between 1978 through 1987 experienced tremendous frustration (Thao, 1994a). This frustration was attributed to numerous problems including "adjustment to the new educational system" (Thao, 1999a, p. 86), "language barrier" (p. 87), "native language and cultural loss" (p. 90), "intergenerational gap" (p. 91), "cultural differences between the Mong and the United States" (p. 92), "the issue of Over-Americanization" (p. 93), "gang related issues" (p. 94), "role shift" (p. 95), "misconceptions about the role of teachers" (p. 96) and "the lack of similar experience to assist their children in the United States" (pp. 96-97). Therefore, the author exacerbated and declared that there was a crisis in Mong American education (Thao, 1999a).

The severity in the low academic achievement of the Mong/Hmong students was echoed by Secretary for Education Kerry Mazzoni in a letter addressed to local school districts in California urging them to attend a conference convened by the Office of the Secretary for Education (OSE) in collaboration with the Central Valley Mong/Hmong leadership and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) on May 28, 2002. She brought to their attention that "Mong/Hmong students are among the lowest performing students in many of our schools" (Mazzoni, 2002, May 16).

Furthermore, Secretary for Education Kerry Mazzoni indicated that "there is a need to intensify the efforts for students who are not succeeding, by increasing parental involvement, home to school communication, and the use of best practices to increase the educational achievement of Mong/Hmong students in California. One hundred fifty (150) educators and community leaders attended this meeting to discuss the educational status of the Mong/Hmong students in California resulting in the formation of the Success for Mong/Hmong Students Advisory Committee" (OSE, 2003).

### **SUCCESS FOR MONG/HMONG STUDENTS ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

Following this conference at the State Capitol in Sacramento, CA on May 28, 2002, the "Success for Mong/Hmong Students" Advisory Committee was formed. This committee is made up of the Mong/Hmong community leaders from communities throughout California and school district representatives. The advisory committee continues to meet on a regular basis, e.g. on February 20, 2003 in the Sacramento City Unified School District Central Office and on June 20, 2003 in Merced City Unified School District, Merced, CA. The goals of the advisory committee are "to work with the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), the Office of the Secretary for Education (OSE), and local school districts to resolve and improve the Mong/Hmong student achievement" (OSE, 2002 & 2003).

### **DILEMMAS FACING THE MONG AMERICANS**

The Mong, coming to the United States with very little formal education in Laos and speaking very little English, have a lot adjustment to do, in order to survive in a highly technological society, such as the United States. One of the major adjustments has to do with the balance between their ways of life, the family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based approach and the new way of life, and the individualistic-based approach. The two major problems involve the social adjustment problem and the education adjustment problems discussed above. As the Mong continue to adjust to the life in the United States and struggle to make their ends meet, they have encountered one critical dilemma after another, beginning with the initial resettlement process since 1975s, secondary migration and welfare reform in the 1980s, gang related issues in the 1990s, crisis in Mong education (Thao, 1999a), the strife to become economic self-sufficient, the struggle for identity and the changing role of the Mong women in the 2000s.

A discussion on most of the aforementioned dilemmas can be found in *Mong education at the crossroads* (Thao, 1999a). However, two new contemporary critical emerging contemporary dilemmas will be discussed. The first involves a discussion on the debate over the Mong/Hmong identity regarding Assembly Bill (AB) 78 (Reyes) Hmong education and the second delves with an emerging radical feminist movement to change the structures of the Mong/Hmong traditional patriarchal culture (Foo, 2002) followed by a response to her commentaries from the author.

## 1) DEBATE OVER THE MONG/HMONG IDENTITY REGARDING ASSEMBLY BILL (AB) 78.

In December 2002, Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes (D-Fresno) introduced AB 78 to the California State Assembly Education Committee to add to Section 51221.4 of the California Education Code to encourage instruction that includes the role of the “Hmong” in the Vietnam War in the Social Science curriculum for Grades 7-12.

The Mong Federation, Inc. and the Mong Americans were in full support of AB 78 Hmong Education (Reyes, AB 78 2002). However, since AB 78 was not inclusive of the Mong American children in California whose parents were involved in the Vietnam War, that are substantially half or more than 50% of the total Mong/Hmong student population in California, the Mong Federation, Inc. and the “Mong” Americans in California requested Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes to add and amend the term “Mong” side by side to the term “Hmong” in the bill to show the inclusion of the two Mong/Hmong groups on two occasions.

First, the Mong Federation, Inc. and the Mong Americans wrote letters to Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes on March 8, 2003 (Mong Federation, 2003, Mar 8). Secondly, since AB 78 was scheduled at the State Assembly Education Committee for consent agenda only for March 19, 2003, representatives of the Mong Federation, Inc. went to the State Capitol to request the State Assembly Committee on Education to add and amend the term “Mong” side by side to the term “Hmong” in the bill, but it was denied, ignored and rejected.

Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes explained to the representatives of the Mong Federation, Inc. that, “all Hmong are classified under that term” and directed the representatives of the Mong Federation, Inc. “to seek a separate ethnic designation through federal channels” (Reyes, 2003, March 19). Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes also confirmed this statement to the *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Lee Romney as well (*Los Angeles Times*, 2003, May 24).

Without consideration for self-identification and understanding of the Mong and Hmong people, Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes decided not to add the term “Mong” side by side to the term “Hmong” in the bill as requested. Instead, a new term “**Southeast Asians**” was added and amended to the bill (AB 78 amended as of March 17, 2003) and her staff Daniel Ross insisted to representatives of the Mong Federation, Inc. that the Mong were already included in the Southeast Asians. Therefore, the Mong Federation, Inc. and the Mong Americans in California did not have a choice, except to oppose AB 78 since the bill did not include the “Mong” Americans.

AB 78 passed the State Assembly Education Committee on March 19, 2003 and the California State Assembly on April 1, 2003 without adding and amending the term “Mong” to the bill. This bill, if it became law, would systematically create, reflect and produce ethnic and language inequality of the Hmong and Mong Americans in California within the American society into the HAVEs and the HAVE NOTs since it favored and benefited only the Hmong-speaking students and their parents in California, in this case, the “Hmong Der” or the “White Hmong.” At the same time, it discriminated against the “Mong-“ speaking students in California whose parents were involved in the Vietnam War.

Then, the Mong Federation, Inc. appealed to the various major newspapers in the nation. The *Los Angeles Times* responded to the Mong Federation, Inc.’s call. Lee Romney published an article entitled “Bill Spurs Bitter Debate Over Hmong Identity” in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 24, 2003 that changed the course of the bill to be more inclusive of the Southeast Asian community.

At the hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on Education on AB 78 on June 11, 2003, the Mong Federation, Inc. and the Mong Americans in California continued to oppose AB 78 because it did not include the “Mong” Americans in the bill. The Mong Federation, Inc. and the Mong Americans did not recommend to the Senate Standing Committee on Education to strike out the term “Hmong” from the bill (Thao, 2003, June 11). Daniel Ross from Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes’ office confirmed to a member of the Mong Americans that the Hmong Education Task Force in Fresno already agreed to drop the term “Hmong” as a subgroup from the bill on June 10, 2003, which was a day before the hearing took place. At the hearing of the State Senate Standing Committee on Education on June 11, 2003, the Mong Federation, Inc. still requested the Senate Committee to add the spelling term “Mong” to be side-by-side with the spelling term “Hmong.” Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes informed representatives of the Mong Federation, Inc. and reaffirmed the point the Hmong Education Task Force in Fresno already agreed to drop the term “Hmong” as a subgroup from the bill on June 10, 2003, which was a day before the State Senate hearing took place and her staff called a representative of the Mong Federation, Inc. to notify him about this change. At the end of the hearing, the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Assemblywoman

Sarah Reyes decided to amend the bill “to be inclusive of the entire Southeast Asian community and drop reference to Hmong as a subgroup in the bill” (Senate Standing Committee on Education Document, 2003, June 11).

## 2) THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE MONG/HMONG WOMEN

In 2000, The Ford Foundation commissioned Lora Jo Foo to write a report on the issues and concerns of Asian Americans. As part of this process, Foo selectively picked the Hmong ethnic group that was already marginalized in the American society to conduct her study. In 2002, she published a special focus chapter on “Hmong women in the U.S.: Changing a patriarchal culture” in *Asian American women: Issues, concerns, and responsive human and civil rights advocacy* (pp. 145-159). Foo (2002) concluded that the Hmong’s patriarchal culture placed lesser value on Hmong women and girls, was the root cause of the escalating violence against them (p. 154).

The purpose of this response is to analyze this report for the professional community, the general public, the media, and The Ford Foundation so we could learn about the potential uses and misuses of this report when translated and interpreted into policy and practice.

Foo’s report represents a departure from many of the research studies in that it uses the cases presented by the media as her primary resources for her data collection. A thorough investigation of the real root cause of the problems should be examined before making a generalization about the finding. The time of the study, including the writing of her entire book from the beginning to the finished product took only about two years. Therefore, timing is an issue. In addition, as a non-Hmong, her data collection and data interpretation involving a deep and complex cultural understanding of the Hmong people are questionable.

A review of the literature was done. Only a total of twenty-one sources were consulted in her reference list (pp. 160-161). An analysis of her citations revealed that she mainly collected her data from the newspapers. Her primary sources included the interviews of eight subject-participants (p. 189) and the review of two newsletters, three reports from the Mutual Assistance Associations and one directory; whereas her secondary sources consisted of eleven citations from the newspapers, three peer-reviewed articles, and one master’s thesis (pp. 160-161).

Instead of drawing her conclusion from a case-by-case basis, she made a generalization on the Hmong males who attributed to the escalation of violence for Hmong women and girls. She portrayed and stigmatized Hmong males negatively by perceiving them as traders of Hmong women as merchandises” (bride price) (p. 149), rapists (p. 149), and polygamists (p. 150). According to her, given the changing role of Hmong women, the Hmong males felt threatened and viewed “slapping and physical abuse as acceptable means of disciplining a disobedient wife” (p. 150) and “Hmong men use suicide killings as a weapon to keep their wives in line by verbally threatening [them]” (p. 152).

Foo’s report is found to be biased, unfair, slanted, and bashing toward Hmong males. Foo is very critical of the Hmong culture as a non-Hmong who knows very little about the Hmong culture. Of course, in every culture, there are good and bad aspects. As Americans, we should become eclectic and learn to balance between the Hmong family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based approach and the individualistic-based approach to life. With the publication of this report at The Ford Foundation level, it is very damaging to the Hmong males as a whole group beyond reparation.

Overall, the tone of the report is anti-Hmong males and bashes against them. This report, if written in a positive tone, can and should inform decisions about policy and practice. Policy should reflect a broad understanding of the Hmong culture, meet high standards of quality, and have the potential to improve the quality of life of the Hmong Americans in the United States. However, the report singled out Hmong males for stereotyping and is preconceived with oversimplified generalization about the Hmong patriarchal culture. There is a danger to this stereotyping in that the Hmong males are not considered as individuals but are categorically classified into the same category based upon the negative experiences of a few individual cases.

Given the background information about the educational attainment of the Mong as a people and their past experience in the past two decades and a half, they have made a lot of progress in the adjustment in the United States during this transitional period from Mong to Mong Americans. They have made a big

adjustment from the family-, clan- and community- or consensus-based approach to the individualistic-based approach. This also means that they have to make a complete shift in their whole life adjustment to fit in the American society. The adjustment rate also varies from individual to individual at a different rate. For some people, it may require a longer period. For some, it may require less time. In the meantime, the Mong culture in the United States is very dynamic and is transforming for the better on a daily basis. It may take some times for them to complete the cycle of adjustment in transitioning from one approach to life to another, e.g. to close the gap between gender, for example. In the meantime, every Mong male is different and unique in their own way. Each should be judged on an individual basis rather than the whole group. It is not fair to lump them altogether in the same category.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Mong American families have special concerns that need special attention. After all, the Mong account for the largest language minority in Wisconsin, in Minnesota, and are ranked third in terms of the numbers for limited English proficient (LEP) students in California. The future of the Mong depends on education. To address the two areas of needs for the Mong American families, the author proposes two recommendations in two areas, which are the social problems and the educational problems and urge those involved to take an active role in the following:

#### **1. SOCIAL PROBLEMS FACING THE MONG AMERICAN FAMILIES**

The author recognizes that the Mong society is changing and is transforming at a very fast pace. Each Mong American needs to start taking control over his or her own destiny by focusing on the present rather than the past. The author recognizes that nobody would help them unless they start to help themselves. The Mong should plan short and long term objectives for their lives. They should begin to design specific plans of actions in order to become economically self-sufficient as soon as possible. The Mong leadership at each locality should encourage small scale of economic development projects and businesses that are achievable and profitable for the Mong. The aim is to develop self-esteem for the Mong community. However, every individual Mong must set his or her own goals.

In the meantime, the Mong should preserve certain aspects of their culture, such as the notion of respect for the elderly, for their family and their culture, the importance of their clan system, folktales, crafts, arts, and music to sustain their cultural existence and to meet their human needs. These particular aspects of the Mong culture are incomparable to what they could find in the various cultures in the United States. These cultural characteristics are worth to preserve and make the Mong community unique. In another words, the Mong should be able to make selective adaptation and know how to balance between their culture and the cultures of the diverse ethno-cultural groups in the United States. They should be able to balance between the process of enculturation (learning the patterns of their own culture) and acculturation (learning how to adjust to other cultures without giving up the Mong culture). It is possible for the Mong to be modernized without being westernized. This is very critical to the survival of the Mong ethno-cultural and linguistic identity in the United States.

#### **2. EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS FACING THE MONG AMERICAN FAMILIES**

In terms of educational problems facing the Mong, two specific areas are recommended for the Mong for consideration. They are, the reassertion of moral education and Mong grandparents into the education process. The following paragraphs provide more details pertaining to each:

##### ***1) Reassertion of Moral Education***

By assessing the overall picture of curriculum in relation to the United States', the author feels that moral education is missing from many school districts' curricula. The author proposed the reassertion of moral education in the curriculum, particularly in the local school districts that are heavily impacted by the Mong American families. By examining the structure of traditional Mong American families, we could see that every Mong member was task-specific. They worked hard to contribute to the welfare of the family as previously discussed.

## 2) *Reassertion of Mong Grandparents into the Education Process*

One of the problems is the lack of Mong grandparents' involvement in the educational process of Mong youngsters. Due to the language barrier, Mong grandparents withdrew themselves voluntarily from this task of providing informal education to their grand children. Secondly, there is a need to reassert moral education for Mong youngsters to culminate their knowledge and personal experience to become future productive, contributing and ethical citizens with a conscious mind of familial and social responsibilities. One of the goals is to develop critical reasoning so that they may be able to draw the line between good and bad, and between right and wrong.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, this chapter consists of three parts. Part I provides information on the Mong American family life, their social, political, economic, spiritual, educational, linguistic, and aesthetic structures of the Mong American families. Part II probes the problems of social and education problems of the Mong American Families with a discussion on the debate over the Hmong/Mong identity evolving around a bill, and a response to Foo's special focus report on the changing role of the Hmong/Mong women in America (2002) followed by Part III, which are recommendations and a conclusion.

The Mong American families coming from a semi-traditional life style from Laos have adjusted amazingly well in a highly technological advanced society, such as the United States. The younger Mong have a lot of opportunity for socio-economic mobility. Known for their intelligence, adaptability, and love for freedom, the Mong Americans will continue to adjust as a community. It is expected that the Mong Americans will advance to their full potential and contribute greatly to the advancement of life in the United States.

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