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THE CANADIAN SOUTHEAST ASIA REFUGEE HISTORICAL RESEARCH PROJECT: HEARTS OF FREEDOM

LITERATURE REVIEW PAPERS

Researchers:

Peter Duschinsky, Colleen Lundy, Michael Molloy, Allan Moscovitch, and Stephanie P. Stobbe

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Laotian Resettlement and Integration in Canada: A Literature Review

Lisa McLean, PhD (cand.)
PhD Candidate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University and a Research Assistant for Hearts of Freedom, in association with Carleton University and Menno Simons College (a College of Canadian Mennonite University)
and
Stephanie P. Stobbe, PhD
Associate Professor in Conflict Resolution Studies at Menno Simons College (a College of Canadian Mennonite University), located at University of Winnipeg, and Researcher for Hearts of Freedom

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Abstract

The mass resettlement of Southeast Asian (Indochinese) refugees remains a historic humanitarian achievement by Canada. Between 1979-1980, Canada resettled 60,000 refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia through government and private sponsorships. Research has focused very little on the experiences of refugees from Laos who fled as a result of the Vietnam War and the Lao Secret War. This paper examines the reasons for their flight from Laos, their experiences in Thai refugee camps, and their initial settlement in Canada. As there were very few Lao communities in Canada at the time, it explores the specific challenges and cultural resources of Laotians and other Lao ethnic minorities, including the Hmong, as they settle and integrate in Canada between 1979 and the early 1990s, and rebuild their community.

The Canadian South East Asia Refugee Historical Research Project: Hearts of Freedom

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Introduction

The resettlement of 60,000 refugees to Canada from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos between 1979-1980 remains one of the greatest humanitarian achievements of the Canadian government and the Canadian public. This mass movement of refugees to Canada in the span of only two years become the "largest single movement of refugees to Canada in its history" (Hon. Min. Atkey as cited in Nixon, 2013, p. 5). Refugees from the region were initially referred to as "Boat People," in reference to the dangerous journey taken by many Vietnamese refugees and others who fled on makeshift boats down the Mekong River and across the South China Sea following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the region and the end of the Vietnam War. This terminology, however, failed to acknowledge the thousands of refugees who fled across land, particularly those from Laos and Cambodia who were also deeply affected by the war in Vietnam.

In addition to the term 'Boat People,' government documents and academic papers also frequently refer to refugees from this region as Indochinese, a term that harkens back to the colonial period when Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia formed the region of French Indochina between 1887 and 1954 (Dorais, 2000, p. 1). Others, seeking to avoid these colonialist implications, prefer to use the term Southeast Asians; however, this term is overly inclusive, including countries in the region that did not face the same upheaval and exodus as occurred in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (Dorais, 2000, p. 1). These general categories also insufficiently describe those who fled their homes during this period, as they fail to reflect the diverse cultures, languages, and histories of these three countries and the different ethnic communities that exist within each country.

As a result of the tendency to use these general categories to refer to refugees from this region, there is little information available that speaks to the specific experiences of refugees from Laos in Canada. As described by Van Esterik (2003), academic studies on refugee experiences in Canada frequently merge these populations together through the use of the single category of Southeast Asian or Indochinese refugees, and in the process, render the smaller population of Laotian refugees invisible (p. 4). Many important longitudinal studies conducted on the settlement experiences of refugees do not disaggregate their findings based on country of origin or ethnic background. While these studies contribute important findings regarding processes of settlement and adaptation, as well as Canada's first experience with the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program, they fail to provide information regarding the specific challenges or cultural resources leveraged by individual ethnic communities.

In a few important exceptions, researchers designed studies that focused on the settlement experiences of refugees from Laos and the different ethnic and religious communities from Laos. These studies provide an indication of how differences in class, culture, religion and experiences during conflict and flight impact the challenges faced by different ethnic communities from Laos as they began the process of settlement and integration in Canada. These studies further highlight the unique strengths and strategies utilized by these different communities to help facilitate their integration into the Canadian cultural context.

This paper draws from these academic studies and other materials pertaining to the displacement of thousands of refugees from their homes in Laos, their experiences in refugee camps in Thailand, and their initial settlement experiences in Canada from 1979 to the early 1990s. The paper uses the term 'Southeast Asian' when referring generally to refugees from this region and will use the term 'Laotians' when speaking generally about refugees born in Laos.

Where possible, the paper will refer to the specific experiences of major ethnic communities from Laos in an effort to recognize the unique experiences and cultural resources leveraged during the settlement and adaptation process by these distinct groups.

The Secret War and Laotian Exodus

Laos is a small land-locked country on the Indochinese peninsula that currently has a population of close to 7 million (Stobbe, 2015, p. 9), though during the Southeast Asia refugee crisis of the mid to late 1970s, the population of Laos numbered less than 4 million. Laos shares a border with Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and China. At the time of the refugee exodus, Laos was a largely rural country, with the exception of the capital Vientiene, with an agrarian economy focused mainly on the cultivation of rice (Dorais, 2000, p. 2; Royle, 1980, p. 57).

Within Laos there are several distinct ethnic groups. Approximately half of the population of Laos during the 1970s were Lowland Lao (also referred to as Lao Loum) who came from both urban and rural backgrounds and practiced Theravada Buddhism (Lerthirunwong-Diong, 1989, p. 15; Stobbe, 2015, p. 16; Van Esterik, 2003). The Hmong Hill Tribes (which are included in the Highland Lao groups or Lao Soung), “known as the warrior race of Laos,” constituted approximately 10 percent of the population of the country (Lerthirunwong-Diong, 1989, p. 15). The Hmong are described as being a semi or pre-literate ethnic group with an animist spiritual background and were “culturally and socially isolated from the Laotian majority” (Winland, 1992). In comparison to Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos had the smallest population of ethnic Chinese (Sino-Lao or Chinese Lao), numbering an estimated 30,000 in 1958, or approximately 10 percent of the population (Chan, 1988, p. 141). The ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia were typically quite economically successful, however, they were also

frequently marginalized and faced discrimination (Chan, 1988, p. 142). Other ethnic groups from Laos include the Upland Lao groups (Lao Theung) and among them are the Khammu (Stobbe, 2015, p. 14). The majority of the literature on the resettlement of refugees from Laos to Canada either make no mention of their ethnic origin or discuss only the majority population, the Lowland Lao, as well as the Hmong Hill Tribes, and occasionally the ethnic Chinese. As there is more literature on the Lowland Lao and the Hmong, this paper will discuss the Canadian settlement experiences of these groups in greater detail below.

Laos gained full independence from France in 1953 after more than 50 years of colonial rule. Following independence, Laos faced significant internal and external pressures as the Lao monarchy, the communist Pathet Lao, and later, United States-backed anti-communist forces fought for control, resulting in 20 years of instability, coups, and civil war (Lerthirunwon-Diong 1989, p. 11). During the 1960s to early 1970s, Laos came under severe bombing by the United States as the Viet Minh began moving supply lines into Laos and the Vietnam War spilled across the border (Stobbe, 2015, 1, 12; Wurfel, 1980, p. 105). By 1973, 1,898,260 metric tons of bombs had been dropped on Laos, "approximately the total tonnage dropped by US air forces during all of World War II in both the European and Pacific theatres" (Dommen, 1985 cited in Lerthirunwong-Diong, 1989, p. 12). The U.S. covert operations in Laos became known as the 'Secret War,' as the U.S. military was not officially engaged in Laos and had even signed a treaty prohibiting military activity in the country; so they sought to prevent information about their activities from leaking to the public (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Stobbe 2015, p. 12).

As a part of their 'secret' operations in Laos during the Vietnam War, the C.I.A. (Central Intelligence Agency) recruited Hmong Hill Tribes people to counterattack the communist Pathet Lao guerillas who were being supported by the Viet Minh (Wurfel, 1980, p. 69). The Hmong had

previously collaborated with the French during the 1940s and later fought against the communist Viet Minh who were encroaching on Hmong territory during the 1950s (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993, p. 45-46). In return for promises of supplies, arms, training and ongoing protection from the United States, the Hmong agreed to wage a counterinsurgency campaign against the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993, p. 90). While both sides faced heavy casualties during this period, with reports emerging of massacres of Hmong villages and mass displacement, the Pathet Lao continued to gain strength (Lerthirunwong-Diong, 1989, p. 12-13).

The Vientiane Agreement on Peace and Concord was signed in 1973, leading to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Laos and the formation of a coalition government between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao. The combined events of the progressive withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region, the heart attack of the Prime Minister of Laos in 1974, and the fall of Cambodia and South Vietnam to communist forces in 1975 led to the consolidation of power of the Pathet Lao and their creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lerthirunwong-Diong, 1989, p. 13). In the aftermath of the assumption of power by the Pathet Lao, tens of thousands of Laotians, particularly those deemed to have collaborated with the former government or the United States or who were otherwise highly-educated or skilled, were sent to "re-education" camps in remote areas of the country. Many were held for years in harsh conditions in the camps or while many others died or disappeared (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993, p. 368-377; Molloy et al., 2017, p. 279).

Between 1975-1980, approximately 400,000 Laotians (more than 200,000 Lowland Lao and 120,000 Hmong), or one tenth of the population fled to Thai refugee camps (Van Esertik, 2003, p. 11). The UNHCR later reported that 229,849 Laotians (156,708 Lowland Lao and 73,141 Hmong or hill tribe) were resettled to third countries from Thailand in the decade

following 1975 (Nontapattamadul, 2000, p. 12). Urban and rural refugees from Laos frequently cited fears of political persecution, specifically fears of the re-education camps, as well as general concerns regarding extreme economic insecurity (Wurfel, 1979, p. 70).

In most literature, it is noted that the Hmong in particular faced grave risks of retribution by the Pathet Lao during this period due to their collaboration with the CIA anti-communist forces (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 277; Wurfel, 1979, p. 70). Although numbers vary, reports indicate that upwards of 100,000 Hmong died in campaigns waged against them by the Pathet Lao between 1975-1980, with the government also reportedly using chemical weapons against the Hmong, leading tens of thousands to flee across the Mekong River to Thai refugee camps (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993, p. 409-410; Nontapattamadul, 2000, p. 9-10; Wurfel, 1980, p. 108). Discussing the abandonment of the Hmong by the United States following the U.S. withdrawal from the region, Hamilton-Merritt (1993) argues that "the Americans were indeed destroying the Hmong. Not by dropping lethal agents on them but by not speaking out, by not being outraged at the brutality" (p. 421).

Thai Refugee Camp Experiences and Resettlement to Canada

Laos shares a long border with Thailand that runs along the Mekong River and also shares certain cultural and historic similarities. Prior to the 1975-1980 exodus, there had been regular contact and trade between Laos and Thailand and thousands of Laotians lived in northeastern Thailand (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 366; Nontapattamadul, 2000, p. 123; Van Esterik, 2003, p. 11). In the instability that accompanied the communist takeover of Laos, the majority of Laotian refugees fled by crossing the Mekong River to refugee camps in Thailand. The first wave of Laotian refugees to arrive in Thailand consisted of approximately 10,000 Lowland Lao, including members of the Royal Lao military, government officials and business people, and

45,000 Hmong refugees (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 278; Van Esterik, 2003, p. 13). The situation continued to deteriorate into 1977 as the refugee population in Thailand ballooned to approximately 76,000 refugees (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 59). By 1978, tensions were escalating between China, Vietnam and Cambodia causing more people to flee the region, with estimates indicating that approximately 82,000 Lao were displaced in Thailand by that point (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 86).

Despite a large overland outflow of Laotian and Cambodian refugees into the camps in Thailand, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee) initially determined that resettlement to a third country was not practical due to the large number of people and their low education levels (Molloy et al, 2017, p. 59). It was determined that the most preferable solutions to the refugee crisis were local integration in Thailand or the refugees' eventual repatriation to their home countries. A 1978 Canadian memorandum to cabinet requesting funding for the resettlement of 1,000 overland refugees referred to the Lao population (both Hmong and Lowland Lao) as "illiterate subsistence farmers who are unsuitable for resettlement in industrialized third countries," adding that the "most sensible long-term solution [for this population of Laotians and Cambodians] would appear to be permanent resettlement in Thailand" (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 88). Though Thai authorities were "more relaxed" toward Laotians as compared to the Vietnamese and Cambodians, they were adamant that there was no permanent solution for Laotian refugees in their country (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 279). While international agencies and potential countries of resettlement, including Canada, debated how to respond to the crisis, refugee camps in the region continued to receive thousands of people fleeing persecution and hardship.

Presaging contemporary approaches to migration and border control through policies of deterrence, Van Esterik (2003) explains that some Thai camps were organized on principles of "humane deterrence" that utilized "deliberately austere and basic conditions to discourage the influx of additional Lao refugees" (p. 13). Thai authorities implemented a policy preventing refugee camps from having higher standards of living than the local population, even when the local populations were quite impoverished (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 315). This ensured that all camps in Thailand had relatively austere conditions, creating fertile soil for hopelessness and boredom among men, in turn fueling problems of crime and the abuse of women in the camps (Van Esterik, 2003, p. 18). Canadian immigration officer, Leo Verboven, reflects these notions of mass displacement, austerity, and refugees' resilience in his comments about his experiences conducting interviews in camps in Thailand with Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer, Hmong and Yao hill tribes people:

> Considering the never-ending crushes of people and the unremitting scenes of camp life – children playing in open sewers, hospitals without beds, and people generally living in conditions far worse than any slums I could imagine --- the refugees zest for life, continuing sense of humour, strong family ties and sheer determination are amazing. And it is these qualities in the people that makes immigration officers feel that the work we do is worthwhile (Nixon, 2013, p. 22).

Ban Napho, located in northeastern Thailand and opened in 1977, was one of the "humane deterrent" camps and housed mostly Lowland Lao refugees (Van Esterik, 2003, p. 13). Refugees in Ban Napho were prevented from working for money, there was no formal school established in the camp, and freedom of movement was not allowed in order to ensure that the

camp remained only a temporary refuge for persons waiting for resettlement (Chongvatana, 1988, p. 139). Despite the limited services available in the camp, the majority of those who participated in a 1986 survey stated that they were satisfied with the camp, finding that the conditions there were preferable to what they were fleeing from, while many remained hopeful that they would be resettled to a third country (Chongvatana, 1988, p. 140). Other respondents felt that they lacked food and were uncertain about their future.

The Ban Vinai camp opened in 1978 and was the largest camp for Hmong refugees, and later became center for the Hmong resistance movement (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 325). Ban Vinai allowed a small degree of freedom of movement, allowing refugees to leave the camp for shopping in the mornings. The UNHCR, the Thai government, and the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees created an education program for children and provided vocational training in the camp (Chongvatana, 1988, p. 148). Hmong respondents to the 1986 survey indicated they were likewise satisfied with the camp, although some expressed disappointment in the lack of employment opportunities and insufficient food (Chongvatana, 1988, p. 148). In other Hmong camps, there were reports of inter-tribal conflict and issues related to the loss of status experienced by men as well as chronic boredom (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 314).

Between 1975 and 1978, a relatively small number of Southeast Asian refugees began arriving in Canada. Nearly 8,000 Vietnamese and a much smaller number of Cambodians and Laotians (approximately 250 and 150, respectively) arrived in Canada during this period (Dorais, 2000, p. 7). The majority of these refugees had family members in Canada and tended to come from middle-class, urban backgrounds and worked in the government, business and military sectors of each country (Dorais, 2000, p. 7; Molloy et al., 2017, p. 43). As the ‘Boat People’ refugee crisis continued to worsen through 1977 and 1978, the Canadian government came under

pressure from the UNHCR to begin accepting overland refugees in Thailand for resettlement (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 68).

In response to these pressures, the Canadian government created the Indochinese Designated Class. The 1976 Immigration Act allowed the Canadian government to designate a group of people as eligible for resettlement to Canada without necessarily first qualifying as Convention refugees (Batarseh, 2016, p. 57). The new Designated Classes system allowed the government to respond quickly to the Southeast Asian refugee crisis by determining that people who had fled Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia after April 30, 1975 were "ipso facto refugees… in absence of evidence to the contrary" (Batarseh, 2016, p. 57). Without the need for the individual determination of Convention refugee status, the Indochinese Designated Class streamlined the processing of Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians in refugee camps in the region, allowing for their rapid resettlement to Canada.

The initial target for the Canadian resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees was modest, but it increased dramatically to 50,000 in 1979, and later increased again to 60,000 in the face of public pressure and support from private sponsors (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 119). These 60,000 refugees to be resettled between 1979 and 1980 were supported by both the government and by the newly created Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program that allowed private groups, including small groups of individuals, religious institutions and ethnic communities to sponsor refugees and provide them with financial, practical, and social support (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 72). In 1979, the Mennonite Central Committee of Canada (MCC) signed the first umbrella agreement with the Canadian government for the private sponsorship of refugees and within weeks religious bodies across the country followed suit (Janzen, 2006, p. 212). These initial umbrella agreements signed in the wake of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis effectively

operationalized the PSR program, with approximately 180,000 refugees from countries around the world arriving in Canada under the PSR program in its first 25 years (Janzen, 2006, p. 220).

With the introduction of the target of 60,000 arrivals between 1979 and 1980, Canadian policy in Thailand focused on the resettlement of Lowland Lao and the Vietnamese boat population in order to meet this significant target (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 304). Canadian policy also dictated that "any refugee selected should be capable of successful establishment in Canada with the settlement assistance available" (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 289). This requirement along with the urgency of the resettlement effort led officers to focus on screening Lowland Lao refugees in the Nonghkai and Ubol camps as many refugees in these camps came from middle-class backgrounds and had strong educational and professional backgrounds, thus improving their chances of successfully settling in Canada (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 289). Indeed, one study indicated that 61 percent of Laotians in Thailand had five years or more of formal education and 43 percent had been civil servants (Thomson, 1980, p. 126).

The Hmong Hill Tribes people were considered particularly vulnerable and in need of resettlement due to the high risk of persecution they faced at the hands of the Pathet Lao as evidenced by recent massacres committed against the population and because of their lack of urban experience and education (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 417; Wurfel, 1979, p. 74). To respond to the needs of vulnerable groups such as the Hmong, Canada developed the Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) program that provided both federal assistance and private sponsorship to at-risk and vulnerable groups who "would not likely have been accepted by any [other] resettlement country, had the voluntary groups and government not banded together to provide special settlement help" (Employment and Immigration Canada, EIC, 1982, p. 14). From 1979 to 1980 during the height of the mass resettlement program, 11 Hmong families numbering 87 people in

total, resettled in Canada. The number of Hmong in Canada increased to approximately 800 persons by 1989 (EIC, 1982, p. 30; Winland, 1994, p. 27). The majority of the Hmong ethnic group settled in Ontario in the Kitchener-Waterloo area and many were sponsored by MCC.

By the end of 1980, the Mennonite Central Committee had sponsored 1,753 Laotians from a total of 9,849 Laotians who had arrived in Canada during this resettlement effort, comprising 53 percent of all refugees sponsored by MCC during that period (EIC, 1982, p. 20; Kehler, 1980, p. 10). While comparatively speaking only a small number of Laotians were included in the mass resettlement program of 1979-1980 (Laotians comprised only 16.4 percent of the 60,000 (EIC, 1982, p. 20)), the literature indicates that there was a degree of tension among experts as to the appropriateness of resettlement as a solution to the Lao refugee crisis.

The possible solutions of local integration or eventual repatriation of the Lowland Lao were favored by some experts and policy makers. The reasoning for this was due to perceptions of the ease with which the Lowland Lao could integrate into Thai society, "where cultural assimilation would be quite easy" (Wurfel, 1979, p. 74), or as mentioned previously, concerns among policy makers that Laotians were too uneducated to successfully settle in Canada (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 88). At the same time, others reported concerns that middle-class Lowland Lao were not genuine refugees, but were economic migrants fleeing economic insecurity, not necessarily persecution (Kehler, 1980, p. 51-52). Some MCC aid workers in Laos expressed concerns that the demand to quickly fill the Canadian refugee quota and the government's focus on refugees who had a good potential for successful settlement in Canada led authorities to choose those refugees most readily available to board planes, not necessarily those at greatest risk of persecution (Kehler, 1980, p. 50-53). These aid workers worried that this would create a 'pull' factor for more people to leave their homes and may result in a brain drain of Laos' most

educated and experienced. One aid worker stated that urban elites and "rich Vientiane youth, children of corrupt generals" were seeking resettlement "so they could continue the "playboy" lifestyle [in Canada] which the communist regime prohibited" (Kehler, 1980, p. 52-53). The MCC report emphasizes that these concerns are not meant to downplay the validity of the fears expressed by many Laotians of persecution and violence, but reflect the concerns of some within the organizations as to the ethics of resettlement as a response to conflict.

Despite these concerns, studies indicate that both the Hmong and the Lowland Lao reported fearing persecution, specifically fears regarding the possibility of abduction and disappearance in state-run re-education camps (Chongvatana, 1988, p. 157-158; Stobbe, 2006, p. 114; Van Esterik, 2003, p. 11). Due to the secrecy surrounding these camps, there are no official numbers of detainees; however, estimates indicate that between 30-50,000 Laotians, including military leaders, Hmong generals, former government officials, and members of the royal family, were sent to re-education camps in remote areas of the country (Savada, 1995, p. 69). Those sent to the camps faced brutal treatment and many languished for years or died, as was the case with the Lao royal family who died of starvation and were buried in unmarked graves outside the camp (Savada, 1995, p. 69-70).

These fears of state-sponsored violence were frequently entangled with concerns about economic insecurity and extreme poverty. As mentioned earlier, Thailand was opposed to the solution of local integration for Southeast Asian refugees and in 1985 began screening Lao refugees to determine if they met refugee eligibility criteria or were eligible for family reunification in a third country. By March 1986, "2,989 Lao had voluntarily repatriated under UNHCR auspices" (EIC, 1986, p. 28). Despite this, the number of Laotians in Thai camps continued to rise and by 1985 there were 93,257 Laotians were taking refuge in Thai camps. The

Canadian government attributed these increases to a "perceived growth in resettlement opportunities;" however, the same report also indicated that from a sample of refugees in 1985, only 42 percent sought resettlement to a third country (EIC, 1986, p. 36). These conflicting findings raise significant questions about whether the desire to resettle to a third country was really driving this outward movement from Laos, particularly in light of the violence committed by the Pathet Lao against Laotian citizens in the years following their assumption of power.

While the issues of brain drain and the effect of refugee resettlement on the post-conflict development of a country are of serious concern, the Pathet Lao had committed atrocities against the Hmong population as well as the urban Lowland Lao (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). These forms of state-sanctioned violence, including massacre, forced detention, disappearance, and other grave violations of human rights prompted reasonable fears of perspection among Laotians that led to their mass displacement. The reports of atrocities committed by the Pathet Lao, the refugees' own testimonies of their fear of persecution, and the reticence of Thai authorities to contemplate local integration all form a compelling argument for the need for third country resettlement for refugees from Laos.

Resettlement and Integration in Canada

Prior to 1975, approximately 200 Laotian students had immigrated to Canada to attend university at primarily francophone institutions in Quebec (Dorais, 2000, p. 6). A similar number Laotian refugees arrived in Canada in the intervening years between 1975 and 1978. It was not until Canada decided to resettle 60,000 Southeast Asian refugees, including overland refugees, that large numbers of Laotians began arriving in Canada. Between 1979 and 1980, almost 10,000 (9,849) refugees from Laos arrived in Canada (EIC, 1982, p. 20). Due to the strong participation of civil society in the PSR program, numbering some 7,000 sponsorship groups, newcomers

were not only located in the major urban centers of the country, but were spread throughout Canada (Dorais, 2000, p. 8; EIC, 1982, p. 5, 14). After arriving in Canada, many Laotians and other Southeast Asian refugees secondarily migrated to major cities that had larger ethnic communities and better employment opportunities. By 1991, almost 50 percent of Laotians lived in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, though a significant number (8 percent) settled in Manitoba due to the active role that the Mennonite church played in the private sponsorship program (Dorais, 2000, p. 10; Molloy et al., 2017, p. 446).

In comparison to the Southeast Asians who arrived in Canada prior to 1975 and during the first wave of refugees from 1975-1978, the refugees who arrived from 1979-80 had overall lower levels of education and professional work experience and were less likely to speak English or French (Dorais, 2000, p. 8). According to Employment and Immigration Canada (EIC), 68 percent of Laotian refugees had some secondary education or less, while 24.3 percent had no formal education and 7.4 percent had some post-secondary education (p. 25). These numbers are in line with those from the other two countries, with Vietnamese refugees reporting a slightly higher level of education and Cambodian refugees slightly lower. Initial governmental statistics do not disaggregate the ability to speak either English or French by country, but note that over 91 percent of all refugees who arrived during this period could not speak either official language (EIC, 1982, p. 24).

In terms of previous occupation in their home country, the largest percentage of Laotians stated that they had been non-workers (28.2%), followed by students (18.7%), new workers (15.9%), fabricating and repair (11.6%), housewives (10%), while others stated that they had been employed as teachers, clerical workers, in medicine, construction and other fields (EIC, 1982, p. 26). Given that the 1991 census indicates that over half of the Laotian population in

Canada at that time were under the age of 25 (Dorais, 2000, p. 12), it is understandable that so few Laotians would have professional work experience, regardless if they came from urban or rural backgrounds. These initial reports of low occupational experience, however, diverge with later studies that indicate that Laotians had among the highest proportion of persons with professional, white-collar work experience (Dorais, 1991, p. 557; Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 85). It is difficult to determine if these differences are an effect of sampling, if more educated refugees were more likely to participate in these studies, or if they are related to a difference in defining the different categories of work that refugees previously engaged in. For example, the EIC 1982 report does not indicate what the category 'new worker' refers to, leaving the possibility that these respondents had been working in entry-level white-collar or other middle class professions.

Language and Employment Acquisition

Among the primary indicators of successful adaptation for newcomers are language acquisition and their integration into the labor market. Southeast Asian refugees in Canada faced a number of barriers to the labor market relating to their lack of fluency in English or French and their overall low levels of education, including illiteracy in their own language as was the case for many Hmong refugees. These barriers to integration were made all the more difficult as Canada entered an economic recession in the 1980s, limiting the number of jobs available (Dorais, 2000, p. 8; Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 271; Samuel, 1987, p. 67). An early government-produced report on the social and economic adaptation of Southeast Asian refugees during their first three years in Canada (1981-1983) indicated that Laotians were quick to enter the labor market with 70 percent reporting that they had been employed within their first six months in the country (Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 76). Their eagerness to enter the labor market is also shown in their greater frequency to seek out information about jobs from government agencies and to

become employed and receive unemployment benefits during their first year in Canada (Neuwirth et al,, 1985, p. 170).

Laotians were also less likely to take language courses and job training during their first three years in Canada, with only 57 percent of Laotians taking language courses for at least five months (Neuwirth et al, 1985, p. 66). By 1991, however, only 13.7 percent of Laotians could not speak either English or French, indicating a higher rate of language acquisition than either the Vietnamese or Cambodians (Dorais, 2000, p. 18). Despite their attempts to quickly enter the labor market, many Laotians found themselves underemployed, as was the case with other Southeast Asian refugees, and were concentrated in low-wage occupations involving manual labor (Chan, 1987, p. 119; Copeland, 1988, p. 101-102; Dorais, 2000, p. 17; Samuel, 1987, p. 68). Further study is required in order to understand why certain groups, such as the Laotians, appeared to be particularly eager to enter the labor market, even at the expense of attending language and job-training sessions that could be useful for their long-term settlement prospects.

Winland's (1994) study of the Hmong settlement experiences in southern Ontario provides an example of how analyses of multiple aspects of identity such as gender and ethnicity can help explain such phenomena. Winland (1994) found that Hmong women were more likely to be employed than men, citing the gendered and racialized stereotypes held by Canadian employers as a reason why Hmong women were preferred employees: "one factory employer stated that he was pleased in particular with the work of Hmong women because they were industrious and as he put it; 'those Asian girls are pretty good with their hands'" (p. 30). The employment imbalance between Hmong women and men disrupted patriarchal cultural norms, leading to family conflict and increasing the burden of work on women as many had work obligations both outside and within the home (Winland, 1994, p. 31). Notably, Winland (1994)

finds that Hmong women were resistant to job-training and language programming due to gender norms, arguing that "their presence would be interpreted by men (male relatives, particularly husbands) as a threat to their status or as a direct competition for available jobs" (p. 32). The experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in Canada illustrate not only the importance of disaggregated data in terms of ethnicity in order to understand the particular settlement needs of different populations, but also the importance of gender analyses for understanding how both ethnicity and gender impact refugees' settlement experiences.

By 1986, six years after the largest wave of Southeast Asian refugees arrived in Canada, 72.7 percent of Laotians of working age were actively working or seeking work, which was more than the Canadian average of 66 percent. Their average annual income was more than what was earned by Cambodians, though less than the Canadian and Vietnamese averages (Dorais, 1991, p. 15). These variations in earnings can be partly explained by the relatively higher previous educational background of Vietnamese refugees as well as their greater access to social networks that are useful for finding work, owing to having a greater population overall and an existing community of pre-1975 university students and middle class refugees from the 1975-1978 period (Dorais, 2000, p. 16; Indra, 1987, p. 158). In this same year, Laotian women were employed outside of the home less than men and made approximately 30 percent less than Laotian men, although both Laotian men and women were concentrated in the industrial sector (Dorais, 2000, p. 15-17).

In studies where the Laotian population reported higher numbers of college-educated or professional workers, there also appeared to be a tendency for the respondents to report greater degrees of dissatisfaction in their settlement experiences. In Dorais' (1991) study of Southeast Asian social and economic adaptation in Quebec City, 20 percent of the sample of 34 Laotian

refugees indicated that they had previous work experience in the civil service, 23 percent as petty business people, and 29 percent as service employees (p. 554). Despite having more professional experience, Laotians were the least likely to be employed in Quebec City in 1987 in comparison to Vietnamese or Cambodian refugees. Dorais (1991) suggests that that these highly skilled Laotian refugees were more discouraged by the job prospects available to them and the related loss of status that they would experience by accepting work outside of their professional or educational experience. The article concludes by explaining that economic adjustment is easier for refugees who have lower occupational status in their home countries "as they would have less difficulty fulfilling their occupational expectations" (Dorais, 1991, p. 560). These results suggest that higher education and previous middle-class work experience may actually worsen refugees' initial settlement experiences by provoking a heightened sense of loss of status.

These findings are echoed by the Neuwirth *et al*. (1985) study that found that 22 percent of Laotians sampled had previous professional experience, but also reported being the most pessimistic about the future (p. 82, 199). The study found that many privately sponsored refugees, including large Laotian families, had moved into subsidized housing during their first three years in Canada. The authors hypothesized that although respondents with greater formal education more frequently feel that they are socially accepted in Canada, the experiences of living in subsidized housing, as shared by many Laotian refugees with large families, may have lowered their sense of social acceptance and increased their pessimism about the future. The authors argue that "feelings of acceptance may well be lower for those living in subsidized and low rental housing in which they may be looked upon as interlopers in a rather tight market" (Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 197-198). These findings provide some indication of the specific challenges faced by refugees with different family compositions and from different socio-

economic backgrounds as well as how settlement is affected by the issues of loss of status, disillusionment and socio-economic conflicts that refugees encounter in Canada.

Among the problems identified by refugees and their sponsors in terms of employment were the need for language training, the general unavailability of jobs in the struggling Canadian economy, the refugees' lack of Canadian work experience and credentialing problems (Kehler, 1980, p. 20-12; Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 270-271; Samuel, 1987, p. 69; Stobbe, 2006, p. 121). Sponsorship groups were found to deliver benefits including the use of personal networks to facilitate settlement and employment, yet there were a number of drawbacks, including a sense of paternalism among sponsors and dependency among refugees (Samuel, 1987, p. 72). In a later study conducted in 2004-05, sponsors and Laotian refugees reflected on their experiences and concluded that refugees must be allowed or encouraged to focus on language acquisition prior to pursuing employment and that there should be more assistance for finding appropriate employment for refugees, including the availability of credentialing or other training supports to match refugees with jobs related to their skills (Stobbe, 2006, p. 121). Laotian refugees, as with the other refugees from Southeast Asia, faced numerous barriers to employment in Canada including language ability, previous training and educational experience, as well as the struggling Canadian economy. Nevertheless, the testimonies of refugees and sponsors indicate that the government could lower some of these barriers by supporting educational and training opportunities for refugees in Canada and facilitating the recognition of their foreign credentials for the Canadian labor market.

Private Sponsorship

The hypothesis of federal authorities that privately sponsored refugees would fare better than those sponsored solely by the government proved more complicated than originally thought.

Employment and Immigration Canada celebrated the success of the new PSR program in their 1982 report issued shortly after the Southeast Asian mass resettlement effort ended:

> The main lesson of the Indochinese program is that voluntary sponsorship works – and that it works exceedingly well. It provides a better and more personal base for refugee resettlement, self-sufficiency and integration. It also provides a clear signal to all levels of government that individual Canadians care deeply about mass human suffering, and that they are willing to invest their resources, their time, and their compassion to do something about it (EIC, 1982, p. 18).

The participation of thousands of sponsoring groups in the resettlement of tens of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees signalled the engagement of the Canadian public in seeking humanitarian solutions for conflicts abroad. At the same time, evaluations of the success of the PSR program in the years following the Southeast Asian refugee crisis showed mixed results from both refugees and sponsors.

The refugees surveyed for the Neuwirth *et al.* (1985) report indicated a general degree of dissatisfaction regarding the performance of their private sponsors. Overall, "less than half of the respondents gave an assessment of "very helpful" while 17% found them to have been of "little help" and "no help at all"" (Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 50). Refugees found their sponsors to be most helpful with facilitation, including for children's education, scheduling medical appointments, finding accommodation and local information. Sponsors were found to be least helpful with "culturally-mediative aspects of their role," in particular, for broadening the refugees' social networks with other Canadians (Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 51). Laotian refugees were the least satisfied with the assistance they received from their sponsors, although they

reported having relatively high levels of interaction with their sponsors (Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 54-56). The authors explain this discrepancy by stating that the "Lao had very high expectations for their future life in Canada which, in their perception, sponsors did not help them to attain" (Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 57). Stobbe (2006) presents an alternative explanation for this discrepancy, explaining that the cultural deference and respect for elders and those in authority held by Laotians led many refugees to desire close relationships with their sponsors who were seen as akin to parents or grandparents (116). This desire for a familial relationship was not understood by sponsors, who instead were accustomed to the Canadian cultural preference for privacy and space, which caused distress among Laotian refugees who felt isolated or uncomfortable with these new social norms (Stobbe, 2006, 116, 119). Cultural sources of potential dissatisfaction must be taken into consideration along with other factors including underemployment and loss of status to explain why Laotians may have been less satisfied with their sponsors or concerned about their future prospects in Canada.

Interestingly, one study found that the experience of being privately sponsored, as was the case among the majority of the Laotians interviewed for the study, was correlated with a stronger acceptability of receiving government support in times of financial need. Johnson (2003) argues that Vietnamese and Laotian refugees came from societies that emphasized a collectivist orientation and a sense of financial responsibility for the family, thus marking government assistance as culturally problematic. The Laotians interviewed for the study were married, employed (77 percent) and satisfied with their income (76 percent), with a slim majority making $30,000 or less per year (Johnson, 2003, p. 128). While government sponsored refugees were not more likely to support receiving government assistance in times of financial need, those who were privately sponsored, particularly Laotians, were more likely to approve of accepting government

assistance. The study concludes that, "it seems that the experience of having relied on non-family during the initial resettlement may have modified their views about the desirability of using such sources when in financial need" (Johnson, 2003, p. 137). It also seems possible that privately sponsored refugees, including Laotians, perceived that government sponsored refugees received better or more consistent support than what they received from their sponsors, leading them to favor government assistance. In either case, given that newly arrived refugees face significant hardships in their first several years, it is beneficial that privately sponsored refugees are able to overcome cultural taboos to accept outside financial support during times of difficulty.

Other studies indicated that cultural misunderstandings on the part of Canadian officials and private sponsoring groups created challenges for some refugees. While some early work was done to introduce current or future sponsors to specific details about Laotian history and culture (Royle, 1980), Stobbe (2006) explains that some orientation material created for potential sponsors conflated the culture and language of all Southeast Asian refugees with that of the Vietnamese (p. 123). Laotians reported experiencing challenges during their first few years related to a lack of access to traditional foods, difficulties with the Canadian climate, and misunderstandings with their sponsors regarding cultural notions of respect, boundaries, kinship traditions, living arrangements, and manners of communication (Stobbe, 2006, p. 116-117). Laotian cultural principles of respect for elders, authority, and community clashed with Canadian norms of informality and privacy, creating the potential for misunderstanding for both refugees and their Canadian sponsors.

A MCC report assessing their participation in the PSR program highlights a particularly extreme example of cultural miscommunication by sharing an anecdote of a significant communication breakdown that occurred between a sponsoring group in northern Saskatchewan

and a newly arrived Hmong family. Shortly after their arrival in the community, members of the sponsoring group requested that the young men of the family take some shovels to assist the sponsors in digging a septic field behind their new rural home. Other members of the family became severely distraught at the sight of the young men digging behind the house, believing that the men were being forced to dig their own graves (Kehler, 1980, p. 13). Despite the best intentions of the sponsoring group, the decision to resettle this family in a remote location away from the cultural, linguistic, and emotional resources of the larger Hmong community in Ontario was a mistake that led, at least initially, to the family's retraumatization. This case highlights the importance of considering the particular needs and traumatic conflict experiences of different ethnic groups in order to facilitate their successful settlement and integration in a third country.

Studies on Southeast Asian experiences with the PSR program also frequently mention conflicts relating to religious differences that arose between sponsors and refugees. Lowland Lao and Hmong refugees reported attending Christian religious services in Canada in order to show respect and gratefulness for their sponsors, despite having Buddhist or, in the case of the Hmong, animist religious beliefs (Kehler, 1980, p. 17; Stobbe, 2006, p. 117). In some cases, refugees reported feeling pressure to attend church or convert to Christianity out of a sense of obligation to their sponsors, while some sponsors questioned what their role should be in terms of introducing the Christian faith to sponsored refugees (despite organizations such as MCC warning sponsors from pressuring refugees to attend church) (Beiser & Hyman, 1997, p. 48; Kehler 1980, p. 17, 55-58). In other cases, Laotians felt some affinity between Christian values and their own beliefs and attended special ceremonies or church services while maintaining their previous religious practices (Stobbe, 2006, p. 117; Winland, 2006, p. 175). Religious differences led to tension and conflict between sponsors and refugees in some cases, however, these

differences also presented opportunities for exchange and at times served as a potential resource for empowerment and adaptation.

Winland (2006) argues that the conversion of Hmong refugees to the Mennonite faith cannot be fully attributed to pressure imposed by the sponsors or as an expression of gratitude by refugees, and that making this assumption robs the Hmong community of agency (p. 175). Instead, Winland suggests that reasons for conversion are complicated and may be related to a sense of shared values, the importance of sacrifice, Mennonite family structure, shared histories of persecution, and the concept of community solidarity and mutual aid (Winland 1994, p. 34; Winland, 2006, p. 174-175). Though the Hmong community may have begun attending the Mennonite church out of a sense of obligation to their sponsors, many continued maintain their new faith for years after arrival leading the community to establish their own Hmong Christian Church in Kitchener. Winland (1992) argues that religious conversion can serve as an acculturative mechanism by "bridging traditional values and practices with western ones" (para. 23). Finding commonalities between traditional practices and those of their Mennonite sponsors assisted Hmong refugees with maintaining continuity with their traditional beliefs while adjusting to the social and cultural norms of the Canadian context. The church also provided members with social and moral support while they recovered from their traumatic experiences of conflict and displacement and it provided venue for regular social contact among the community (Winland, 1994, p. 35-36). For the Hmong, religious conversion did not require the abandonment of traditional practices or beliefs, but represented "a process of selectively incorporating and/or superimposing specific Christian beliefs and practices onto their own," preserving some traditional beliefs and values while adjusting others (Winland, 1994, p. 39-41). While tthis process was not without conflict, Winland (1994) argues that religious conversion and entry into

new religious communities served as resources for rebuilding the Hmong community in Canada after tragedy and upheaval by providing a framework for understanding Canadian social norms and a way of translating Hmong values and practices into the Canadian context.

Recommendations for the improvement of the PSR program frequently indicated that improved cultural understanding of different ethnic populations among the sponsors and government officials is an essential first step (Kehler, 1980; Neuwrith et al., 1985, p. 272; Stobbe, 2006). Other recommendations include providing more clear guidelines for sponsors regarding their role and minimum expectations for financial and social support to ensure that all refugees have the opportunity to attend language and educational courses to be better prepared to enter the labor market (Neuwirth et al., 1985, p. 272). These clear guidelines would also be of significant import to sponsors themselves, as many sponsors expressed confusion regarding their role, the expectations of them as sponsors, and the limitations of what they can expect from refugees (Kehler, 1980, 12). Despite the above challenges and conflicts, sponsors and Laotian refugees reported generally positive feelings regarding the PSR program (Kehler, 1980, p. 27; Stobbe, 2006, p. 125). As described by Beiser et al. (1997), these findings should be understood "as a caution rather than an indictment" of the sponsors or the PSR program (p. 48) and should be used to further improve this important program.

Mental Health and Coping

Another area of concern among academics and policy makers following the mass resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees related to the mental health outcomes of refugees following resettlement. Unfortunately, some large studies on mental health and the adaptation of Southeast Asian refugees do not disaggregate their findings based on ethnicity or provide findings that are specific to Laotian refugees (see: Beiser, 1999). While these studies provide

important general information about the mental health challenges faced by refugees following resettlement, further research is needed in order to gain insight into the particular experiences, challenges, and cultural resources leveraged by specific ethnic communities in Canada.

As previously indicated, stressors that may result in negative mental heath consequences among refugees include unemployment, underemployment, and the related problems of loss of status, as well as feelings of failure in terms of perceived obligation to family (Beiser & Hyman, 1997, p. 42). In a study on unemployment and coping strategies among Southeast Asian refugees, Laotians were shown to have a greater tendency than refugees from Vietnam or Cambodia to withdraw socially from family, friends, and ethnic organizations due to the hardship of unemployment, with 84 percent of Laotians stating that unemployment had 'a little' negative effect on their social relations (in comparison to 48 percent of Cambodians) (Chan, 1987, p. 122-124). Study respondents explained their social withdrawal arose from a "lack of money and time, and a host of psychological barriers such as guilt, shame and sense of personal incompetence stemming from continued unemployment or under-employment" (Chan, 1987, p. 124). This heightened sense of guilt or shame may be related to a sense of loss of status and the Laotian cultural notion of "saving face" and the need to resolve problems quietly to avoid embarrassing the family (Stobbe, 2015, p. 34-37). Chan (1987) mentions that these negative feelings increased when in contact with others in the community who were active in the labor market (124), lending creedence to the notion that their social withdrawal was related to the Laotian cultural tendency of conflict avoidance, practiced as a mechanism to avoid an escalation of conflict and maintain social harmony (Stobbe, 2015, p. 39).

Although Chan (1987) found that unemployment strained some social relations, the study concludes that overall the experience of unemployment among refugees "actually intensifies

family relations, demands the pulling together of all resources, and consequently, contributes to family cohesiveness" (Chan, 1987, p. 126). Social networks and family provided important emotional support and cultural understanding for refugees coping with changes and economic struggles (Beiser & Hyman, 1997, p. 45-46; Chan, 1987, p. 127; Spencer-Nimmons, 1994, p. 180). These findings reflect the collectivist culture of Laos in which responsibilities toward the family are paired with the centrality of the family for support and problem solving (Johnson, 2003; Royle, 1980, p. 58-59; Stobbe, 2006, p. 115). Refugees coped with change and hardship by drawing on traditional cultural resources as well as existing social supports in Canada.

Upon arrival, the Hmong faced the difficult prospect of not only renegotiating their animist religious identity in some cases, but also a number of cultural practices that did not align with Canadian norms, including the practice of polygamy. Once in Canada, the Hmong community in Kitchener-Waterloo, along with their private sponsors and settlement officials, engaged in a deliberative process "to discuss which aspects of Hmong culture could not continue, which cultural practices were absolutely essential for them, and which were negotiable" to facilitate their integration into Canadian society (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 418). These problem-solving and cultural interpretation sessions allowed for moments of mutual learning and self-reflection between the newcomers and their Canadian sponsors as Hmong refugees sought advice on proper behavior and good citizenship in the Canadian context. During one of these sessions, a Hmong woman asked the group, "how do I know how to be a good woman?" leading to a dialogue between the women in the room on the various ways one can be "a good woman" within or outside the confines of cultural or religious gender roles (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 433). While these informative sessions were of practical importance to the

newcomers in order to be able to navigate new cultural and social systems, they also represented opportunities for their sponsors to reflect on their own cultural attitudes and beliefs.

Some studies have focused on how religion and religious practice serve as resources for the prevention of mental health problems among refugees. In her study on the Lowland Lao of Toronto, Van Esterik (2003) explored how ritual practices including the *baci* or *soukhouan* ritual and practices of *kruat nam* and feeding monks helped maintain and transmit Lao identity and traditional values as well as familial and community solidarity after the upheaval of conflict and resettlement. Van Esterik (2003) argues that the preservation of these rituals acted as a "preventative strategy for mental health problems" (p. 125). The *soukhouan* ritual is practiced cross-culturally by the Lowland Lao as well as the Lao Theung and Lao Soung, reflecting the intermingling of Theravada Buddhist and animist beliefs in Laos (Stobbe, 2015, p. 70). In this ritual key Laotian values are reinforced and transmitted, including moral values and teachings, and the values of respect, gratitude and sacrifice, which in Buddhist cosmology, aids practitioners in acquiring 'merit' for advancing their status in the afterlife (Stobbe, 2015, p. 70-71). Van Esterik (2003) argues that ritual practices "are the raw materials from which individual Lao refugees can begin to structure a new Lao identity in North America. From these ritual acts [Laotians] select those values that are central to their individual and collective identities as Lao refugees (not Southeast Asian or Indochinese refugees)" (Van Esterik, 2003, p. 132). Buddhist ritual helps transmit culturally-appropriate values that reflect the history and traditions of the Lowland Lao, acting as a resource for social and cultural adaptation in a foreign context.

As discussed previously, the Hmong also utilized religious practice as an adaptive strategy, but for some Hmong community members adaptation involved conversion to the Mennonite faith in order to adapt traditional spiritual and cultural practices to align with

Canadian social and cultural norms (Winland, 1992). In each of these cases, refugees coped with disruption and change by drawing on and strengthening their own religious and cultural values and practices while incorporating new traditions and ways of being that reflect the Canadian context.

Rebuilding Community in Canada

After 1982, Canadian policy shifted from refugee resettlement to focusing on family reunification with over half of the 1,500 Laotians who arrived between 1983-1986 coming to Canada to rejoin their families (Dorais, 2000, p. 8). By 1991, approximately 17,500 persons of Laotian origin lived in Canada, including ethnic Chinese and Hmong tribes people (Dorais, 2000, p. 10). Since the arrival of almost 10,000 Laotian-born refugees between 1979-1980, Laotians in Canada have been rebuilding their ethnic and religious communities and integrating into the broader Canadian society. As several studies have indicated, Laotians' process of integration has not necessarily been one of assimilation, but of finding ways to maintain their culture, values, language, and cultural and religious practices, while adapting to the Canadian context (Dorais, 2000, p. 28; Lerthirunwong-Diong, 1989, p. 170; Nontapattamadul, 2000; Van Esterik, 2003; Winland, 1992). This process of bridging cultures and communities is core to the notion of multiculturalism and is mutually enriching, though it may frequently be fraught with difficulties and contestation.

In addition to the focus on employment and language acquisition as key indicators of successful settlement and integration, other studies focused on the development of ethnic and religious organizations as crucial resources for refugee settlement. Lao ethnic community organizations sprung up across Canada as early as 1980 with the purpose of assisting newly arrived Laotians with their resettlement and adaptation, providing a space for the community to

gather and rebuild ties, and to celebrate and help retain Laotian culture through cultural activities and the celebration of ethnic festivals (Dorais, 1988, p. 179; Van Esterik & Van Esterik, 1988, p. 123). These associations also served as important resources for finding jobs and linking newcomers with available services in the community (Molloy et al., 2017, p. 445).

These community organizations encountered numerous challenges during their first several years. One significant challenge related to the size of the Laotian community and the competition for scarce governmental resources with the much larger Vietnamese ethnic community (Chan, 1988, p. 155; Van Esterik & Van Esterik, 1988, p. 124). This problem became particularly acute several years after the refugees' arrival when federal funds for ethnic organizations began to dry up (Copeland, 1988, p. 112). Laotian communities in Canada, including the even smaller community of ethnic Chinese persons from Laos, frequently lacked the leadership of educated, middle-class professionals who had experience navigating bureaucracy and who could speak English or French (Chan, 1988, p. 156; Indra, 1987, p. 158). These challenges limited the ability of some Laotian organizations to act as cultural brokers between the provincial and federal government and the Laotian community in order to access funds and connect newcomers with community resources (Chan, 1988, p. 155; Indra, 1987, p. 162).

Other challenges included political conflicts between community members with pro- or anti-communist political stances and concerns about youth abandoning Laotian culture and language for western values and English (Copeland, 1988, p. 109; Dorais, 1988, p. 186-187; Lerthirunwong-Diong, 1989, p. 171-173). Other studies found that after 10 or more years, the Laotian community continued to struggle to build stronger ties with the local Canadian community (Nontapattamadul, 2000, 130). This was partly due to ongoing challenges with

language and the refugees' desire to seek social support and affirmation from within the Lao community following a period of upheaval. Despite this and other ongoing economic and social challenges, Laotians reported feeling satisfied with their lives in Canada, proud of the achievements of their children, and optimistic for the future (Nontapattamadul, 2000, p. 124; Van Esterik & Van Esterik, 1988, p. 126).

Some of the efforts made by Laotians to strengthen and maintain their culture within the Canadian context involved establishing places of worship that specifically served the Laotian community. Laotian communities established Buddhist temples across Canada that served as places of worship as well as community centers for the Lowland Lao community. Ritual practices connected families disrupted by displacement and resettlement with their cultural heritage, serving an important role in the preservation and transmission of ethnic identity: "as one parent expressed it, they need the services "so our children will know where they came from"" (Van Esterik, 2003, p. 94). Laotian and Hmong Mennonite churches were also established by refugees who had converted to Christianity before or after arriving in Canada (Nontapattamadul, 2000, 109-110; Winland, 1992). These churches provided services in the first language of the congregants and as well as a sense of community and meaning for a population emerging from conflict (Nontapattamadul, 2000, 109-112; Winland, 2006, 175). In this sense, places of worship and religious practices not only served individual needs for meaning and belief, but assisted Laotian refugees in rebuilding their communities in Canada and maintaining their cultural and ethnic identities.

Conclusion

The arrival of 9,849 Laotian refugees in Canada between 1979-1980 marked a watershed moment in the history of Canadian international humanitarian action and the beginning of new

opportunities and challenges for a population fleeing repression and displacement. Ethnic communities from Laos faced unique challenges in Canada owing to their varied histories and experiences prior to arrival. The first several years in Canada were particularly difficult due to the struggling Canadian economy and challenges many refugees faced adjusting to the Canadian environment and culture. Private sponsors provided significant practical support to refugees in terms of housing, financial support and assistance locating jobs. In some cases, cultural misunderstandings and uneven power dynamics created conflict in these relationships; however, sponsors also played an important role providing emotional support to refugees having to navigate a new culture and way of life. Many Laotians also took on leadership roles in their own communities, building ethnic and religious organizations and institutions intended to support the Laotian community and maintain Laotian ethnic identity in Canada. These ethnic and religious communities enrich Canadian society and serve as a bridge between refugee communities and the broader Canadian public.

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