Hmong Women Down Under
Diaspora, Gender and Agency in Contemporary Australia

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Statement of Originality

This thesis is the original work of the author
All sources used and assistance obtained have been acknowledged

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study into the life-experiences of five first-generation Hmong refugee women now living in Australia. Hmong migrant women’s narratives of mobility, displacement and resettlement provide the basis for analysing successive phases of migration, as they took place from Laos to their arrival in Sydney and Canberra. Through processes of forced migration, family breakup and a shifting of gendered roles in the family, the women in this thesis have transformed their lives and paved the way for their children to start life as Australians.

In 1976, the women whom I worked with in Sydney were among the first generation of Hmong arrivals in Australia. They came from Thai refugee camps, where they had lived in precarious conditions following their escape from Laos and the Communist Pathet Lao regime that came to power in 1975. On arrival in Sydney, with the assistance of the Australian Government, they found temporary residence in migrant hostels and Housing Commission estates. Lacking the relevant skills and qualifications, newly arrived Hmong women found work in low-skilled, poorly paid employment. Since those early days, however, major transitions in their lives have brought about both significant opportunities and challenges. These shifts have also been important junctures that have reshaped their lives, identities, and subjectivities.

Traditional Hmong culture relegates women to an inferior status in society. A woman’s social value is measured by her ability to continue her husband’s patriline and by her exemplary performance of traditional gender roles. Growing up in Laos, the Hmong patriarchal system circumscribes women’s ability to exercise their equal capacity for agency. First-generation Hmong women who migrated to Australia, for example, were socialised into a patriarchal system that shaped their consciousness to a life of subordination. Their gendered memories spoke of marginalisation and their subordinated positions in Hmong households and communities in their homeland. As a coping mechanism, at a young age they learned to negotiate the limiting nature of the Hmong patriarchal structure.

When my interlocutors migrated to Australia, these first-generation arrivals continued to live within the gendered ideologies and practices they arrived with. However, migration and resettlement in Australia also encouraged an exploration of new social frontiers, as these women contested and negotiated traditional expectations and gendered identities. Such identities shifted and weakened through exposure and adaptation of both genders to Western-gendered values.
This study shows that despite the lack of material and cultural capital when they first arrived, first-generation Hmong women have managed to transform their lives by maximizing opportunities of employment, financial security, and access to social networks and exposure to western rights and values. Their efforts have enabled them to tacitly exercise greater domestic and cultural identity and agency. With such personal and socio-economic shifts and greater agency, Hmong migrant women have transformed traditional concepts of Hmong womanhood and strengthened their role as culture bearers; maintaining inter-clan relationships and providing greater agency for their daughters’ generation in the Australian diaspora.

Drawing upon in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions with five respondents over one year, I bring to light the implicit and explicit agency of Hmong refugee women now living in Australia. I pay particular attention to their economic activities, and their homemaking as an expression of domestic authority, and seek to understand the inter-generational impact of their newly forged agency on their daughters — second-generation Hmong women born in Australia. This study provides an important basis for comparison between Hmong migrant-refugee women and other migrant women of different ethnicities in Australian cities.
Dedication

“Is that your mother?” Dawb¹ inquired, as I thumbed through the image of my late mother on my phone.

“Yes. That was her,” I replied.

She held my phone closer and examined my mother’s facial features before commenting, “I’m very sorry to tell you, but your mother is more beautiful than you.” She sounded genuinely sorry and at the same time comical.

“No need to be sorry,” I told her. “A lot of people have said the same thing. I know what they mean,” I reassured her.

Thinking I was offended she pressed her point, “You are not that bad, it’s just she is more beautiful.” I smiled at her before returning to the image of my mother.

It was during that conversation that I realised I share a few things in common with the Hmong women in my study: one, we are all mothers and daughters; two, we are all immigrants to Australia; three, we are all coming to terms with aging; and four, we all have unreconciled emotions about the deaths of our mothers. None of us felt that the void they had left had been filled. Thus, I believe that subtly underlying this thesis are the profound emotional longings for our mothers.

This thesis, therefore, is dedicated to the spirits of our mothers who inspired the completion of this work, especially to my very own, Estelit.

¹Throughout this thesis I have given my interlocutors pseudonyms to preserve the privacy of people who gave me their time and stories.
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In the Philippines, I thank all the members of my University of the Philippines Centre for Women’s Studies (UPCWS) for providing me with the invaluable training in grassroots-feminist research.

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Glossary

Akhan  Laotian term for house, also used to refer to dwelling places in refugee camps

Baci  A ceremony wherein a string is tied the wrist to bind a person to another. Many Hmong also told me that they do this to wish a person good health and good fortune.

Dab tshiaj neej  Shamanic spirits

Hluas nakauj  Young courting girl

Hmoob Dawb  White Hmong

Hmoob Dou, Hmmob Dub  Black Hmong

Hmoob Nsaub  Green Hmong

Hu plig  Soul calling

Iwm tsiab  Hmong New Year

Khi Tes (Hmong)  Spirit string that seals one’s soul and prevents it from wandering

Khi hluas  Thread-tying ritual

Ku xim  Hmong word meaning regret

Kwn Kab  Wall altar

Laig Dab  Food offering

Leej nus  Brother

Niam Pog  Paternal grandmother

Niam Tais  Maternal grandmother

Nruas  Musical drum

Nyab  Wife

Nyob Nruab Hlis  30-day confinement of a woman who has just given birth

Paj ntaub  Storycloth

Phi laj  Best man in Hmong wedding

Pov po  Ball throwing, a rite of passage for Hmong boys and girls.

Qeej  Windpipe instrument

Qhov cos  Rice mortar

Qhov cub  Stove

Qhov rooj txuas  Front door

Qhov txos  Clay stove

Tus poj niam  Mother

Txiv neeb  Shaman

Ua dab or Ua neeb  Healing ritual

Ua neeb  Healing ritual

Xim xau  Two string violin

Xwm kab  Spirit of the house
I met Nakauj Lee, 56, for the first time in winter\(^2\) of 2015, at the Liverpool train station in Sydney. She wore a vibrant red scarf with her hair in an elegant coiffure. She looked regal and poised in her dark winter coat reaching down just below her knees. She and her husband, Hmong pioneer and elder Zab Yia Lee greeted me with welcoming smiles and handshakes. After an exchange of pleasantries, we headed to the parking lot. Nakauj took the driver’s seat of the four-wheel Honda SUV, an unlikely activity for a Hmong woman of her generation.\(^3\) Zab must have read my thoughts, glancing at his wife he said, “Nakauj is now a better driver than I am”. Nakauj laughed shyly at her husband’s teasing. Perhaps this was a promising start to my research on women's agency, I thought to myself.

Nakauj is a former refugee and one of the first Hmong women who arrived in Australia. She and her immediate family escaped the Pathet Lao regime by crossing the Mekong River to Thailand where she lived in a refugee camp for more than a year. Her family arrived in Australia over several years, from the mid 1970s to the early 80s. The Hmong community in which she was raised was highly patriarchal, wherein, women held subordinate positions and exercised limited agency. However, migration was to reconfigure the status of women like Nakauj.

Nakauj appears to be the picture of success. Her confident demeanour belies her traumatic past. She is a self-made woman and, with all of her four children married, a doting grandmother to four grandchildren. She has also acquired the things she wanted in life—a house, a car, stable employment and a lifestyle that affords occasional travel to places of interest.

Everything about her life seemed to be in place. However, it was not an easy journey for Nakauj. It is hard to fathom how at the age of 15, she was exiled to another country. And, without any formal education, she had to learn to speak, read and write in English. Despite these challenges, she was able to start a family and engage initially in low-paid work in the city during her first years in Australia.

A “young bride and survivor” was how one of her daughters described her. Her description applies to the other women in this study. My interlocutors were young when they married and had

\(^2\)Australian winter is from June to August.
\(^3\)Julian (1998: 8) points out that acquiring a driver’s licence was an initial act of independence for Hmong women in Tasmania. Although perceived by men during that time as inappropriate, they nevertheless recognised it as a skill that eased mobility for women who manage to take their children to childcare and transport their farm produce.
carried the burden and responsibilities of Hmong women during both the pre- and post-Secret War era. Being the eldest daughter in her family and tasked with looking after her eleven siblings in both Laos and in Australia, Nakauj is also described as the “mother of all”. Following her family’s migration, she also fulfilled her reproductive duties, bearing four children, who were raised by her mother and mother-in-law; because at that time, she was left with little choice but to work alongside her husband to provide for their growing family.

Despite the hardships of the years following their arrival in Australia, Nakauj always expresses gratitude for being able to migrate to Australia, sharing: “Australia changed us all. It was not that easy in the beginning, but now we are thankful that we live here”. Her experiences may have reshaped her views of the world but Nakauj — like the other women in this study — believes that deep inside, she is essentially the same. She upholds Hmong cultural values and identifies deeply with her ethnicity, while she also embraces the Australian way of life. Through her hard work and sacrifices she was able to create new beginnings for the next generation of Hmong daughters in Australia.

People close to her know, that beneath her soft and motherly appearance, she is decisive and in control of family affairs. Nakauj shares the common attribute of resilience with other Hmong women. Their daughters, the second generation believe their mothers’ roles as in the Hmong diaspora in Australia have been pivotal in the creation of new lives for the next generation. They have changed the gender dynamics and status in Hmong households and society. In the process they have contributed to expanding the limited agency of Hmong women within the patriarchal household, clan and community into a broader agency. This thesis will unravel the individual character of women, focusing on the strength, capabilities and self-determination as expressed through their lived experiences within the Hmong Australian diaspora.

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4 She sponsored all members of her immediate family to Australia when she and her husband had finally settled.
Chapter 1
Introduction

The Hmong Context

This study begins with an introduction to the history of the Hmong people. It traces the group’s dispersal from China where they originated to their migration southward of Asia during the late 19th century to Laos. After introducing the broader history of Hmong migration, I outline the arrival of a specific group of Laotian Hmong migrants in the Australian cities of Sydney and Canberra. Five women within that group are the focus of this study. These particular women were born and raised in Laos until their exile in Thai refugee camps after the current communist Pathet Lao (PL) regime took over Laos in 1975. The chapter then leads to a detailed identification of field sites and research interlocutors. Finally, I outline the strength in the use of feminist methodology employed in gathering ethnographic data, while I point out the limitations encountered during the conduct of the research process.

The History of Hmong Diaspora from the 19th Century Onwards

The Hmong, as an ethnic group, originated from China in the provinces of Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan and Hunan. They had a long history of struggle and oppression against the cruelty of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) that led to their global dispersal from the mid-19th century onwards. Since then, for over a century to this day there have been waves of Hmong migration, first to nearby Asian countries and many decades later to the West at the end of the Second Indochina War (Chan, 1994; Geddes, 1976; Tapp, 1989; Vang, 1979; Vang, 2013).

During the mid-19th century, because of the Han’s (Chinese) excessive imposition of taxes, corvée labour practices, extreme poverty and everyday brutalities, the Hmong migrated southward—initially to Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Laos, where they took refuge in mountainous borderland regions between 1810 to 1820 (Yang, 1975; Vang, 2013). It was in these mountain areas that they continued to engage in subsistence cultivation, moving from one place to another, always in search of arable lands. This kind of agricultural lifestyle in remote, isolated uplands had been the bedrock of Hmong political and cultural freedom.
Map 1: Shown is the Hmong pattern of migration from China down south towards Laos, Thailand and Vietnam where they had settled in the mid-19th century.

In 1893, Laos became a French protectorate. During this period the Hmong had already settled in Xiengkhouung, Sam Neua, Luang Prabang and Phong Saly provinces. The French, together with the lowland Lao, again imposed extensive levy and corvée labour practices on the Hmong. Being unjustly levied, the Hmong, together with other ethnic groups, began to stage several revolts such as the Kha rebellion (1901), the Tai rebellion (1914) and the Hmong rebellion in Sam Neua (1919) led by Chao Bat Chay (Vuey Pa Chay), known as the Madman’s Rebellion. All the above rebellions were staged by Lao
ethnic groups that included the Hmong (Lee, 2008; Vang, 2013). When the abovementioned Hmong rebellion ended in 1921, the French allowed the Hmong to govern themselves and established Nong Het as an autonomous Hmong tasseng (district) (Chan, 1994: 8). It was during this period that prominent Hmong men leaders, such as Ly Xia Foung, Lo Bliayao and Touby Lyfoung, figured prominently in Laotian history (Vang, 2013: 179-188).

It is important to note that from the early historical accounts until the Hmong’s participation in the Second Indochina War, Hmong women’s experiences and roles in both wars were never mentioned. It was always the contributions of men that had been highlighted in historical writings. Hence, in the next chapter of this thesis, I problematize the women’s absence in historical accounts and how such omission has resulted in Hmong women being given a peripheral place in history.

According to the male focused history, the Hmong during the height of military uprising could have claimed political power or allied themselves to mainstream Laotian society, especially when the French fell to Germany in 1940 (Lee, 2008). However, it was only during the Japanese occupation that the Hmong became involved in the movement for Laotian independence under the leadership of Faydang Lobliyao and Touby Lyfoung (Vang, 2013).

In 1945, the Japanese had full control over the French. The Hmong assisted the Lao in fighting against the Japanese. After Japan’s defeat in the First Indochina War, the French returned to power in Indochina. It was then that they made Laos a constitutional monarchy. The following year, Laos became an independent state under the French Union (Lee, 2008; Vang, 2013).

The Birth of the Pathet Lao Resistance Movement

When the French returned, King Sisavang Vong and Prince Phetsarath became prominent political figures in Laos. According to Gary Lee (1986), after the surrender of Japan, Prince Phetsarath asked the Allied Powers to recognise and support Laos’ independence from France. However, some French officials pressured King Sisavang Vong to supersede Phetsarath’s announcement. Therefore, he and a group of Lao leaders exiled themselves in Bangkok in 1940. These men included Lao Princes Phetsarath, Souphanouvong, Souvanna Phouma, Nhoy Abhay and Phaya Khamao. In 1949, they formed themselves into the Lao Isara (Lao Independence)—a non-communist, nationalist group.

Due to major disagreements within the group, particularly Prince Souphanouvong’s alliance with the Viet Minh, the group was then dissolved. In 1950, Souphanouvong transformed the group
into the resistance movement known as the Pathet Lao (Lao state) and continued the group’s alliance with the anti-French Viet Minh.

In 1953, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Viet Minh military commander, launched a guerrilla attack against the French in northern Laos. The Hmong were implicated in this attack. The United States, which was backing up the French, feared defeat by the combined Pathet Lao and Viet Minh forces. Therefore, they pressured the French to withdraw. Thus, in October of 1954, France granted independence to Laos (Lee, 2008; Thee, 1973).

The Americans supported the French, but they had little economic or military interest in Laos other than protecting their interest in Thailand (Lee, 2008; Vang, 2013). However, during the Cold War with Russia, the US feared the spread of communism in the West as well as in Asia. Thus, in line with the policy of containing communism within Europe, Africa, Central America and Southeast Asia, the US provided economic aid to the Royal Lao government. Later, prompted by the threat of further insurrection by Pathet Lao guerrillas, the US built up the Royal Lao army. From then on, the CIA with backing from the Pentagon became the major driving force during the Second Indochina War.

The Secret War: Hmong’s Implication in the Laotian Civil War

During the turbulent year of 1961, the CIA started recruiting Hmong civilians into a mercenary army. Nicholas Tapp (2010) pointed out that the Hmong were caught between two camps: the communists backed by Russia and China, and the United States-led Western struggle against communism. The conscription of the Hmong by both the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Army (RLA) to fight with them divided the Hmong as a people. Both Hmong men with, and without, military training were recruited. The most prominent CIA recruit from among the military-trained Hmong men was General Vang Pao, whose army unit was well known for its effective guerrilla activities (Morrison, 2008; Quincy, 2000; Thee, 1973; Vang, 2013).

The involvement of ethnic groups in the war was kept a secret by the CIA, which according to Thomas Vang (2013) was made so, “in order to avoid the opposition of the Soviet Union and other nations that had signed the Geneva Agreement in 1962” (268). Hence, five thousand Hmong men were therefore trained by the Green Beret and started fighting against a neutralist group led by Kong that overthrew the rightist regime in a coup d’état (Thee, 1973: 12). It was said that the fighting took

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5 The Geneva Accord was signed by several countries including the US and the Soviet Union stating that Laos should be allowed to operate as a neutral country free from external influences, therefore all foreign forces were withdrawn from the country.
place in Pa Dong, near the Plain of Jars, which was near the mountains where the Hmong people resided. That same year, the war started. The following year, more than 19,000 Hmong were conscripted to fight against the Pathet Lao. In 1964, the CIA and General Vang Pao established a permanent secret military headquarters in Long Chieng (Tieng), which was a significant place, not only for the Hmong men, who were involved in military activities, but also to civilians, including the women in this study. By 1975, Long Chieng had become a top US military base, which was also home to more than 30,000 Hmong refugees from all over Laos (Vang, 2013: 268).

**Refugees of War and Exile in the West**

The Secret War was a complex and complicated engagement with stakeholders from many factions from Laos, the United States and later Vietnam. When the Americans in South Vietnam started bombing North Vietnam in 1965, a combined Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese army attacked Na Khang, an important base for General Vang Pao forces. It was there that the general was wounded. Later, when the important Bouam Luang base was attacked, the Hmong, who remained active members of the Laotian forces, defended the base. As a result, many Hmong lost their lives in the battle (Vang, 2013: 277). By 1969, even after the newly elected US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, negotiated peace with North Vietnam, Hmong forces continued to fight on the battlefields, therefore, losing more Hmong lives. By 1973 a peace agreement between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government was made, wherein, the Pathet Laos demanded the withdrawal of the US and the formation of a new provisional government. The Laotian Civil War lasted sixteen years (1959-75) and the Secret War lasted thirteen years (1962-75). Together, these wars claimed the lives of around 17,000 Hmong soldiers and 50,000 Hmong civilians (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999: 334).

The Secret War, as an aftermath of the Second Indochinese War in Laos, created long-term social and political changes felt not only in Asia, but also in several countries, which were, directly or indirectly, involved in the campaign to suppress the spread of communism. The most cataclysmic consequence was the displacement of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Vietnam and Laos. The Hmong, who were then being hunted by the Pathet Lao army, started fleeing Laos.

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*For consistency, the term Secret War will be used throughout this thesis, to refer to the Hmong’s forced participation in the Laotian Civil War, which was the aftermath of the Indochina war. This term is preferred to place emphasis on the forced recruitment and implication of the Hmong and other Lao ethnic groups in a war that had been kept a secret by the Americans to avoid the opposition of the Soviet Union and other nations that had signed the Geneva Agreement in 1962 (Vang, 2010: 30).*
There were three waves of the Hmong exodus recorded in history: the first took place between 1975 and 1976; the second, between 1977 and 1979, and the third, between 1980 and 1985. The exodus of the Hmong since the 1970s was provoked by the imminent threat to their lives and their continued poverty in Laos. From that period on they have been dispersed from their northern villages to the Laotian capital of Vientiane. From there they crossed to Thailand, where they stayed in Nong Khai and Ban Vinai refugee camps. Eventually, from the refugee camps they were further exiled to the following Western countries: the United States, France, French Guiana, Germany, Canada, Argentina, New Zealand and Australia (Luong & Nieke, 2013: 1; Yang in Pfeifer et al, 2013: 4; Vang, 2010: 7).

Map 2: Shown are the countries where the Hmong migrated after they left the refugee camps in Thailand.

Hmong Women’s Stories: Memories of War and Escape

In all the historical accounts of both the First and Second Indochinese Wars, very little, or nothing at all, was mentioned about the roles of Hmong women in wartime Laos. In Claiming Place (Vang, Nibbs & Vang, 2016), a recent edited volume on Hmong women’s agency, however, two chapters (3 and 4) recognised the wartime contributions and political influence of Hmong women teachers and nurses during the Secret War (Lee, 2016; Vang, 2016). Apart from the women’s roles in the Secret War, their roles in families and society, as Mai Na N. Lee (2016) pointed out in her chapter, “has [also] eluded the scrutiny of historians” (88). She devoted her chapter in Claiming Place to examining the Hmong women’s roles in society and their influence on “men’s political legitimacy” (88). Other than these two articles, all the academic contributions that were cited earlier in this chapter were devoted to the contributions of men. This chapter, therefore, adds to the scarce wartime and peacetime literature on women through their memories, as articulated in English—a second language the women had learned.
after migration. Despite the limitation in language, this study has been able to collect oral narratives that bring to light the everyday experiences of women during the Secret War, their exile in Thai refugee camps and, finally, during their migration to Australia.

According to the women, they had to take over the traditional male roles of being the main providers and household heads when the men in their families participated in the war. Similarly, women whose husbands were not in the military also suffered the consequences of war because of the constant displacement of their families, almost always with young children, under which circumstances they had to carry the burden of moving and re-establishing their households.

The Hmong women further recalled that their first memories of displacement were often of frequent movements from one town to another, usually around the Long Chiang military base in Xiengkhouang province. The women in this study, who were at the time young girls, along with other members of their families, found themselves caught up in a deadly armed conflict. Faced with such a predicament, the young women together with family members planned and carried out their escape from Laos. Accounts of their escape were always highlighted in the women’s life-stories that were collected for this study.

Below is an example of a common narrative shared by first generation Hmong women in this study. This narrative as told by Ntsuab Vang Lee, aged 66, resonates with the accounts of the other women. Ntsuab confirmed that when the war ended, the Pathet Lao government persecuted Hmong people for their wartime support for the US, especially those who remained loyal to General Vang Pao, the Hmong military leader. Her account is presented below:

On the late afternoon when Ntsuab and her party crossed the river, it was the time of year when heavy rains poured for many days and nights, swelling the Mekong. The rains left the riverbanks with silt and mud. Ntsuab said that even on nights when it was extremely dangerous, Laotian boat owners would convince their passengers that it was safe to cross “to the other side”. “They [boat owners] were desperate”, Ntsuab explained. This desperation, she said, was understandable because the communists had occupied several towns of major Northern provinces including Houaphanh and Xiengkhouang villages. The villages were destroyed, and many people were displaced by the Pathet Lao authorities. That night the boatman’s desperation outweighed Ntsuab’s fear and anxiety. She would be convinced to cross the river to seek temporary asylum in Thailand. From there, she would later depart to be reunited with her husband, who had already gained entry into Australia as a Colombo scholar.
Ntsuab, who was then 21, was reluctant to cross the Mekong that day. She had good reasons to feel so, especially in her delicate condition, eight months heavy with her second child and travelling with a four-year-old son under her care. Seeing a small leak in the boat and aware that the river, with its strong currents, carried with them debris of large logs and trunks that could capsize it, she was terrified. She told the boatman, whom she called leej nus (brother), that she preferred to stay on the Laotian side of the Mekong until it was safe to travel. He convinced her, “It is better to go now. By the time I get back for you it would be dark, and we may not be able to cross”. On that night, Ntsuab was confronted with a crucial choice — to cross the Mekong into the refugee camp or stay in Laos with the possibility of getting caught and jailed. Ntsuab remembered vividly the time she and all people on the boat almost drowned near the border of Thailand.

It rained hard the night before. The currents were strong and were pushing the boat to different directions. I was very scared. When we arrived near the Thai border, a huge tree trunk collided with our boat and the boat capsized. I grabbed my son and held him. Then it was pitch dark and I could not see anything. It was hard for me because I was pregnant. I felt like something was dragging me down under water. I came up, and then I went under water again. At this point the boatman pulled me out of the water.

In addition to similar accounts, the women also recalled personal everyday experiences during exile in refugee camps which have been incorporated into chapter five.

**Australian Settlement and Migration**

The women of Ntsuab’s generation arrived in Australia during the second and third waves of Hmong migration between 1977 and 1985. By the confluence of several seemingly disparate historical events at this time, the arrival and settlement of refugees was made possible by the new shift in the Australian Immigration Policy as well as Australia’s plan for further economic modernization. This saw the need for the importation of outside human resources. However, as Australia continued to move out of the shadows of the White Australia Policy, the pattern of behaviour towards any people with characteristics different from the white Anglo-Saxon colonizers still manifested itself in mid-21st century Australian culture. However, throughout the early 1970s, Australia’s attitude towards non-white migrants and refugees slowly changed. By 1973, the Australian Labor Party government had withdrawn all racial references in the Immigration Act and implemented the modernity

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7 The legacy of the British colonisation in 1788. This was part of the Australian Commonwealth government policy after the country federated in 1901 which “sought to exclude non-white-immigration to regulate any attempt to undercut the white man’s wages” (Laing, 2017: 218).
model, allowing a non-White immigrant population to participate in enhancing Australia’s economic productivity. It was then that the concept of multiculturalism within Australia was conceived.

The shifting away from the White Australia Policy formally changed migration laws that included the abolition of the “15-year rule”. The acceptance and resettlement of Indochinese refugees (the majority of whom were Vietnamese) was a significant historic event in the Australian migration experience. Firstly, because the arrival of refugees in such numbers was unprecedented. Secondly, their presence had generated debates within the public, and among political and academic circles (Lee, 1997). Although the attitude towards non-white migrants and refugees was changing, Australian politicians and citizens alike welcomed the Indochinese refugees with reluctance and scepticism (Brew, 1985: 18; Stats, 2015: 73-75). Between 1977 and 1979, opinion polls showed reluctance, if not total disagreement, with the Fraser government for accepting refugees (Higgins, 2016: 94).

The process by which refugees could enter Australia was in accordance with the criteria identified under the Refugee Humanitarian and Special Assistance Program (RHSAP). In 1979, refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, who arrived through the RHSAP, were reunited with family members through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). It was during this period that several Hmong women arrived in Sydney through a chain of family sponsorships (Lee, 2000: 419).

The Hmong were relatively unknown to Australians during the 1970s, but several of them had already set foot on Australian soil as young students and scholars under the Colombo Plan (420). As mentioned earlier, the US had initiated efforts to suppress the spread of communism in different parts of the world, including Southeast Asia. The Colombo Plan, according to Nicholas Tapp (2000: 62), was an “educational initiative” under which many young Hmong students benefitted from the provision of scholarships by the Australian government to undertake secondary schooling. However, many early migrations in the mid-1970s were war related. Therefore, the first six Hmong families were all survivors of the Secret War in Laos. By 1984, this number had increased to 81 families. The biggest number settled in Sydney (215), followed by Melbourne (112), Hobart (37), Adelaide (11) and Canberra (9).

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8 According to Matthew Jordan, it was an “overtly discriminatory provision introduced in 1957 which allowed non-Europeans to become naturalised only after residing in Australia for 15 years or longer” (2017: 169).
9 Approximately 150,000 by 1975 (Viviani, 1980: 2).
10 See also Jakubowicz’s (1985) commentary on Geoffrey Blainey’s debate over the scale and pace of Asian immigration, particularly the Indochinese after the Vietnam War.
1996, this number had grown to 1,420, with Queensland hosting the largest number (Wronska-Friend, 2010: 98).

Map 3: Shown are the cities in six Australian States where the Hmong migrated.

When Hmong family members arrived in Australia, most lived with those who had sponsored them. However, despite the support from relatives, they still faced enormous challenges in a new country. Their displacement was accompanied by the absence of social networks and economic capital, and with limited Australian government support, which initially catered to a narrow category of humanitarian migrants (McMichael & Manderson, 2004: 1).

When my interlocutors arrived in Sydney, they were young, newly married brides, between the ages of 14 and 19. They had just left their parental homes for a committed life as members of their husbands’ families. The women brought with them domestic and agricultural knowledge, and an adherence to a patriarchal system that did not provide them with an equal capacity to exercise agency. Further, migration circumstances forced them to navigate through new frontiers.
Few studies have been devoted to the lived experiences of Hmong women during their exodus from Laos, their exile in Thai refugee camps and their subsequent migration to Australia. When the women have been included in post-Secret War academic writings, particularly in the US, they have been portrayed as docile, marginalised and bounded by traditional cultural practices and beliefs (Vang et al., 2016). Within the parameters of traditional gender expectations, the women held significant familial and economic roles. However, these were rarely highlighted in academic writings. Unlike the roles of Hmong men in contemporary history, women have been seen neither as heroes nor trailblazers. If they were mentioned in Hmong scholarship, their deeds and accomplishments were often overshadowed by the achievements of Hmong men (Her, 2016: 3-25). Luisa Camagay (2002) points out that women had been invisible in history because “historians ha[d] been dominantly males, moreover the kind of history which has long prevailed ha[d] been political and diplomatic wherein males figure[d] prominently” (117). Quite positively, the invisibility of women, according to Camagay, led to the emergence of a nouvelle histoire, a social history or “herstory” that gave women their rightful place in global history.

In the historiography of the Hmong diaspora, women have remained at the periphery for a long time. Indeed, Hmong women’s essentialised representation as docile individuals—passive, submissive and lacking the ability to direct the course of their lives—was premised within a masculinist and Western point of view. For over two decades, this has been the commonly held view, particularly in the United States. This study diverges from such a gendered, essentialising view, contributing instead to the entire volume by Keown-Bomar and Vang (2016), by presenting Hmong women as individuals with the capacity to exercise agency when given the necessary access to economic and social opportunities.

Based on ethnographic research in Sydney, this thesis delves into the everyday lives of five first-generation Hmong migrant-refugee women by exploring the explicit and tacit ways through which they have exercised their agency. I will show how first-generation women adapted to Western life by using their combined cultural knowledge, hard work, life experiences in exile and the tenacity that they had developed from their past experiences towards transforming their lives. This research argues that Hmong women, despite the continued challenge of the Hmong patriarchal system and the lack of financial and cultural capital when they first arrived in Sydney and Canberra, were able to transform their lives over the years. Through employment opportunities that fostered financial security, access

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11 A term used by Vang et al. (2016: xix) versus the feminist point of view or representation.
12 Later in this study, I elaborate on the essentialising of the Hmong refugee woman in Western academic texts.
to social networks and exposure to Western ideologies of rights and values, my interlocutors gained greater authority in the domestic sphere and agency in the household. Through their agency, Hmong migrant women maintained inter-clan relationships and mobilised intercultural dispositions. More significantly, they became the prime movers of families, creating new paths and opportunities for their daughters, who now enjoy more freedom in their personal and professional lives.

Map 5: Sydney is located on the Australian south east coast and Canberra inland, south of Sydney.
This study presents evidence that supports a counter position against previous narratives that have portrayed Hmong women as powerless subjects of patriarchal rule. It challenges stereotypical portrayals of Hmong women as the weaker sex by highlighting the tenacity of five first-generation women and the ingenious strategies that they have employed to navigate patriarchal norms and migration circumstances.

More broadly, this thesis seeks answers to how migration opportunities strengthened the once limited agency of Hmong women migrants into one that afforded them greater power and autonomy to fulfil personal desires and aspirations. Specifically, I examine Hmong women’s agentic actions by addressing the following issues in each of the chapters. In chapter three, I explain how Hmong women’s disadvantaged location within traditional Hmong society has led to their feminist awakening and enabled them to navigate around patriarchal control. In chapter four, I examine how employment opportunities provoked a shift in gender expectations and relations at home, and how it transformed my interlocutor’s self-valuation and conception of womanhood. In chapter five, I explore
how Hmong women gained domestic and cultural authority through the everyday acts of home making which, in effect, facilitated their roles as cultural bearers. Finally, chapter six is about how the legacy of Hmong mothers became the primary agency of their daughters. I examine the lives of the second-generation Hmong women and the issues they have had growing between two cultures. I examine the differential views of the two generations on the concept of adolescence and motherhood, and discuss how the experiential learnings from their mothers’ lives have influenced their roles as women and mothers.

Field Sites and Research Interlocutors

To address the aforementioned issues, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the southwest suburbs of the city of Liverpool in New South Wales: Bringelly, Casula, Hoxton Park, Preston, Green Valley and Liverpool. Outside Liverpool, I interviewed Hmong who live in Bossley Park and Fairfield. At the time of my research, there were approximately 19 Hmong families living in Sydney, totalling approximately 300 members. I also participated in the workplace activities of three women located in Rhodes and Campbelltown, both suburbs of Sydney. My other Hmong interlocutors lived in Canberra, the Australian Capital Territory, in the suburbs of Calwell and Bonython—home to two extended families of around 25 members. I also conducted fieldwork in the Canberra suburb of Macquarie, where Ntsuab regularly sold her produce. Fieldwork was conducted between 2016 and early 2018.

I commenced fieldwork in 2015 by attending Saturday evening adult education classes in order to immerse myself in the Hmong community. I interviewed both men and women belonging to the first and second generation. Those whom I refer to as first-generation are those who arrived in Australia from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. The second generation are those who were born and raised in Australia (with the exception of one participant, who arrived as an infant from the Nong Khai refugee camp).

As noted, relatives who were Colombo Plan scholars sponsored many relatives who arrived under the family reunification program of the Australian Department of Immigration. With the exception of the two newly arrived women, most were born and grew up in Xiengkhouang province before they escaped to Ban Vinai and Nong Khai refugee camps in Thailand in the 1970s. In age, the first-generation migrant women in this study range between 50 years and their mid-70s.

The interviews that I conducted lasted from three to five hours each. During these interviews, I was able to collect individual life-stories and answers to an open-ended questionnaire on the topics
of gender roles and relations, integration, participation in work, spatial organisations of the houses and mother-daughter relationships. These meetings provided valuable data on how women exercise their economic independence, their domestic authority and their cultural agency. It is through their agency that they continued their roles as culture bearers and were able to pass on a legacy to the new generation of Hmong daughters. In total, I interviewed 18 first-generation Hmong men and women, some multiple times to assure the accuracy of data.

The second generation who participated in this research were all born and raised in Australia. Their ages range between 24 and 37 years old. They are highly educated and are pursuing individual careers. Similarly, as I did with the first generation, I conducted in-depth interviews with them, lasting between three to five hours. My interviewees shared life-stories, spoke of gender roles and expectations, the challenges of coming from a culturally, ethnically diverse background and their relationships with their mothers while growing up. A common experience marked by inter-generational and cultural conflicts with parents, as well as crises in identity, were central topics that they discussed during interviews.

Map 7: Shown are the locations where the former refugee camps in Ban Vinal and Nong Khai were located. Shown in the map also is Pakse from where Ntsuab crossed the river to the border of Thailand. Other important places shown in the maps are Long Chieng, US Military Base and Xiengkhouung province where all the women were born.
According to Christine Ward Gailey (2014), “Anthropology as a field [which is particular in the use of ethnographic research approach] lends itself to feminist methods” (147). She emphasized that, at its best, it bears witness to complex human conditions, but at its worst, it could “transform peoples into exotic objects for consumption by more powerful audiences” (Gailey, 2014: 147). Also, as stated by Rosario del Rosario (1997), “In the past, traditional ethnography of women had either been gender blind or biased” (56). These ethnographies tended to focus on the positivist and dominant male norms of the researcher who, in pursuit of objectivity, had been less empathetic with, and had minimal subjective identification with women (56). Considered scientific, such ethnography had also been deemed superior over the subjective accounts of women. Thus, traditional ethnography of women had been both hierarchical and ethnocentric; the researcher’s a priori knowledge overpowered the local knowledge of informants (Ramazanoglu, 1992: 207). It was when the need to focus on, and represent, marginalised groups of women—poor, uneducated, of colour, from non-English speaking background, and of diverse ethnicities—that early feminist scholars worked towards a new research approach to rectify past mistakes in the conduct of conventional ethnography. Therefore, a new ethnography that was focused on the subjective understanding of women, whose perceptions and articulations are different from the dominant male view, emerged. Apart from giving gender (and women) a central
role, the feminist research process is participatory and is clear in the understanding that research is conducted not only for and on women but with women. More significantly, it recognises diversity and pays attention to language usage. It is also activist-oriented, always on guard as to how power sustains oppression. Ultimately, the feminist research process is committed to working towards the elimination of male biases and women’s oppression in all of its forms.

An important component of this paradigm is the application of the concept of reflexivity, which encourages the researcher to examine his/her own background and values, and how they influence or even impinge on the whole research process. This kind of reflexivity has enabled researchers to listen and understand the “creation of meaning of those who are not powerful in the reductive sense of wealth or political control or even social change” (Gailey, 2014: 147).

In conducting research, I positioned myself as a participant-observer from where I was able to perceive and experience my interlocutor’s everyday lives. However, I kept in mind Renato Rosaldo’s (1989) point that subjectivities change in the context of research, as do the prevailing vectors of power between the researcher and interlocutors. I was thus self-aware of my position as a female researcher and academic. Nonetheless, having such reflexivity made me examine my own biases. I was conscious of my cultural perspective as a Filipina, my experiences as a migrant woman in Australia and how my evolving subjectivity and notions of everyday happenings affect my use of research tools and methodologies.

Since this study is aimed at unearthing and examining the inner lives and subjectivities of women, I acknowledged that the generation of women in this study had been previously disadvantaged in Hmong traditional society. Hence, their experiences are unique and distinct because of the gender roles and expectations imposed on them by Hmong culture and society. Further, since this study is aimed at unearthing the inner lives of women, I examined their individual lives through the lens of gender. Through this lens, I acknowledged that they had been previously disadvantaged by a culture and society that paid little attention to their contributions. Thus, they did not possess a stronger agency to achieve what young men of their generation had attained in Laos.

In this study I employed multiple research methodologies: immersion, collection and recording of life-stories and in-depth interviews, and participant observation. This study also made use of extensive secondary data that form this chapter and the next on the theoretical underpinnings of this work.
My use of the above-mentioned methods was guided by the feminist theories that are discussed in this study. Just like any other feminist studies, a reciprocal relationship between theories and methods exists in this work. Both inform and shape each other as they explore the lived experiences of women in stratified societies. This study further agrees with Gailey’s claim that the strength of feminist ethnographic methods is that they enable the identification and examination of unequal power relations and how they are culturally reproduced, practiced and embodied on the basis of gender (2014: 148).

As mentioned, I immersed myself in the Hmong community in Sydney by participating in adult education classes for two months. Zab Lee initiated the class in 1992, to introduce Hmong new arrivals to basic Western concepts. In this class, participants were able to practice the basic English language skills that they had gained from the government’s adult migrant English program. As part of establishing rapport, I shared my own migration experiences with the women. Often, we candidly exchanged notes about our period of adjustments and the follies we committed adjusting to Australian life. We shared many learnings from each other’s lives, empathised and commiserated with each other.

As earlier noted, the women were all above 50 years old, except for Daphne, a relatively recent migrant in her late twenties, who had married Zab’s stepbrother twelve years ago. All the women in the class, who became my research interlocutors, classified themselves as Hmoob Dawb (White Hmong), which is, according to their subcultural division, based on the colour and pattern of their traditional costume. There are approximately 16 Hmong clans in Australia that congregated within suburbs of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra, Cairns, Innisfail and Tasmania (Lee & Tapp, 2010: 12). The Hmong women in my research belong to the Lee (Lis) clan through marital relations. Before marriage to Lee men, the women belonged to the Yang (Yanj), Vang and Lor (Lauj) clans.
During fieldwork in Sydney and Canberra, I became deeply immersed in the lives of five women and their families. Despite the early challenges that I encountered in trying to establish relationships within the Hmong community located in the different southwest suburbs of Sydney, I eventually was able to participate in the daily lives of the women with whom I have developed comfortable relationships. Aware of the complex cultural factors affecting women’s subjectivities and gender relations at home and in the Hmong community, I also participated in various gatherings and activities such as: family gatherings and dinners, and activities such as cooking, gardening, dance practices, and the annual Floriade. Further, the women included me in family and kinship gatherings and everyday activities, such as tending gardens or feeding chickens, which are part of Hmong communal culture. At home, and in the above gatherings, I observed the women’s relationships with Hmong men and with fellow women both within and outside their kinship groups. Moreover, I joined birthdays and kinship group celebrations and other highly important social and cultural gatherings. One of these was a tribute party to Zab Lee, honouring him as a Hmong pioneer in Australia. I also attended several shamanic rituals and participated in New Year celebrations for three consecutive years from 2016.

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13 Festival of flowers in Canberra where the women meet annually publicly displaying their Hmong dresses.
Subsequently, this study has relied heavily on the first generation’s memories of Laos, their homeland, and their journeys through refugee camps and on to Australia. In these memories, the experiences of trauma and resilience were always present. I recorded and deciphered the interviews with the assistance of my Hmong translators. These recorded materials aided in filling the gaps in deciphering personal accounts.

To gather data for chapter four, on the effect of work on women’s self-valuation and worth, I participated in the economic activities of three women: (1) Ntsuab’s work in her backyard farm and at Jamison’s Sunday Market in the suburb of Macquarie in Canberra; (2) Da Yang’s work in the packing area of Tribina\textsuperscript{14} factory located in Rhodes, NSW; and (3) Huab’s work in Hot Bread Bakery in Campbelltown, NSW. Having Ntsuab as a Canberra-based key interlocutor meant that I had to travel back and forth between the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW). Often, I

\textsuperscript{14} Not its real name.
would spend many weeks in Canberra helping Ntsuab in her backyard garden and market stall, before travelling back to Sydney for special gatherings and participation in the work activities of Da and Huab.

Image 4: Hmong New Year ritual and ceremony when all the Hmong walk under a string to drive the old year out and usher the new year in.

Data for chapters five and six was reliant upon everyday conversations and in-depth interviews. I investigated how women acquire and exercise domestic authority and cultural agency. I
carefully observed women’s use of home spaces and how they organised them. Further, from in-depth interviews of the second generation I gathered a deep insight of mother-daughter relationships and the emotional and intergenerational gaps that existed between the two in the early years of integration. It was also through my close association with the second generation that I was able to acquire an understanding of how their mothers’ legacy had shaped their lives.

Limitations of Study

The most significant factor that limited the conduct of this study was the language barrier. There are not too many Hmong first-generation women who are highly proficient in the English language. For this reason, they did not wish to take part in the study. Further, my inability to speak and understand Hmong was a significant hurdle. Thus, this study was limited to the lives and experiences of five Hmong women, who demonstrated a level of English proficiency. The five women generously welcomed me in their homes and kinship groups, places of work and personal lives. Later, I came to the realisation that what had limited the research process has, in fact, strengthened it. By focusing on the five women I was able to collect very rich data about their everyday lives and was able to develop friendships with two of them, which I maintain to this day.

Table 1 (below) shows their profiles, referring to their place of birth, marital status, offspring, age of arrival and age at the time of research.

Table 1- Profile of the Lee Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhoua Lee</td>
<td>Ha Pho</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>2 (living) 1 (deceased)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ntsuab Vang Lee</td>
<td>Xam Neua</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakauj Lor Lee</td>
<td>Nonghet</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xiengkhoung</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huab Lor Lee</td>
<td>Xiengkhoung</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3 1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da Lee Yang</td>
<td>Xiengkhoung</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Summaries

In this present chapter, I have provided the cultural background and history of the Hmong, an introductory account of their diaspora from mainland China to Laos, and then their eventual migration to Australia. I have identified the study’s field sites, research interlocutors and the feminist methodology employed before describing the limitations encountered during the conduct of field research. This chapter has contained the necessary background to support the exploration of the Hmong’s theoretical underpinnings. Further in the following paragraphs I foreshadow the chapters to come:

**Chapter Two** explores the theoretical underpinnings involved in studying the agency of Hmong women. A theoretical discussion of women’s agency precedes the introduction of the notion of “patriarchal navigating”. Initially, this notion is explored in the context of Hmong women’s experiences from their exercise of limited agency in traditional and patriarchal society to their continued gendered existence after migration, when they continued to be subjected to patriarchal traditions. Consequently, the discussion highlights the need to address intersectionality and understanding the concept of gendered geographies of power in analysing the complex and layered diasporic experiences of Hmong migrant-refugee women. This presentation of the Hmong women’s ethnographic accounts is incorporated in a review of the post-Second Indochinese or post-Silent War literature—a period of transition when the Hmong had been expelled from Laos and had been living in exile in the West. Western Hmong scholars had collaborated with Hmong military elite in reconstructing experiences during and after the war, especially when they migrated to the West. This review features essentialised representations of Hmong Women in Western ethnographic texts; the role of agency in literary expression through studying the work of native Hmong scholars; and, the pressing need to deconstruct the essentialised Hmong woman. Then, deliberation is given to this thesis’ contribution and significance before outlining its subsequent organisation and chapter content.

**Chapter Three** traces the extreme marginalisation the Hmong women faced in traditional patriarchal society based on oral stories. It argues that the Hmong patriarchal system sets the path for Hmong girls to lead disadvantaged and underprivileged life on the margins. From childhood, their patriarchal
parents socialised them into acceptance of subordinate positions through their fathers’ conditioning and their mothers’ blind acceptance of assigned roles, marginalisation and oppression. This practice normalised these gendered experiences in the eyes of young Hmong girls. Nevertheless, the repercussions of patriarchal control led to an awakening of their consciousness. Using their limited agency, at an early age, the girls developed strategies to navigate patriarchal practices and expectations. The narratives of women repeatedly spoke of gender inequality and the challenges of contesting patriarchal control. These ranged from assigned gender roles, through son preference, forced early marriage and bride kidnapping, to the bigamous marriages of their fathers. By witnessing and surviving these experiences, their consciousness was awakened to the realities of their lives located on the margins of society.

Chapter Four illustrates how participation in paid work and other economic activities transformed the Hmong women’s identities. Through the transformative power of work, they gained financial independence and developed new senses of self. Their identity, therefore, has shifted from being rooted in their traditional roles to one that is shaped by their self-reliance, economic freedom and freedom of choice. In the process they located their self-worth in the meanings they ascribed to work and work-related activities. Also, there was an element of reciprocity in the participation of Hmong migrant-refugee women in economic activities within Australia. They injected into their host’s paid labour market a repertoire of deeply ingrained skills and positive attitudes—a habitus of behaviour learned and formed as a matter of daily routine within their home and in fields in Laos. In turn, their presence in the public sphere transformed the once traditional women into income earners and heads of families. Drawing upon their work-related experiences, I explore how they were able to develop new criteria of self-valuation and arrive at a new concept of Hmong womanhood involving: the possession of economic power, the creation of network/cross-cultural friendships, economic autonomy, and freedom from discrimination through entrepreneurship, and maintaining a sense of self-worth according to the Australian value system.

Chapter Five is about the exercise of domestic authority, as facilitated by the economic power that the women gained from employment. In the past, the Hmong women, who became part of their husband’s family through marriage, did not enjoy absolute control and authority over the domestic space due to the existence of hierarchy within the domestic space. Nevertheless, when women gained the financial acumen from which they gained greater negotiating power from work participation, they co-purchased their ideal house with their husbands. Then they began to enjoy the freedom to design, embellish and engage in cultural and urban agricultural practices. Domestic control and authority began to manifest in the ways the women expressed their aesthetic tastes through the spatial
organisation of their homes. Using these spaces, they have been able to express deep emotions, new
identities and aesthetic tastes, which helped sustain existing cultural dispositions and close kinship
relationships. Driven by nostalgia in the early years, the women shared accounts of past dwelling
places based on memories. Consequently, the current use and functions of the spaces of the Sydney
homes were influenced by their experiences derived from their traditional homes in Laos, the akhans
in refugee camps, migrant hostels and housing commission dwellings in Sydney. More specifically,
these past experiences are corralled in the spatial organization and function of their Sydney homes,
notably inside and outside the kitchen, the outer and inner living areas, the garage, garden and patio.

**Chapter Six** is about the agency of second-generation Hmong women as shaped by their mothers’ lived
experiences. In this chapter, attention is first given to the negative impact that women’s preoccupation
with work has on the mother-daughter relationship. Their desire to ensure the provision of basic
necessities and their ambition of economic affluence resulted in an emotional gap with their children.
This chapter closely sought to find out the root causes of the gap between the two generations.
Growing up in Hmong traditional households, their daughters, just like their mothers before them, had
to submit to similar patriarchal control. However, informed by Western views, they rebelled against
continued forms of patriarchal control and the lack of emotional support during their teenage years.

More than just the negative impact of their mothers’ absence due to work commitments, this
chapter investigates other factors that could be attributed to the mother-daughter emotional conflict.
Aware of the differential views between the two generations of women—that of the traditional Hmong
and that of the Australian—I examined two important key concepts that were deeply held by the
women: adolescence and motherhood. Hence, this chapter investigates the disparity in the
generational views on adolescence and motherhood. Paradoxically, despite their once estranged and
distant relationships, this chapter argues that through the understanding of their mothers’ views and
life experiences, Hmong daughters have learned to appreciate their mothers’ strong qualities of self-
determination and resilience which they themselves have embodied in adulthood.

**Chapter Seven** concludes this thesis by reflecting on how new knowledge has been generated by
addressing the life experiences of Hmong migrant-refugee women in Australia. I also assess the
ethnographic feminist research process employed in the conduct of fieldwork. Then, I present the main
findings of this thesis and its significant contributions to the broader study of diasporas, gender and
agency in contemporary Australia. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this ethnography of Hmong
women before I canvass the implications and recommendations for further research in gender and
migration studies.
Chapter 2
Studying the Hmong: Theoretical Underpinnings

The Hmong context provides the necessary facts to illustrate the application of relevant theoretical issues. This chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings involved in researching the forced migration, resettlement and agency of Hmong women. In this chapter, a discussion of women's agency precedes the introduction of the notion of “patriarchal navigating”. Initially, this notion is explored in the context of Hmong women’s experiences from their exercise of limited agency in a traditional and patriarchal society to their continued marginalised status after migration, when they experience a different form of patriarchy.

Consequently, such a discussion needs to address intersectionality by understanding the concept of gendered geographies of power in analysing the complex and layered diasporic experiences of Hmong migrant-refugee women. This presentation of the Hmong women’s ethnographic accounts is incorporated in a review of the post-Secret War literature. This review features essentialised representations of Hmong Women in Western ethnographic texts and even photographs; the role of agency in literary expression through studying the work of native Hmong scholars and, the pressing need to deconstruct the essentialised Hmong women. Finally, deliberation is given to this thesis’ contribution and significance.

Women’s Agency

“Agency” has been defined in several different ways. The concept has been applied in various disciplines, guided by two antagonist traditions in the field of social science research, the humanist and the post-structuralist.

Brownyn Davies (1991) makes an important distinction between the two: The humanist point of view, she explains, defines agency as an ability to make a choice based on rational thought, moral obligation and responsibility. Possessing these abilities to make critical life choices is what essentially constitutes a person. It is also through this act by which individuals attain personhood. Scholars like Paul Benson (2005), however, perceived the aforementioned humanist definition as masculinist, elitist and problematic. He disagrees with the interpretation of emotional and non-rational choices being considered as non-agentic (also cited in Davies, 1991). Benson believes that the humanist framework has failed to recognise not only aspects of an individual’s emotional or non-rational self, but also
undermines a person’s subjectivities. Both human aspects are deemed crucial to the process of self-actualisation and self-making.

The post-structuralist viewpoint, on the other hand, focuses on, “the experience of being a person [as] captured in the notion of subjectivity” (Davies, 1991: 44). Concepts not based on rationality alone such as desire, motivations, and the embodiment of emotions, sentiments, memories, aspirations, values and practices, and resistance against oppression, are considered an integral part of an agentic identity. This concept was further expanded on by Katherine Frank (2006: 282) emphasising the intersection of emotional motivations and personal background and histories, as well the socio-cultural contexts under which the individual demonstrates a capacity to act and make choices.

In line with the post-structuralist tradition Diana Tietjens Meyer (2002: 7) reiterates that women’s agency and identity are embodiments that cannot be separated from each other. The application of agentic skills leading to the ultimate act of self-determination as Meyer argues is developed from childhood. While Meyer stresses that culture and society dictate women’s gendered identity from a young age, she believes such conditioning does not [always] impede women’s ability to function as self-determining agents later in life. Post-structuralist feminists believe in women’s capacity to strategise around profoundly ingrained cultural norms and forms of patriarchal constraints. They further believe that women have the ability to negotiate and employ both explicit and implicit ways to achieve goals and gain what they believe is their entitlement (Kabeer, 2005; Yuval-Davies, 2006; Nakano-Glen, 1983).

This study draws particularly on the post-structuralist conceptualisation of agency. The post-structuralist notion of agency intersects with aspects of women’s lives, both being and persona. Focusing on the implicit and explicit forms of agency, this study delves into the individual subjectivity of women that is beyond rational accountability and moral obligation.

The explicit and implicit ways by which women navigate the social is influenced by forms of agency that they both have and are afforded. Nalia Kabeer (2005) draws a distinction between a passive form of agency and an active form. She argues that agency in the passive form is attained through actions under circumstances where women have little choice. Active agency, on the other hand, is carried out with “purposeful behaviour” and with the end goal of empowerment (15).

Women from different generations within the same culture respond differently to restrictive and oppressive patriarchal conventions and practices. Responses depend on the kind of agency that is
available in the context of their circumstances. Passive forms of agency, for example, in circumstances where women have little choice, may not be radically transformative, yet still contribute to empowerment (Kabeer, 2005: 15). Regardless of how long it takes, or how minimal the benefits women gain from such transformation, its significance lies in the way it challenges and changes forms of control or patriarchal views.

**Patriarchal Navigating**

Postmodernist feminist theorists namely Judith Butler (in Mahmood, 2001) and Sabah Mahmood (2001) explore how women negotiate and contest limited agencies. It was with an awareness of women’s capabilities that Butler wrote that, “subordination provides the subject’s continuing condition of possibility” (in Mahmood, 1993:15). It is by circumventing around their subordinate roles that women find ways out of their disadvantaged positions. Feminist scholars such as Mahmood, and Ma Vang et al. (2016) each highlight how women circumvent restrictive situations out of a desire for authority and autonomy. Mahmood supported Butler’s view of women’s use of agency with reference to ‘strategi[s]ing’ as the ‘paradox of subjectivation’. This led Butler to elaborate, “[T]he very processes and conditions that secure the subject’s subordination are also the means by which she [the woman] becomes a self-conscious identity and agent” (211).

Echoing Paul Benson’s (2005) stance on women’s use of free will as a form of agency, Mahmood argued that for someone to be liberated, it is required that her actions be the consequence of her own free will. Even actions that might be deemed “illiberal”, she stressed “can be tolerated, if it is determined by a free consenting individual acting on her own accord” (2001: 207). This is mirrored in Denise Kandiyoti’s (1988) use of the term ‘patriarchal bargaining’ to define the same process by which women circumvent patriarchy within the limits of their available agency. In these “bargainings” gender relations, dynamics and positions are continuously contested, negotiated and redefined according to circumstances faced by actors (Kandiyoti, 2005: 289-290).

Gendered practices which women circumvent include traditional roles, patriarchal control, religious traditionalism, or constraints of sexual behaviour (Mahmood, 2001; Chong, 2006; Nathanson and Schoen, 1993; and Chaudhuri et al., 2014). Through what is considered as a silent agreement between two participants, women usually hold the lesser or weaker position, especially within the context of the traditional household. This is one of the places where patriarchal bargaining takes place. Often the woman finds herself oscillating between advancing and retreating, eventually resorting to passive forms of agency (Chaudhuri et al., 2014).
Patriarchy is a complex system of power that permeates traditional societies and culture. It also strongly affects aspects of women's lives not limited to their personal, familial, social and spiritual well-being. In this study, when Hmong women exercise agency in implicit and unconscious ways, often they were motivated by a personal desire or self-expression. Very seldom were the men openly supportive. However, through women's persistence, the men were led to compromise, allowing changes in gender dynamics and power relations within the home. Accordingly, I consider the examples of women's exercise of agency in this study to be examples of “navigating” rather than bargaining.

I use the term “navigating” in preference to the term “bargaining” because it more appropriately describes the actions of the Hmong women with whom I worked. The argument is that in bargaining there is an active and conscious exchange between two individuals, who are fully aware, or have a full understanding that, in a given situation, they are entering an agreement and perhaps exercising equal decision-making power. Often this was not the case between Hmong men and women. In the traditional home environment, as this study demonstrates, young women have had to circumvent expected roles and traditional behaviour.

A further example of patriarchal navigating is illustrated in Mahmood’s (2001) ethnographic work with Egyptian Muslim women. Described as “docile agents”, the women’s actions and embodiments of habits were the results of specific reactions to subordination, which they used to exercise their agency. Their participation in Islamic mosque activities was not an act of resistance against the religious institution, rather it was an act of navigating around the patriarchal system.

In chapter three, I demonstrate the ways by which Hmong women have “redeployed”15 conventional expectations and practices such as early marriage and traditional roles to fulfil familial duties, while at the same time building their capacity for autonomy and agency. In chapters four and five I show how they implicitly exercise their domestic authority and navigate patriarchy through the spaces of their home. Finally, I illustrate how the second generation again navigates the remnants of patriarchy as they come of age and leave their Hmong home in pursuit of autonomy.

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15 An act by which the women in Mahmood’s study “resist the dominant male order by [subvert hegemonic patriarchal practices]” (2001:205).
Intersectionality and Hmong Migrant-refugee Women

Hmong women in Sydney and Canberra, as much as they belong to the broad category of their gender, they also fit the category of migrant-refugee women. When they arrived in Australia they again faced a different form of marginalisation and “othering”. To examine such complex experiences, and the interlocking systems of oppression that shape the gendered performances of Hmong women, this study draws inspiration from the works of Chandra Tapalde-Mohanty (1984), Kimberlee Crenshaw (2010), Bell Hooks (1984), Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) and Anna Carastathis (2014) on the concept of intersectionality between gender, ethnic background, class, education and migration status.

In her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, Tapalde-Mohanty (1984) called attention to Western feminists whose work had not fully grasp the different and diverse experiences of “other” women from the so-called “Third World” (335). In particular, she pointed at the colonial gaze, or the feminist’s Western framework, as a lens that interprets all women’s experience only from the Western point of view. Carastathis, referring to white-dominated discourses, supports Crenshaw’s argument (1989), pointing to the lack of an existing concept to describe and examine the overlapping systems of oppression faced by poor, uneducated women of colour. The aforementioned scholars understand the shortcomings of such a Western-centric viewpoint. Crenshaw explained that this framework is based on a priori knowledge that perceives women as belonging to only one homogenous group. Thus, the gaze that Tapalde-Mohanty describes was unable to pay close attention to the different levels and dimensions of female experiences. Especially, those who come from diverse backgrounds and have realities that are uniquely their own, such as migrant-refugee women of ethnic background like the Hmong, who have been marginalised socially, culturally and economically in the receiving countries.

Tapalde-Mohanty scrutinised the interpretation of “Third World” women by those in the “First World” (1984: 335). Her interpretation was shaped by what she considered “a certain mode of appropriation and codification of scholarship and knowledge”. In particular, a structural domination employing a particular analytic category overlooked the intersection of race, class, and religion of women, who did not share their background. Tapalde-Mohanty explains:

... feminist writings...discursively colonize[d] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing, representing a composite, singular “Third World Woman”- an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but carries with it the authorizing signature of a Western humanist (334-335).

The othering and subsequent alienation of Hmong women in Western societies is not the result of a single factor. I will argue how the production of a composite representation of Hmong
women as the “Other” by Western scholars has influenced hegemonic discourses, which, for some time, have dominated analyses of their lived experiences. The hegemonic view has resulted in many misconceptions about Hmong women. This study seeks to avoid the replication of such misrepresentations. I apply the concept of intersectionality in analysing the accounts of Hmong women, and unpack the interlocking systems structuring their “othering”, in which social factors of gender, ethnicity, class, patriarchal background, literacy or formal education, age, migration status and spiritual beliefs are at play.

**Women’s Gendered Geographies**

Joan Ackner (1989) argued that previous Western feminist writings have assumed that the history and experiences of women from ethnic, migrant-refugee and poor backgrounds could only be viewed through the lens of gender or patriarchy (1989, 236). Again, socio-cultural and political systems of oppression that overlap and affect women’s lives have also been omitted. Consequently, Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar (2001) developed a model for comprehending migrant women’s experiences within the context of migration and transnational space. Aptly called “Gendered Geographies of Power”; this model examines how gender operates in multiple spatial, social and cultural scales concomitant with changes in their geographical locations. The multiple scales that are being referred to include, but are not limited to family structure, the social space upon migration and the hegemonies, which affect gender dynamics and relations within the home and social space (Mills 2003: 49).

Social agency is a central feature of the Mahler and Pessar model. The strength and the exercise of this agency are affected by, if not completely dependent on changes in geographic scales and social locations. These geographic scales and locations refer to the position of people in power hierarchies that are created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based, and other socially stratifying factors (Mahler and Pessar, 2001: 445-447). These other factors include hierarchies of class, race, age, educational background, ethnicity, and nationality. Analysing migrant experiences through this framework highlights transnational actions that have been developed and the new possibilities created by people on the move.

Conflict and experiences within the patriarchal socio-scape of Laos shaped my interlocutors’ gender consciousness. I consider the intersections of several socio-cultural factors in my analyses, as well as in the presentation of women’s agency. I understand the women in this study are individuals who hold cultural beliefs and status within their kinship groups and in the broader Australian society. However, it should not be overlooked that migration and women’s participation in the workforce

Through participation in paid labour, the women in this study have gained greater purchasing, negotiation and decision-making power and been able to access multi-cultural networks. Also, they have broken gender barriers within households and communities. Ultimately, they have attained higher economic status, which has in turn afforded their respective family’s middle-class status. Furthermore, exposure to Australian cosmopolitan cultural practices, values, rights and privileges have led to new gendered subjectivities premised on Australian gender ideologies.

**Historiography and Ethnography of Hmong Women**

In the following section, I discuss Hmong historiography, with a particular focus on periods that have provoked important shifts in the portrayal of women in the academic literature—from how they were perceived in the context of traditional subordinate roles, to their transformation as active members of society who held oppositional views against the norm.

**The Essentialised Hmong Woman**

Studies on Hmong women’s agency did not dominate, nor were treated, as the focus of Hmong academic writings during the early post-Secret War era. Instead, a “refugee narrative” proliferated during the mid-1980s until the early 1990s. The refugee narrative appeared in the introductions to most articles, dissertations and books on the Hmong diaspora, particularly in the US. This narrative, which became the dominant narrative among early Hmong scholarship, largely appeared in accounts written about the men who had participated in the Secret War, either as high-ranking military officers or as politicians (Vang, 2010; Chan, 1994; Yang, 2013; Chiu, 2013). Some of these accounts were written by women, notably Jane Hamilton-Merritt (1993) and Gayle Morrison (1999). In both works, the military and political contributions of men in history were the main focus. A recent work by Kurlantzick (2016) similarly devoted great space to the deeds of Hmong men. Women’s roles in this period have been noticeably absent.

While men were valorised in such historical accounts, the deeds of women have been rendered peripheral, if not altogether invisible. This gendered representation of the Hmong however, is, of late, changing. Recent studies do indicate a changing view, wherein women’s experiences of displacement in Laos and their wartime contributions as nurses and teachers have been featured
(Vang, 2016: 56-84; Lee, 2016: 87-166). These works have been the very first historical accounts that have focused on women’s everyday heroism.

Other Post-Secret War writings on the Hmong diasporic experiences used the dichotomy paradigm in their analysis by contrasting the pre-modern and traditional culture of the Hmong with the modern and progressive Western culture and society. Consequently, these writings provided a static depiction of Hmong culture and society that remained backwards and patriarchal despite migration to Western countries (Fass, 1991; and Sherman, 1988). These comparisons have been problematic and accounted for at least some of the short-sighted analyses that have proliferated in the field of Hmong gender studies. This analytic framework in studying gender “historicized Hmong women in a particular way”—as lacking in power, resilience and agency (Her, 2016: 3-25). Scholarly work on the experiences and issues of women who migrated to the West, specifically in the US (Chan, 1994; Bays, 1994: Donnelly, 1997; and Fadiman, 1997) depicted Hmong women as “gendered refugee figures” within the limited parameters of gendered Hmong subjectivities (Vang et al., 2016: viii).

Within such accounts, Hmong women have been depicted as blind followers who endure the dictates, restrictive standards and norms of their traditional culture. In other studies, both Hmong men and women are said to be continuing to practice and perform animistic rituals and beliefs and are still engaged in agricultural practices within the industrialised western suburbs where they settled (Lee, 2005; Lee, 2010; Helsel et al. 2002; and Fadiman, 1997). Hmong women have been portrayed as refugees; people without formal education, illiterate in the English language, and burdened by multiple domestic responsibilities (Lee, H.Y. & Vang, S. J., 2010; and Faderman,1998). This mischaracterization has amplified the enduring academic silence about the agency of displaced Hmong women who moved to the West after the Secret War.16

In the few anthropological studies during this period, photographic representations played an important role in propagating stereotypes of Hmong refugee women. Her (2016) has warned about the danger of “decontextualised photographic representations”.17 She critiqued the use of photographs to support research studies of the Hmong using an analytical framework that propagates a view that patriarchy is the root cause of women’s oppression. She also criticised the use of the “dichotomy framework” rendering Hmong women as the “Other”. The combination of such kinds of

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16 Some studies further mentioned incidents of domestic violence that became prevalent due to men’s loss of domestic authority brought about by experiences of displacement and unemployment (Thomas, 1999; and Ong, 2003).

17 Images on the covers of the Spirit catches you and you fall down (Fadiman, 1997), Changing Lives of Refugee Women (Donnelly, 1997) and image of traditional Hmong woman on opening page (Liampuntong -Rice, 2000).
textual and photographic representations had been dominant for some time and therefore left a significant mark in the study of Hmong women who migrated to the West.

To explicate her point, Her put forward the case of her mother, whose photograph was captured by Joel Pickford (2012). In the photo, she was depicted as a farm labourer, which was supported by new anthropological accounts that reinforced a generalised image of Hmong women of her mother’s generation as working-class women (Vang et al., 2016: 7). Imagery is powerful and creates a lasting impression on individuals and groups. As a Hmong feminist scholar, Her was wary about her mother’s response to such representations. Moreover, she was concerned about the possibility of an erroneous reading of the photograph that might render a stereotypical image of Hmong women, as poor backyard farmers; when they have other identities as entrepreneurs, community leaders, decision makers and breadwinners.

It was also the manner by which these migrant-refugee women of ethnic background were represented in both photographic and textual forms that the ideological notion of the cultural “Other” was constructed. Therefore, the misconception that resulted from the use of this analytical framework projected Hmong women as lacking in agency. Moreover, they were also misconstrued as weak and helpless victims of Hmong and Western patriarchy.

Previously, descriptions of traditional Hmong culture in Laos relayed accounts of shamanic rituals, agrarian life, belief in the afterlife, and patrilineal structures. Such a focus on the exotic fostered a romanticised portrayal of Hmong women (Vang & Flores, 2009; Luong & Nieke, 2013; Lee, 2007; Cooper, 1984; Chan, 1994; Donnelly, 1997: Liamputtong-Rice, 2000, Moua, 2002; Symonds, 2014; Duffy, 2007; Faderman, 1998; Vang, 2010; and Tapp & Lee, 2010). It was through these depictions that Hmong women were essentialised as representations of the traditional; expected to be a perfect wife and daughter, domesticated and submissive.

Hmong feminist scholars have tried to rectify such monolithic, essentialised representations through discourses that emphasise women’s agency within and outside the communities in which they have resettled. The current debate in the field of Hmong women’s studies attempts to debunk these antiquated representations. This study is a feminist critique of representations of previous studies about the role of Hmong women in history. I present the agentic facet of Hmong women in Australia.

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18 American photographer and author of “Soul Calling: A Photographic Journey Through the Hmong Diaspora”.
19 The following text was the opening paragraph of Her’s chapter in the book Claiming Place (in Vang et al., 2016: 3).
by demonstrating their capacity for self-actualisation even while struggling with their indigenous culture which bears the remnants of patriarchy. Moreover, this thesis reveals the tenacity of women, demonstrating their acceptance of challenges and changes while at the same time discerning of situations that they deem as either oppressive or emancipatory.

I traced the essentialising and othering of Hmong women from academic categories in three arenas: (1) authentic Hmong women of homeland Laos; (2) refugee women who migrated to the West; and (3) acculturated women, trapped between Hmong and Western cultures (Her, 2016: 6). Academic studies constructed the composite and later essentialised image of the Hmong migrant-refugee women through these three filters. Previous scholarship on category 1, “authentic” Hmong women, being concerned with women’s roles in patriarchal societies, skewed research away from examining women’s agency. Two notable works were: The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures (Fadiman, 1997), and Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women (Donnelly, 1997).

Nancy Donnelly (1997) drew her study from secondary data from the work of previous Hmong Western male scholars, notably Lemoine (1972), Geddes (1971) and Cooper (1979), and her eight years of association with Hmong women. Donnelly’s use of secondary data derived from the classic work of the aforementioned Western male scholars overshadowed her ethnographic fieldwork findings. The author’s findings contain valuable information which could have altered public perception of the Hmong had it been reframed or theorised with keen focus on women’s capacity for agency.

Further, Donnelly did not identify a great degree of transformation in the lives of women even after they have gained access to economic undertakings (1997: 13, 18). This stands in contrast to the findings of this study and those of others, that reported significant positive results from migrant women’s economic participation. Many studies (Koggel, 2003; Nakano-Glen, 1983; Kaplan, 1997; Boserup, 1970; Ayala & Murga, 2016; Kabeer, 2000; Gordon, 2004; Ong, 2003; Thomas,1999; Tomlimson, 2010) show that migrant women’s initial participation in paid work brought significant changes in their lives, that include among others their fluid movement between the private and public spheres, and the acquisition of power to negotiate belonging within the receiving country.

Interestingly, Donnelly devoted a chapter in her book on women’s participation in economic activities. Aptly entitled “Selling Textile”, the book chapter is an appropriate point of reference in the study of Hmong women’s agency. Although Donelly’s work was not focused on women’s agency, it nonetheless presented ways by which women circumvented around what they perceived as their
disadvantaged position in a women’s needlework cooperative that was supposedly selling original work of refugee women who lived locally in Seattle. To save them production time and also perhaps out of their desire to help kins struggling in refugee camps in Thailand, the women decided to import needlework (*paj ntaub*) from relatives. They also avoided the 20 per cent mark-up that the cooperative was taking from their sale by directly approaching buyers of their needle work. The act might had been considered by American Christian women whom they work with as deceitful—they expected honesty in the negotiation. However, Hmong women approached the problem of the difficulty of negotiating with the American women by acting on what they considered was the best solution for them.

Another important work is Pranee Liamputtong-Rice’s (2000) book entitled “Hmong Women and Reproduction”. This work remains the only comprehensive ethnographic study on Hmong migrant-refugee women in Australia. The book was focused on the traditional reproduction roles, birthing and motherhood experiences of the first generation Hmong women in Melbourne. Drawing from the work of Symonds (2014) which was focused on female reproduction among White Hmong in Thailand, Liamputtong-Rice’s work depicted the homogenous representation of women in traditional roles. Like Symonds, the author elicited information about traditional practices and beliefs mirroring Symonds’s scholarship that affirmed the centrality of reproduction and nurturing roles of women. And the importance of these roles in the continuity of Hmong culture and ethnic group.

Liamputtong-Rice’s work and that of Anne Fadiman (1997), who explored the real-life medical dilemma faced by an American Hmong family were ground-breaking. Both authors explored women’s nurturing roles and the clash between the traditional animistic beliefs and Western medical practice. Ironically, while the studies contributed to the “othering” of Hmong women, it also changed public opinion and narrowed the gap in the cultural understanding that prevailed during that period. Through the voices and experiences of Hmong women, the authors provided insights on their continued adherence to religious beliefs around childbirth and motherhood practices. More significantly, it opened discussions on culturally sensitive approaches to Hmong women’s health and well-being.

All the above work however were influenced by the ethnocentric views of the wider society that prevailed during that period (Liamputtong-Rice, 2000; Fadiman, 1997; and Donnelly, 1997). From such a standpoint, they approached data collection with the intention of unearthing information about a people who were spoken about in a “negative manner” (Liamputtong Rice 2000: xvii), were perceived as “difficult” (Fadiman 2000:S3), and exhibited “unstable cultural knowledge” (Donnelly cited in Tapp, 1996: 189). Although there was no conscious intention to portray them in a negative light, their work contributed to the creation of the essentialised Hmong woman. This was done through their reference
to the qualities of the authentic, good Hmong woman of the homeland. This authentic woman was fixed in traditional gender roles and was constrained by traditional cultural values. This authentic Hmong woman remained a central figure in the analyses of the work mentioned above.

In addition to the inclusion of Hmong women’s views in academic studies, two studies from the scarce literature that exists on Hmong women in Australia include those that were conducted by Roberta Julian (1998) and Maria Wronska-Friend (2010). In these studies, the agency of women was reflected in the ways through which women constructed and expressed diasporic identities.

Wronska-Friend was the first to examine the use of Hmong cultural objects in Australia, specifically those who migrated to Cairns. She looked into the women’s use of Hmong dresses, the silver jewellery and other forms of needlework as central in her analyses of Hmong women’s femininity. She also explored how the new hybridized and commercialised Hmong dress became a material expression of the women’s creativity and evolving identity. She traced how the dress ceased to be used as a marker of identity among Hmong sub-groups. This indicates that the Hmong have adopted a sort of a pan-ethnic identification with other Hmong subgroups regardless of the colour of the costume.

Here, their otherness is not similar to the othering that Hmong Americans have experienced in the US. In Wronska-Friend’s study otherness pertained to agency. They wore their dresses with a sense of pride and through them, they further exercised their freedom of choice by producing and purchasing hybridised versions of a highly important cultural object.

An elaboration of Wronska-Friend’s work was done by Roberta Julian (2000), who also examined the changing concept of femininity of Hmong women in Tasmania. Both authors highlighted the women’s continued accommodation of traditional gender roles. However, unlike in the US Hmong in America, those in Hobart and Cairns were not negatively perceived as primitive and backward, albeit, they were still considered exotic from other ethnic groups forming the Australian multi-cultural landscape. Nevertheless, Julian pinpointed that identity construction at the local level in Tasmania at that time was all about maintaining traditional cultural identity. Therefore, both Hmong men and women were compelled, at times, to display their exotic identity through Hmong costumes in Hobart’s Salamanca market. It was in this market where they also sold their farm produce. It should be noted that Julian’s work did not focus on the economic participation of women as a liberating factor. Unlike

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20 Lee and Tapp published “The Hmong of Australia: Culture and Diaspora in 2010”, wherein, the writings of the three women previously mentioned had appeared. Both Lee and Tapp also wrote about issues of settlement, identity and adaptation that appeared in the same publication.
Julian’s work, in chapter four of this study, I will emphasise the high emancipatory potential of the economic activities of the women as the main agency.

**Agency in Literary Expression: The Work of Native Scholars**

Hmong women’s display of agency also became prominent in the literary genre. Through their autobiographic work the women particularly the 1.5 and the second generation was able to express feelings about their domestic and social roles and, more importantly, their roles in history and the writing of history. This was an implicit yet powerful agency for literate and educated Hmong women.

During the early 2000s, educated women of the 1.5 and second generations started writing about themselves. This expression brought to the fore their voices, privileging their insights and highlighting their agencies (Vang et al., 2016: xix). Ethno-biographic or auto-ethnographic genre in the forms of memoirs, anthologies, autobiography and literary writings emerged (Vang et al., vii; Her, 2016: 22). However, in the US, the emergence of a new scholastic approach to Hmong history took place with the introduction of literacy to Hmong women. This allowed Hmong scholars, with women forming a more significant number of them, to narrate their stories using an auto-ethnographic approach. This approach covered memoirs, autobiography, and scholarly and other literary writings (Klinge, 2012). Since then the voices of Hmong women have become part of Hmong historical writing.

Hmong-American women scholars have tackled the complex issues of identity, race, gender, and other diasporic experiences related to both Hmong and American culture in their writings. An interesting pioneering literary work was *Dia’s Storycloth* (Cha, 1996). In this work, Cha interpreted the images of the *paj ntaub* or storycloth that was sketched and embroidered by her uncle, Nhia Thao Chia and his wife, Chue. This sophisticated work by hand was a memento from the war. It provided a compelling visual narrative based on the personal accounts of those who experienced war and camp life firsthand. Although, a non-academic work, it was a pioneering narrative of Hmong women’s agency. Cha provided an ingenious retelling of the refugee narrative from a native scholar’s viewpoint.

Another well-known work of this genre was the *Bamboo Among the Oaks* (Moua: 2002), a compilation of literary works by second-generation Hmong women. Contrary to the calm storytelling

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21 Comprising of individuals who were born in Laos and migrated to Australia as infants or young children.
22 Popular writings of this genre include *Bamboo Among the Oaks, How do I begin: A Hmong Literary Anthology, The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, and other writings published in *Paj Ntaub Voice*. The writings introduced a shift in paradigm where Hmong women were finally recognised as “agentic individuals” (Yang et al, 2016: vii).
of Cha’s work, this study contained the powerful voices of Hmong women. Their topics included telling psycho-social processes of adaptation, identity dilemmas, intergenerational conflicts, and the discovery of their mother’s experiences as victims of patriarchy and patriarchal violence. Their voices were angry, hurt and traumatised. The voices were of those of mothers and daughters expressing strong emotions asking essential questions that had never been previously asked publicly by Hmong women. They were confrontational questions, condemning and ignoring Hmongspeak (Lee in Moua, 2002: 47). It was a brave documentation of young women’s voices that also contained the narratives of their mothers as told to them. This exposed a different side of the Hmong perspective, which confronted the mistreatment of Hmong refugees in the West. While this compilation contributes to the work of othering, it also provided an unprecedented literary agency from within Hmong culture and society.

In contrast, the Latehomecomer, a memoir written by Kalia Yang (2008), a Hmong 1.5 generation migrant in the US, did not argue that the Hmong patriarchal system was oppressive. There was no tale of an authoritative father and an unquestioning mother. Instead, she wrote about the feelings of ‘otherness’ within the American society, where the Hmong as a refugee group was misunderstood and marginalised. In her writing, the reader could sense the resilience of a woman, who has come of age, and, despite years of having the feeling of an outsider, has found her place in America. The three generations of women she portrayed in her book — her grandmother, her mother and herself and her sister — were strong women who confronted and survived poverty, fear, nostalgia, anxiety, loneliness and alienation. She also quite poignantly demonstrated how, in the context of migration, her father experienced the same life pattern that Hmong women experienced. Migration had in the same way made Hmong men vulnerable. She narrated how her father suffered from the patriarchy of the West. “Like all men everywhere you should work and look after your family”, the social service worker told her father. Without language skills and education, patriarchy put a lot of pressure on her father to provide for his family. An essential part of the book was the liberating experience of being a university student, an early realisation of the emancipatory agency of education for women of her generation.

Similarly, Lee’s (2013) Banana Girl, is the only autobiographical account by a generation Y Hmong woman in Australia. The work was a testament to how the migration of the Hmong had engineered a great transition in the position of women in Hmong households. This had occurred through education and Western acculturation. Lee’s honest accounts of personal experiences that included her honest detachment from Hmong rituals and beliefs, was a work independent of the old

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23 The Hmong people’s round-about way of telling someone something that they cannot say directly.
paradigm on Hmong women. Her views and way of telling her story was not atypical of what is expected of a Hmong daughter. What sets Lee’s work apart from any other memoir written about the Hmong is that it touches on topics that are considered taboo within Hmong discourse. Her nonchalant stories of sexual escapades, I surmise, were neither intended to shock nor express rebellion against traditional Hmong culture. Lee wrote about life as she experienced it, in a straightforward, spontaneous, and uninhibited way using the everyday parlance of her generation. Thus, Lee's work is important because it portrays a woman with a high sense of individuality, who is not afraid to speak her mind nor question and contradict conventions. With her work, she initiated the deconstruction of Hmong women’s traditional image, as well as provided an important link to the gap in the study of the second-generation Hmong women in Australia.

Deconstructing the Essentialised Hmong Woman

There is a need to deconstruct the docile and powerless essentialised image of Hmong women in academic work. By focusing on women's capabilities such as their participation in economic activities and decision making as part of their newly gained domestic authority and cultural agency, this study takes a close look at the radical shift that had taken place in their lives.

It is appropriate to say that the gap in recording Hmong women’s history had only recently been filled. As discussed, the proliferation of Hmong women’s work in the literary genre engendered a change from silence to empowered voices; expressions that stem from Hmong women’s use of their agency to fuel their survival and success as immigrants. This section examines work done in deconstructing the essentialised representation of Hmong women.

Specifically, I will present the contribution of feminist scholars who challenged the analytic framework that had dominated Hmong scholarship for decades. Thus, with the ground-breaking publication of the book Claiming Place in 2016 Hmong scholars opened new avenues for discussion of women’s experiences through a post-structuralist framework (or using their term “desire-based framework”) by which they explored the various agencies of Hmong women in different contexts. They explored themes and topics from wartime contributions, to roles and positions within kinship, politics and social organisation, to expression through arts and finally to other salient topics that were previously deemed taboo, such as sexuality and divorce (Vang, 2016).

The Hmong women scholars, whose work appeared in Claiming Place (2016) highlighted direct challenges to docile portrayals of women in the previously mentioned writings. The authors in this book extended the study of agency by examining the ways by which women create alternative forms
of belonging and identities. The work of native Hmong women scholars in this book have succeeded in modifying the "refugee narrative" towards one that equally gives importance to the lived experiences of women, while, at the same time, recognising their contributions to history and society.

Much earlier than the contributions in Claiming Place, the agency of women was defined along the lines of recognising rights to education, which they believed would translate into financial independence and autonomy (Lee, 1997). Although these women had to overcome economic and racial hurdles, as well as patriarchal control, they made sound choices of postponing marriage to be able to pursue college when they found the opportunity. The women became pioneers. They were the first to acquire formal education in the US.

Lee’s initial study set the tone for succeeding research that focused more on dismantling the “deficit-based frameworks” of previous and earlier scholastic research on Hmong women. Lee’s study provided the springboard for Keowm-Bomar & Ka Vang (2016) to examine cases of women, who were empowered by education and participation in community leadership. Nevertheless, the women still had to contend with patriarchy, as they had to accommodate subordinate roles as daughters, despite their leadership roles in the community. They also had to navigate patriarchal norms to maintain familial and cultural support. However, openly they defied cultural impositions they found to be extreme. An interesting part of the study is the case of a Hmong divorcee, who defied conventions by doing the unacceptable — remarrying a man from Laos many years her junior whom she met online. She did not only generate anger from elders but also from fellow Hmong women as well.

Similarly, Prasit Lepreecha (2016) made an interesting study that emphasised women’s reliance on family connections when ostracised as divorcees. The author, a male native scholar, who interestingly examined the actions taken by divorced Hmong women in Thailand, addressed their exclusion from family rituals and Hmong society. The women in his study were barred from participating in community rituals after divorce. They had disgraced their families regardless of the reason for their divorce. The women in his study suffered from the loss of family support and protection from their original family and in-laws, but later sought family support for childcare when they decided to leave communities to work in the city. Lepreecha’s study is rare, in fact, it was my very first encounter of a study on Hmong women divorcees. The women in his study asserted for their social inclusion by invoking the Universal Declaration on Human rights in a petition for their elders to change

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24 I was informed that online dating with younger women in Laos has been the common way Hmong men have found wives.

25 Reasons for divorce could be attributed to the following: husband's infidelity, the inability of the woman to have children or domestic violence.
the rule that excluded divorcees from rituals. The women were bonded by the experience of being social outcasts and found power in the collective. They demonstrated a sense of activism by forming an alliance with a women’s organisation known as the Network of Hmong women. Through their collective, they demanded basic human rights such as education, gender equality in the family, and negotiated for their re-inclusion into spiritual rituals (2016: 144-166).

In another study, Maikue Vang (2016) highlights the creative agency of women in expressing diasporic identity. Vang employs the art of *paj ntaub* (storycloth making) in her creative work. She learned the traditional technique and designs in needlework from the women in her family, which she incorporated in her own artwork. This way, she admitted, she felt more at ease expressing her identity which according to her is complex and constantly shifting, for the reason that she is many things—a westernised woman of colour, an artist, working class and queer. Similar to the way the women in her family used the *paj ntaub* in the olden days, she also used it as a personal meta-narrative. Today, however, it has become a tool of creative expression and empowerment rather than a mechanism for simply depicting traditional roles. Similarly, Hmong in this study used cultural objects to express emotions and through this kind of expression they were able to perform an important role as culture bearers (Craig, 2016: 195-219).

**Thesis Contribution and Significance**

It took many decades for Hmong women to come up with a counter-narrative to their victimisation and marginalisation. The shift from the defeatist representation to the discourse on women’s agency took almost two decades before Hmong women academics became discontented with the old anecdotes and portrayals of ordinary Hmong women.

Like *Claiming Place*, this thesis is focused on the agency of Hmong women. I highlight Hmong women’s leadership roles through engagement with family and social structures.

However, there is a difference by which this study contributes to the following fields: Hmong studies, women’s studies, migration studies and the ethnography of Hmong women within the diaspora. Unlike the compilation of research above this study discusses not only the explicit agencies of women as exercised in public spaces of work and larger society but implicitly and uniquely within the home—the place where they were originally subordinated. The materiality of their agency was made apparent by the way they were expressed through the spatial organisation of their homes. This study could be better understood by deeply exploring the meanings that women ascribed through the
materiality of the home. I emphasise the tools and strategies that women employ in engaging with kinship groups and cultural memories, in that they have implicitly utilised the spaces of the home to reaffirm their leadership qualities and continued their engagement with cultural memories. Further, the emphasis on locating agency in mundane everyday activities, or in the “unconscious”, in the tacit and almost insignificant act of homemaking which gives them a sense of control and authority is an important contribution of this thesis.

There is over a decade between the publication of Liamputtong-Rice’s 2000 work and Lee’s 2013 auto-ethnography. Each book represented the lives of different generations of Hmong women, who lived in the same country but held differing views about Hmong culture. Over that time no one had written about Hmong women in Australia. This study therefore, will fill in the missing gap with accounts gathered from the women based on their memories and current day experiences. In these gap years, no ethnographic work, let alone feminist ethnographic work by a native scholar had been published. Unlike the US case, where Hmong women were able to open up about salient issues and concerns, Australia is yet to produce Hmong women scholars, who will offer us an insider’s perspective on their migration experiences and current lives.

It is important to note, the storytellers in this study are different from the Hmong-American women because they belong to a much smaller population in their host countries. Further, the stories and experiences of these women in Australia are different in that it has taken almost a third of a century for the stories to be told. Over such a long period these women have undergone considerable character transformation and have formed new subjectivities. This study is considered timely as the women are coming to terms with ageing and are more reflective of their past experiences. Thus, whenever I tell them that I am writing about their lives, they have no qualms nor worry about it. Most of the time, the response would be a simple word of gratitude, a succinct and gentle “Thank you” as if saying “yes, it is about time”

Theoretically, this study asserts the post-structuralist stance of taking into consideration several facets and aspects of women’s lives and experiences. It challenges the limitation of the humanist perspective that does not offer a sound analytic framework to the layers and dimensions of Hmong women’s explicit and implicit exercise of agency. With the use of intersectionality, I frame and make sense of the multifaceted experiences and issues of the women. Further analysing the system of oppression that they had been subjected to as women of ethnic background within the patriarchal household and society bring forth salient issues to which the exercise of agency is being measured.
Chapter 3
From Limited Agency to Early Feminist Awakening

The Cycle of Life

Mothers who were socialised in Hmong patriarchal culture, more often than not, perpetuate subordination. In her essay Understanding Patriarchy Bell Hooks (2004) argues that “most of us learned patriarchal attitudes in our family of origin, they were usually taught to us by our [parents]” (2). It is from our mothers’ responses to forms of patriarchal violence (subtle or explicit), that give us daughters the strong message that their act of submission is the norm. Therefore, as daughters, we do not question our subjugation or devaluation as individuals. Hooks added that “the most common forms of patriarchal [control] are those that take place in the home between patriarchal parents and children” through the everyday workings of gender inequality. Patriarchal [abuse] takes place because we are brainwashed into submission and acceptance. Thus, “it is difficult for any [son] or [daughter] to rebel against patriarchy or to be disloyal to the patriarchal parent, be that parent male or female” (Hooks, 2004).

From the traditional roles they performed in Laos, the women now have a clear understanding of what used to be their gendered lives in the homeland. An examination of the cultural life cycle of Hmong females in traditional Hmong society, as illustrated by the women’s narratives, revealed how the patriarchal system shaped their lives. From a young age they were considered second-class members of the family with the son being preferred over them (Liamputtong-Rice, 2002). From when they could walk on their own, they were socialised to undertake domestic and farm work. Previous studies of Hmong women’s lives (Donnelly, 1997; Liamputtong-Rice, 2002; Symonds, 2014; Lee, 1997 and 2001, Moau, 2013, Cha, 1996, Chan, 1994, and Cooper, 1996) presented Hmong female status in traditional society as one lacking in privileges and entitlements as compared to the men. Their marginalised position deprived them of equal chances of formal education and opportunities outside the home and village.

Also, in their younger years, they were not given the time to mature into adults capable of making a sound choice of whom to marry. Instead, at the onset of puberty, they were forced into premature marriages as dictated by conventions that led to early pregnancy and further domestic responsibilities. Marriage through kidnapping or abduction was also openly condoned and accepted. It was disguised as the “normal” way by which men could find a wife. The perpetrators, however, took little consideration of the violence that such practice inflicted on women (Lee, 2001).
In addition, the narratives of women confirm Goldstein’s (1985) accounts that Hmong daughters’ membership in the original families and kinship groups was temporary. When they married, they were no longer considered their parents’ daughters, instead, they become daughters of their husband’s parents to whom they are obligated for life.

Once married, they were pressured to produce children, specifically, a firstborn male child who would continue their husband’s patriline. The women also understood that if they failed to produce a male child, they would have to try several times until they did. They were also aware that when they were past the childbearing age and had not produced a male child, their husbands would marry a younger woman who would bear them a son. For this reason, they knew that bigamous or sometimes polygamous marriages of the husband could occur. Hmong women considered these marriages a form of emotional abuse. This kind of abuse, if defied openly by women, was at times exacerbated by physical violence leading women to live in fear (Moua, 2013). At a later age the women would continue to work in the fields giving them no other opportunity of another life.

The cycle of life, as described above, normalised the older generation’s gendered experiences of inequalities in the eyes of young Hmong girls. Therefore, at a young age, the women examined in this study of Hmong in Sydney never questioned their roles nor position in the household. Instead, they fulfilled the expected roles with submission as women who lived before them had done until they came of age and cognitive understanding. This allowed them to see their own lives unfold in the lived experiences of their mothers.

In this chapter, I present the recollection of memories of two succeeding generations of women through the accounts of the younger ones. This younger generation are the first-generation Hmong women who migrated to Australia. The narratives represent the interlocking memories which speak loudly of inequality, unprivileged position and limited agency. Specific gendered experiences resulted in traumatic memories that developed resilience in women. Therefore, through the lens of trauma and resilience, this chapter analyses the women’s experiences and seeks to identify the forces that shaped their consciousness.

I suggest that these two generations had responded differently to Hmong restrictive and oppressive patriarchal conventions: the older generation accommodating their subordination and marginalisation; and the generation of their daughters strategised around their disadvantaged position through their limited agency in their desire for self-making and self-actualisation. What are the factors
that account for these differences? How different were the circumstances of women that the latter seemed to have demonstrated a kind of feminist awakening which their mothers did not seem to have the predisposition to do? More specifically, this chapter addresses how Hmong mothers and fathers perpetuate patriarchy.

I argue that the Hmong patriarchal system set the path for Hmong girls to a disadvantaged and underprivileged life on the margins of Hmong society. From childhood, their patriarchal parents socialised them into accepting their subordinate positions through their fathers' conditioning and their mothers' acceptance of assigned roles and marginalisation. However, as they grew older, through their gendered experiences they recognised the inequality and oppression committed against women in Hmong society. Therefore, when they were old enough, they learned how to navigate patriarchy with the limited agency that was available to them. This led to the awakening of their feminist consciousness.

This chapter also introduces the readers to forms of patriarchal restrictions, control and trauma experienced by Hmong women. Starting with what is perceived to be the most mundane and invisible forms i.e. their designated gender roles and expectations, son preferencing and the other practices that are considered more systemic and institutionalised. These include polygamy and early and forced marriages. In the next section, I introduce each of the Hmong women through their narratives and memories by which the stranglehold of patriarchy in traditional Hmong culture is confirmed.

**Trauma and Resilience in the Voices of Memories**

When the women migrated to Australia, they continued to be driven by and engaged with their gendered memories from Laos. Hmong women’s memories are socially and culturally specific. Their identical accounts reveal how they locate themselves as daughters. With many of the women in this study being the eldest female child, their stories also revealed how they located themselves within their kinship groups according to their priorities and corresponding cultural roles.

The women shared common emotional accounts which they passed on to the women within their kinship groups. These accounts demonstrate endurance and resilience. It is for this reason that this chapter will look through the lens of trauma and resilience in identifying the forces that shaped their consciousness.
In patriarchal societies, trauma is experienced differently between genders. The gendered social, economic and political boundaries produce unequal power relations by which women are subordinated and marginalised, making them vulnerable to abuse. The gender boundaries of the private and public realms wherein the women occupy the domestic sphere “usually ascribed lower status, which gives women less access to power” (Segalo, 2015: 449). Hmong concepts of masculinity and femininity are distinctly associated with cultural, societal beliefs and practices that place women in disadvantaged positions. Although trauma experienced by the women did not arise from interpersonal violence, they were nevertheless caused by emotional trauma that stemmed from acts of patriarchal practice.

Furthermore, gender expectations were another major cause of trauma for Hmong women. Hmong men are expected to be figures of virility and rationality whose decisions govern the households. On the other hand, their feminine counterparts are expected to be submissive, good-natured, good homemakers, nurturing, patient and sacrificing. It is in this context of unequal expectations that a power imbalance exists and that patriarchal control and abuse are committed. This imbalance is exemplified in incidences of bigamous and polygamous marriages of men which are condoned by society. On the other hand, the extramarital affairs of women are also condemned. Further, the practice of levirate marriages (the compulsory marriage of a widow to her husband’s younger brother) is widely accepted, normalising rape and curtailing women’s freedom of choice and perhaps in many instances, even normalising rape within marriage.

Despite the negative impact of trauma; however, scholars like Goodman et al. argue that "traumatic experiences can [also] generate unique strengths, coping mechanisms and sources of resilience” (2017: 310). A study conducted by Marie Desiree Caroline Lenette (2011) demonstrated the various means by which single refugee women with children developed pathways to resilience. Just like the women in Lenette’s study, Hmong women developed resilience from a young age from their personal experiences as Hmong females. They demonstrated their resilience by coping with the challenges during exile in refugee camps and the initial years of adaptation in Australia.

From many years of living in Australia, the women have faced migration challenges that included adaptation, loss of identity and economic difficulty. They have also been exposed to a different way of living and perceiving the world. When they migrated to Australia they began to have an emic view of Hmong patriarchy through a Western gender lens. As I came to know the individual women personally, I learned that despite the traditional cultural perception, Hmong women possess tenacity. None of the Hmong migrant-refugee women I have met in Sydney displayed weakness of
character, nor did they think that any of the women whom they know personally is weak. Instead, they believe that the maternal figures who had the most significant impact on their lives and their views of the world were strong, resilient survivors of poverty, hardships and trauma caused by the Secret War in Laos and the loss of loved ones.

Paradoxically, their mothers and other maternal figures unconsciously and unknowingly perpetuated patriarchy through their acceptance of gender roles, subordination and marginalisation. These were also the women from whom they inherited their peripheral positions in society.

The women have long realised that by fleeing Laos and migrating to Australia, they finally are in a stronger position to challenge patriarchy. Migration to Australia slowly changed gender dynamics at home due to migration circumstances. Both men and women were transformed with their exposure to the Australian workplaces, western values and rights. They both gained an awareness that Hmong traditions and practices that are oppressive to women can no longer be continued. They understand that the commission of acts of violence against women has corresponding legal consequences. For instance, Huab told me that Hmong men are aware that they could no longer take another wife, when their wife could not bear them a male child. She added, “We are now in Australia. They can do that in Laos but here, no, no! The women will fight them!”. In Australia, husbands are very aware that they cannot prohibit their wives from working or from wanting to pursue further studies.

Further, fathers could no longer favour nor privilege male children over their daughters. Instead, the new generation of Hmong daughters born in Australia has been encouraged from a young age to study hard, albeit within the requirements of domestic roles. Thus, many Hmong daughters excelled in academic and professional endeavours. In Sydney, there is common knowledge that second-generation females are more successful than their male counterparts in their chosen careers. More significantly, the second generation of women is no longer obliged to marry Hmong men. Also, if they marry men from other ethnic backgrounds, they would no longer fear judgement or loss of face. They are aware that the older generation has gained a degree of acceptance of their preferences for life partners. Women, more so than the men, found liberation from their restrictive roles. Migration to Australia has strengthened their once limited agency into one that afforded them greater freedom and autonomy.
The Ambiguity of Hmong Femininity and Assigned Gender Roles

It took many years, and gendered experiences before the women had a clear understanding of their lives on the margins. In this section, I present the women's accounts from which I gained insights into their relationships with their mothers. They also revealed how the mothers and fathers perpetuated patriarchy through forms of cultural control which they identified.

Each woman’s narrative contained nostalgic descriptions of their mother’s character, citing specific virtues and attributes associated with the traditional expected roles that they emulated while growing.

I gathered from the women’s stories that Hmong femininity is an ambivalent concept. On the one hand, Hmong society recognised the women’s roles as essential in the continuation of the patriline and the functioning of the household (Chan, 1994; Donnelly, 1997). On the other hand, it also marginalised them when they failed to meet cultural expectations. For instance, married women, who do not perform their domestic and economic duties well, are not positively regarded by their in-laws.

Thus, the concept of femininity, as constructed through gender ideologies is taken as a cultural standard by which females measure their worth as individuals and as members of their respective households and communities. It is through the same standard that they described the good characters of their mothers. The women’s emphasis on how their mother performed their domestic roles that extended to agricultural work, suggested that being a hard worker and an obedient wife and daughter defined Hmong femininity.

When I first met Zhou Thao Lee, a petite soft-spoken 62-year-old widow at her home in Sydney, she asked me, “Why do you want to know about my life?” Although slightly reluctant, she was nevertheless enthusiastic at the prospect of telling the story of her life. Thinking that I already knew much about Hmong women’s lives in Sydney, she insinuated that, “Our stories are all the same, same life in Laos, same life in refugee camps and same life in Australia. Same, same”. Somehow I understood what she meant — belonging to the same kinship and clan groups the women share similar life trajectories. Despite the commonalities of their experiences, there are radical disparities that highlight each woman’s agency and their unique ways of coping and facing challenges. Zhou’s life story is a testimony to this, yet in many ways, it mirrors the lives of the other four women whose narratives heavily emphasised their mother’s positive and feminine qualities as well as their traumatic experiences.
Zhou was born in Ha Pho (also known as Pha Khao) near Long Chieng where she also grew up. She informed me that she was the second eldest of five children. Zhou migrated to Australia in 1975 with her husband and mother-in-law. Since then she bore three children. One of them died in his early 20’s, the year after she also lost her beloved husband. Zhou mentioned that if it were not for her profound relationship with her mother, she would have found it difficult to survive. All throughout her life, she has witnessed her mother’s resilience, a woman who survived poverty, marital abuse and the war. She told me that it is from her mother’s resilience, that she always drew her courage. Still quite teary-eyed, she started talking affectionately about her mother. She referred to her as “my mum” in the English language, and the mere mention of the word seemed to have transformed Zhou into a young child again. She loved the fact that someone inquired about her mother, and she could not be happier to reminisce about her.

My mother’s name was Chia. She was a tiny woman like me. She worked hard on the farm and took care of all of us. She worked all day. I remember I was happiest whenever I was with my mother in the fields. Me and my sibling would all walk together to the fields for many hours, we would leave home at dawn and would arrive on the farm before the sun was high. My father did not do domestic work. It was my mother who did everything for us. She never complained. She was loving and gentle to her children. She never said anything hurtful. She taught me how to do all the chores at home as well as in the fields.

The women in this study all came from a working-class and farming background. Their families relied on the meagre income of the male heads employed as military personnel. If the head of the household was not employed, earnings would have come from the sales of crops. Women supplemented the family’s food with the vegetables that they planted in their backyard gardens. Hmong women were important producers of the family’s staple food. The women, together with their young children, were labourers in the fields. Most women whose families lived in farming were mired in poverty. Zhou’s mother bore five children and therefore she had to work extremely hard in both the fields and at home. She added that although the men were the ones responsible for heavy agricultural work, the women assisted in farm work while they continued with their biological reproduction and domestic roles. Zhou also mentioned that her mother at times participated in work that was mainly relegated to men. She shared, “My mother, although she did not go to school, you could tell that she was smart by the way she did things. She helped build our house, a job that only men would do in our village”. 26 It fascinates me how Zhou interpreted her mother’s participation in a male activity as a manifestation of her intelligence. I surmised that this

26 Translated by Kaye Lee.
was an indication that women themselves undervalued their work, their intelligence and good nature because of how they were socially conditioned.

Similarly, the other women in this study spoke of their mothers’ undervalued positive qualities. Hmong daughters lived by their mothers’ examples emulating the attributes of diligence, patience, submissiveness, endurance and sacrifice. They were expected to be the perfect housewives, who upheld the families’ good reputation at all times.

Huab Lor Lee, 58, has been married for over 40 years and is a mother of four. She migrated to Australia in 1979 after being exiled for more than three years in a Thai refugee camp. She was born in Xiengkhouung where she grew up until the age of 11 when her family moved to Long Chieng. She is the eldest of seven children. Her mother died when she was in her teens. Huab gave me an insight into her mother’s life and that of her niam pog (paternal grandmother), who was another maternal figure in her life.

When she was still living, Huab’s mother always reminded her of the importance of conforming with the Hmong concept of femininity. When she shared accounts of her mother’s life, she said:

My mother was a good woman. She cooked a lot and worked a lot in the farm. She took care of animals—pigs, cows, chooks. My mother said to me she did not marry a rich man—that is why she works hard. My father was lucky. He did not work hard like my mother. He studied. My mother did not go to school.

Huab continued, “In the old days Hmong people think that if you couldn’t do the things that your mother could do and as efficiently as she did them, then you would not be [considered] a good Hmong woman.” It was evident from the information, she shared, that the assigned gender roles confining girls to domestic and farm work also pressured them to conform to the standard norms of Hmong femininity. Huab added:

“My mom often told me that, ‘You are a woman, you should do your work well in the house. You should cook, work hard in the farm, feed the animals, take care of the children and sew them clothes. Your mother-in-law will not like you if you don’t know how to do all these things’”.

I asked Huab if she heeded her mother’s advice. She explained that she did, however, she added, only to a certain extent. Huab believes that she and her mother came from different generations and therefore, they hold different points of view and perspectives. She admitted that she
did not really like sewing and was never good at it. “I was really bad [in] it and I don’t like doing it” she said with a chuckle.

Huab said that although she grew up in Long Chieng, she was socialised at an early age to do domestic chores like Zhoua. This relegation of domestic work that subordinated the girls, left no room for the cultivation of aspirations outside their household and village. Being the eldest female carried the extra burden of assuming the role of a second mother to younger siblings.

When Huab’s mother passed away, she and her niam pog took over the role of her deceased mother. She was 14, and her niam pog was 72 years old. The care of seven young children was an enormous task confronting both women. Taking into consideration the stages of their lives, when they assumed the primary responsibility of childrearing and caring, provided me with an understanding of how Hmong females could be trapped in traditional roles within their life cycle?. It is quite rare for Hmong women to enjoy their later years. In villages in Laos old women remain enslaved to domestic responsibilities. The rare occasions when elderly women enjoy their senior years is when they have derived income from the sale of crops or when they have a daughter-in-law who could do domestic chores for them (Ireson, 1996). Huab’s niam pog had none of the above privileges and therefore, in her old age, she continued to labour at home.

Huab again emphasised her grandmother’s extraordinary quality of patience and endurance. She dedicated the rest of her remaining life to raising her siblings until she passed away at 81. “Ah she never stop[ped] working, I tell you. She [was] so strong even [though] she was already old. She was always doing things. I learned so much from her”.

In the cases of other women, the enduring trait of their mothers was again asserted. Nakauj, who was introduced at the beginning of this thesis, was born in Ban Nonghet in XiengKhouang province. She was the second child, first of two daughters and later the eldest of a brood of seven children when her parents reunited after ten years of being separated. For Nakauj, her mother was her life’s moving force. Nakauj grew up not knowing much about her father. Her mother told her that when she was about three months old, her father had an accident and had to be taken to a hospital in Long Chieng.

According to my mother, she had to stay with my sister and I because we were still young. Four days after my father was taken to Long Chieng she said the Communists took over Nonghet. My father because he was a government soldier could not return to us because the Communists would have captured him.
Nakauj said her mother did not know whether or not her father survived. She had lost contact with him for almost ten years. Nakauj described her mother as a patient and enduring woman who suffered a lot in her life. Nakauj shared, “When my father was [absent] my mother raised my sister and I by herself. She worked hard on the farm, so we would have food to eat”. On the second year that her father was absent her four-year-old sister became very ill and died. “When I was older, my mother told me a story, she said she was very, very sad when my sister died, and my father was not there”, Nakauj lamented. Despite her mother’s struggles, Nakauj said she remained a devoted mother to her and a good daughter to her in-laws. Most of her recollections of her mother were about working on the farm and tending to the vegetable garden outside their house. In addition to the quality of being industrious, Nakauj again mentioned the stereotypical attributes of being nurturing and gentle. She added, “She was very, very kind, soft-spoken and lovely. I don’t remember her getting angry. She was a good-hearted person, but she [was] also very strong”.

Son Preference and Deprivation of Education

Apart from assigned gender roles, the practice of son preference has negatively impacted both Hmong girl-children and women. Growing up, Hmong daughters understood that their brother’s welfare and well-being were more important than theirs. As a result, they felt they were second class members of their families. This preference manifested in the provisions of basic needs such as food, clothing and most especially, educational opportunity. The women also mentioned that they felt a deep sense of inequality because their mothers favoured their brothers over them.

Da Yang Lee, 56, married, with four children was born in Xiengkhouang and grew up in Long Chien. She is the second child in the brood of eleven comprising of seven sisters and four brothers. In Da’s accounts, she reaffirmed how Hmong mothers perpetuate patriarchal practices. Further, the women revealed that Hmong mothers, as well as older sisters, reaffirmed the dominant position of boys and the subservient position of girls in the family. Her father, who was a soldier was always on duty and away. When Da was nine years of age, her father died of an illness. After her father’s death her mother raised all of her children through farm work. Da first escaped with her family and lived initially in Namphong then in Van Vinai.

During my interview with Da she expressed her resentment towards the practice of son preferencing, “When I was young, I always knew that my brothers were my mother’s favourites. She made sure they had everything they needed”. There was a feeling of regret and at the same time
resignation in the tone of her voice. She knew the reason why such practice persists. Son preference is rooted in the sociocultural structure of Hmong society as well as embedded in the spiritual beliefs. Symonds (2014) pointed out that males play essential roles in Hmong cosmology. They are needed to perform rituals to lead the souls of the dead to the land of the ancestors. The (eldest) son is required to perform the critical role of guiding his father to the land of ancestors when he passed on. The women have no part in this ritual.

Economically, males were also expected to support the family, because they were the ones who received formal education. More significantly, the youngest male child was assigned the primary care of his parents in their old age. Therefore, if a woman failed to bear a male child for her husband the latter’s decision to remarry another woman to procreate a male child was justified. Women suffer from pressure and anxiety over the pressure of bearing a male child. If a wife failed to do what she was expected during her first pregnancy she would be compelled to conceive repeatedly until finally she gave birth to a firstborn male.

When a male child was born, the much-awaited child would receive the mother’s full attention and priority. I asked her if she was ever jealous. She replied, “Of course, but what can you do?” Hmong people always say that Cuaj lub hli tsis cuag ib lub nub (nine moons are not comparable to one sun). She told me that as the youngest child she should have been given more attention, but this was not the case. Instead, her brothers were provided with more material things and privileges compared to what she was given.

My mother openly showed us that the boys were more important than us girls. She could not be blamed for it, she waited for so long to have a son. Before she gave birth to her first son she had five daughters. She had two stillbirths. In Hmong culture, my mother knew if she did not bear a son my father would look for another woman. So she tried over and over again. Thus, when her first son was born, she wrapped the baby right away. She did not want to know the baby’s sex. She was afraid that she had given birth to another daughter!

Parents’ preference for sons over daughters has profound implications on the lives of Hmong girls. One of its negative consequences is the deprivation of educational or skill opportunities. The accounts of women support claims of the desire to attend a school or gain basic skills in reading and writing. However, the lack of encouragement and priority on the part of their fathers hindered them from learning. The priority of Hmong fathers was the education of their sons. Zab, Nakauj’s husband, whose father was in the military, made sure that his children were educated. He also allowed the girls to attend school. Zab shared this trait with all his brothers, including making sure his eldest sisters attended school, “I used to travel from our village to the city with my sister where we both attended
the same school. We even sat in the same class! However, after a year or two, she stopped because she had to help our mother on the farm”. Zab’s story attests to the peripheral position of girls. Moreover, being the eldest female further disadvantages them, because they hold the primary responsibility of assisting their mothers in farm and household work. This relegation of work left no room for the cultivation of aspirations outside their household and village.

Women, like Huab, Ntsuab, and Zhou, believe that if they were all allowed to study, then they would have discovered their other capabilities. At times when I chatted with Huab I would sense her frustration in not being able to carry out important tasks requiring literacy. She also often expresses the frustration of not being able to learn new things on her own because of her inability to read and learn from books. Huab envied her husband who could read and learn from books. Their lack of literacy affects their confidence in their intellectual capacity. I observed that when I asked the women about Hmong history or cultural rituals and practices, they would always ask their husbands to answer my questions. They believe that their husbands’ knowledge of historical and cultural facts is more accurate. Also, because their husbands could speak and write in English and French, I noticed that the women in a way looked up to them as a figure of intellectual authority.

The women never fully understood the transformative value of education until they migrated to Australia when they witnessed how their daughters advanced in their careers. When they arrived in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s, the women found themselves again on the margins of society. However, at that time, they shared the experience of marginalisation with their husbands who like them, held the status of refugees. They attributed their experiences of social exclusion, the inability to adapt, lack of social and upward economic mobility to their lack of formal studies. They believed that they experienced greater difficulty in adapting to Australian society than their husbands. They attribute this to their husbands’ ability to communicate in written and oral English. They also acknowledged that their lack of knowledge of Australia, its people and culture contributed to their slow adaptation.

In Laos, Hmong girls had to overcome class, ethnicity and gender barriers in gaining basic education (Mason, 1986). The Hmong daughters in this chapter were aware that the opportunity of education was neither their privilege nor entitlement. The women confided that as part of their primarily domestic duties, they are tied to the confines of the homes. Secondarily, since they were also expected to marry young, they would belong to their husband’s family. For this reason, it was deemed a waste of family’s economic resources to invest in their education.
Mothers failed to recognise the desires and aspirations of their daughters. It was difficult for them to do so as they themselves had been denied the opportunity of a basic education. Therefore they could have not fully understood its value in the daughters’ future. For them to raise and mould the women into fine traditional Hmong wives would have been sufficient. The daughters however were envious of the opportunities enjoyed by their brothers. Zhou at around the age of nine felt the desire to attend school. “Every morning I saw the boys prepared themselves for school”, she told me. She told me also that she had approached her father to ask if he could be allowed to attend school with her brothers and the boys in the village. Her father declined her wish. Zhou shared, “he said, ‘You stay with your mother and help her on the farm. We need money so your brothers can go to school’. “Back then”, Zhou said, “all the girls in the village did not attend school, so I thought that was how things ought to be”. She therefore continued to work on the farm and supported her brothers schooling and missed out on opportunities.

There was a kind of discrimination against poor, uneducated girls who marry into wealthy Hmong families. Ntsuab married a man whose father owned several acres of land, therefore, had the financial capital to send his children to school. When Ntsuab married her husband, he had already acquired a secondary education. Ntsuab narrated,

I married at a very young. While my husband had the chance to go to school I did not have this opportunity. His family was rich while mine was very poor. Because he went to study he could speak four languages. I knew that my mother-in-law did not like me for her son because I was not educated and could not read and write.

Ntsuab also recalled that, “When I arrived in Australia, I only had a few hours of English lessons”. Because of her inability to speak English Ntsuab felt inadequate. At times I could sense that she equated her lack of formal education with ignorance. Often, she would tell me, “I do not know anything, because I did not study.

In Da’s case her father, encouraged her to attend school in Long Chieng. He said, “It does not matter if you are a girl. If you want to go to school you can go to school”. Da’s mother also supported her wish to study. Thus, Da gained basic concepts in Math and literacy in Lao which benefited her greatly when she migrated to the US where she completed her secondary schooling.

Similarly, Huab mentioned her interest in studying when she was young. She attended school for few months but due to her family’s upheaval, her studies were often interrupted. She remembers soldiers patrolling the school, which prompted the volunteer teacher to quit. During that short time of school though Huab was able to acquire basic literacy. It was not too long afterwards that she was
married. Beyond that, she never had another chance to pursue her studies. Today Huab and Ntsuab are entrepreneurs. They consider their lack of formal education their greatest *ku xim* (regret). Often they express self-pity when reminded of lost opportunities. They believed that they could have done better in the respective businesses if only they had formal education.

Further, the women believe that lack of English prevented them from fitting into Australian society, specifically when they needed to claim legal rights. Huab suffered extreme trauma losing her 15-year-old son, who drowned while canoeing in the Sydney Royal Park. She believed that there was negligence on the part of the park administration. She wanted to sue them. However, this would require seeking the assistance of a lawyer who would mediate between her and park officials. Unable to speak English and being unaware of Australian law, Huab felt helpless. In frustration Huab dropped the case. She told me the story of her niece suing a hospital and its medical practitioners for malpractice. “When my niece gave birth to her baby she suffered from some complications from childbirth. But because she could speak English well, you know she finished at uni, she sued the doctor and the hospital. She won and she received renumeration for it.”

Huab wished she had been educated or at least had the literacy and fluency in the English language. She reckoned, “I could have done it the way my niece did. I could have written something or took the case to court. If only I had been able to do that then I would have felt less angry and bitter about the death of my son”.

**Bigamous Marriages of Hmong Men**

Another patriarchal practice that impacted women later in life was the prevalence of bigamy or polygamy. In Hmong culture, this practice was accepted as another form of marriage. Men would marry more than two wives who would give them more children. If a wife had failed to bear a male offspring then the husband would marry another woman who would give him a son. For farming families the addition of another wife was an economic advantage. Moreover, having more children meant having more labourers in the field.

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27 Schein (2016) used the term polygyny which means multiple marriages of men to women as oppose to polygamy which means multiple marriages of both men and women.
The women spoke emotionally and at length of Hmong men’s polygamous marriages. They described the practice as “hurtful and cruel”. In China, where the Hmong were believed to have originated, polygamy was unacceptable and was perceived as an abuse of male privileges among Hmong elite. However, it is now deeply rooted in Hmong culture in Laos and has been widely condoned in Hmong society (Schein, 2016: 251).

The pressure of producing a male child bore heavily on women, as shown earlier in Da’s case. When the women were young, they already had a good understanding of how this male practice had affected their mothers psychologically, emotionally and economically. Below are the women’s stories of how the practice of bigamous marriages affected them.

After ten years of absence, Nakauj’s father resurfaced. With him was a new wife with whom he had a new set of children. In spite of her resentment, Nakauj’s mother accepted her husband’s decision to bring home the new wife and children to live with them. During that time Nakauj’s mother bore her father five more children. When the young second wife assumed the role of the first wife, it changed the dynamics at home.

Nakauj’s family became her father’s second priority. Nakauj’s daughter Sharon told me the story, “My mum remembered that her step-siblings were given more food than those of her own younger siblings. In a family of 11, the children had to compete over resources”. Nakauj, as the firstborn acted as a second mother to her siblings at 10 years old. It was hard for her to accept such unequal treatment from both her father and her mother. Nakauj did not condone her father’s bigamous marriage. She also resented her father for inflicting suffering on her mother. With a tone of sadness and disappointment she explained, “My mother accept[ed] so many things [so quietly] without complaining or talking about them”. Today, she is convinced that this practice is not only emotionally damaging to the wives but also the children. Nakauj’s husband describes his wife as “very competitive and a go-getter”. He added that because of her childhood experiences, “she makes sure that she does not play favourites and treats her children equally”.

Similarly, in Huab’s case, her father’s choice of marrying a second wife took a toll on her mother’s psychological and physical well-being. Huab’s mother found it so unbearable to cohabit with her husband’s second wife. She had constant fights with Huab’s father and suffered emotionally. Huab recalled that on the ninth month of her father’s marriage to his new wife, her mother passed away, leaving seven children behind, the youngest of them was a seven-month-old baby.
In a very exasperated tone, Huab tried to analyse Hmong culture and traditions in the accounts below:

I should not be saying this, because I am Hmong too. But I feel sorry for Hmong women when their husbands remarried and they are forced to live with the new wife. It was very hard. Women of the older generation just accepted things. They would say, “It does not matter, take it easy, take it easy as long as you both stay together for the kids. Then the kids are happy, because they have a father and a mother. But, you know, I felt sorry for my mother. Tell me, if you were a married man with seven children would you take another wife?

Sternly Huab told me that if the same thing happens to her she would just let her husband go. Casually she said, “What he wants to do is okay with me. For as long he lets me know. He can go!” This indicates the amount of autonomy Huab has gained over the years. I took her words as an indication of the value she places on herself and her dignity. It was clear to me that would not condone such cultural practice. She considers it as highly unfair. Further, she told me she can survive on her own and does not care about what Hmong people say. Huab had often demonstrated a strong sense of independence and had always let her views known. She believes that women should not suffer the same way women of past generations did.

In Zhou’s mother’s case, this kind of patriarchal abuse was exacerbated by physical violence. Zhou explained that her father was not ideal nor was he the perfect husband. Although her mother bore him male children, it did not stop him from marrying a second wife.

My father had two wives, my mother was his first wife, together they had five children. His second wife had only one son with him. My father was already physically violent with my mother even before he took on another. When the second wife started living with us, the violence intensified. My mother, at that point, wanted to leave him, but my father’s parents discouraged her because they favoured her over the second wife. So, she stayed and endured the abuse for years.

Zhou’s explained that women who had been subjected to this form of abuse always feel humiliated at the thought of being replaced.

In the triad relation of two women and one husband, the first wife was often at the receiving end of abuse. However, Ntsuab told me that this is not the case with her father-in-law’s marriage. She gave me an insight into the lives of second wives. Ntsuab told me that her father-in-law married a second wife. The young woman was 15 years old, 20 years younger than her father-in-law. Ntsuab, who was about the same age, had established a closeness with the young woman through their daily work on the farm. Ntsuab said, “Everyday while we worked on the farm she sang her songs. They were sorrowful songs. She told me she did not want to marry my father-in-law because he was married and
that she loved somebody else”. However, Ntsuab’s father-in-law offered the girl’s parents a dowry and asked for her hand in marriage. The young woman, according to Ntsuab, felt betrayed by her parents who forced her into marriage. In Hmong tradition, when a daughter defy her parent’s wishes, especially when the dowry had been paid, it was tantamount to disrespecting the elders. They in turn, would have lost face if this happened. The young woman therefore was left with little choice but to obey her parents’ wishes.

According to Ntsuab, the young woman could not accept that she had to marry an older and married man. She had a boyfriend whom she loved and wished to have a future life with. With her marriage to Ntsuab’s father in-law she lost her chance for a future with her boyfriend.

Ntsuab recalled that one day she and the young woman were left all by themselves at home. From outside where she was working Ntsuab heard a hysterical call for help from her friend. She ran to the kitchen and found her friend fighting for her life after she had drank poison. The young woman held tightly to Ntsuab. “It was too late, I could not do anything anymore, she died fast”, Ntsuab told me. Many first generation Hmong women had told me that young Hmong women in the past, even though they had the option to divorce their husbands, often chose to take their lives rather than dishonour their parents. Women like Ntsuab understood the helplessness of young women who were trapped in unwanted marriages. Like Huab she does not condone such practice.

**Navigating Patriarchy: Filial Duty and Early Marriage**

The generation of women in this study was expected to marry between the ages of 14 and 16, beyond this age they said, a woman was already considered too old for marriage. Aware of this expectation and practice the women sometimes agreed to marry young to fulfil their familial economic obligations.

Hmong women in the past did not always have a free choice of whom to marry. Young girls were at times pushed to marry for convenience or familial duty. The girls knew the advantages of marrying an educated man versus those who were not.

Zhou, having witnessed her mother’s predicament, vowed to marry a man who was kind and educated. She wanted a way out of their challenging domestic situation and the only way she knew, was to marry a man who could help her and her siblings. However at 14 she was kidnapped. She was
abducted by a man whom she was forced to marry. Zhou remembered the experience, “I wanted to go back home. I missed my mother a lot. But I was not allowed to leave”. Fortunately for Zhou, she and the husband who kidnapped her lived with the man’s uncles who was a leader in the community. Zhou said the uncle had the authority to grant a divorce. Thus, she pleaded with her husband’s uncle to grant her a divorce. The uncle agreed to grant her a divorce on the condition that after her divorced from his nephew she would marry the uncle’s son.

Zhou continued, “I told my ex-husband’s uncle that I would not allow that to happen. He then told me that he would have to find me a new husband and then I could go back and see my parents again”. Despite Zhou’s reluctance she accepted the condition. Being away from her family she was already worried about her mother and wished to be home. Thus, she agreed on an arranged marriage with another man. She talked about how she felt about her situation at that time:

It was a hard decision to make at that age, I was scared and was not sure of my decision. I did not know what to do, but I wanted to see my mother. I wanted to go home. So I agreed to marry another man whom I had not met. My potential husband was then instructed by the uncle to see my parents. So he did. He told my parents that he wanted to marry me. My parents liked him, and when the two of us met, we liked each other as well.

Three months later, they married. Zhou had extraordinary luck and the ability to negotiate her way out of forced marriage at the age of fourteen was admirable.

Zhou discovered at a very young age that there is power in defying the rules of convention. She learned from her mother’s misery and did her best to escape her unfortunate situation. Unlike her mother, who stayed in her marriage because of the wishes of the elders, Zhou was defiant and determined that she would not suffer the same way her mother did.

In contrast to Zhou’s experience, Nakauj and Ntsuab did not make conscious decisions to marry educated men. Nevertheless, they had the choice and decided to do so. Below, the two women talked about how they met and decided to marry:

Nakauj met her husband in a Thai refugee camp. She was 15 and he was many years her senior. Zab, who was then a budding scholar was conducting fieldwork in Thai refugee camp. Nakauj, being the eldest among her father’s first and second families, held many responsibilities at home. When her husband-to-be expressed his desire to marry her she had reservations. She had a vital role in raising her younger siblings. Leaving her family meant that her mother would be left to singlehandedly carry on domestic roles. However, within the month of their meeting, the couple married. They left Nong
Khai refugee camp and lived in Chiangmai for a couple of months. In Chiangmai Nakauj’s migration papers were processed that allowed her entry to Australia. Because of her decision to marry and migrate with her husband in Australia, she was able to sponsor her family. She and her husband started a chain of Hmong refugee migrations to Australia. Today all her full and half-siblings who now have families of their own have settled in Sydney and Brisbane.

Ntsuab’s story was different. She lost her mother at the age of four and was under the care of her father who remarried. She told me that her stepmother mistreated her and she bore trauma of that all her adult life. Comparing her story with other first generation women, I learned that children from a previous marriage of Hmong men were often mistreated by their stepmothers. Nakauj, Huab and Ntsuab all shared the common sad experience of being treated with hostility by their stepmothers. Ntsuab’s father, because of the situation at home, decided to send his young daughter to live with close relatives in Xam Neua with whom she stayed until the age of 14. Ntsuab often talked about emotions of loneliness from losing her mother and growing up away from her father. When she was a teenager, she decided to return to her father in Mong Pen, Xiengkhoung. Once back she found life too difficult and felt unwanted by her stepmother.

In her teenage years, Ntsuab longed to belong to a family. It was then that she met her future husband Cai. He was 19 and she was 17. Hardly knowing Cai, Ntsuab decided to marry him. She moved to her husband’s home where she became part of the family. Later, however, she again felt that she was not fully accepted by her in-laws. As mentioned earlier in this chapter Ntsuab’s mother-in-law did not favour her for her son partly because of her poor economic background. Based on Ntsuab’s story, I learned that Hmong senior women exercised power over younger women. The manner by which they imposed authority on younger women was a manifestation of internalised patriarchy. Many young daughters-in-law experienced hardships in the early years of their marriage. All the women understood their mother-in-law’s exercise of domestic power. They also understood that it was something that they had to contend with. Fortunately, for Ntsuab, her father-in-law purchased some farmlands in the village of Phalat. Ntsuab found an opportunity to gain her mother-in-law’s acceptance by working hard with other clan members in cultivating her father-in-law’s fields. Eventually, she earned her mother-in-law’s approval and respect. From then on she and her mother-in-law began to have a good relationship.

In Huab’s case her mother objected to her decision to marry Kub her now husband. Huab explained that she had a boyfriend when she met Kub. Her boyfriend at was very traditional in his ways and thinking. “He wanted me to just stay at home, clean, cook, and look after our future children”.

Huab admitted that she chose to marry Kub instead of her boyfriend at that time. She explained her boyfriend did not seem to be interested in supporting her aspirations. Huab added that when she was young she wanted to learn, do business and even go to America where some of her Hmong relatives had migrated. When she met her husband he was training to become a schoolteacher. Despite her mother’s objection she was adamant to marry him. They married at a young age when she was barely 16. Huab admitted that they had encountered many difficulties as a result of the war. She lived with him and his family in a Thai refugee camp for many years before they finally found the opportunity to migrate to Australia. “We had experienced so many hardships together over the years”, she once told me. However, she said she had no regret about her decision to marry Kub. He had been supportive of most of her life’s choices. She added that it was because of his support that she was able to realise her dream of becoming a businesswoman.

In the stories presented above, it was evident that the women exercised limited agency in Hmong traditional culture and society. In the next chapter, I will show how this limited agency had been extended when the women gained autonomy through economic activities. I discuss how their participation in economic activities when they migrated to Australia led towards self-actualisation. Further, I demonstrate how the women’s newly gained financial independence changed their roles within the home. They therefore began to possess greater autonomy and decision-making power that has impacted their individual lives as well as the lives of their families.  

Conclusion

The life stories in this chapter contain personal accounts of first-generation Hmong migrant-refugee women and their mothers. These narratives also include anecdotes and experiences of their maternal figures. The Hmong daughters in this chapter grew up witnessing the older generation’s submission and conformity to Hmong patriarchal rules and conventions, which caused the women to sacrifice individual happiness and aspirations. Memories of such personal experiences had opened their eyes to gender inequality and their disadvantaged position. Traditional knowledge was also highly valued as a measure of a woman’s worthiness as a wife. Many women therefore applied their traditional knowledge as a way of gaining their husband’s family’s acceptance and approval.

As they grew older these women became aware of their marginalised position and low status in Hmong society. Such awareness led them to become critical of their lack of freedom of choice and

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28 This topic will be discussed in chapter four.
opportunities. The women openly expressed their rejection of the bigamous practice of their fathers—a form of abuse that they believed to which their mothers should not have been subjected. They also questioned the absence of educational opportunity for young girls during that time. Although they continued to perform their traditional roles within Hmong society, they used their agency to defy its rules and conventions, especially on matters that would adversely affect their future. For instance, Zhou negotiated her divorce with Hmong elder at the age of 14 after she had been kidnapped and was forced to marry.

Based on their stories it is evident that the women had navigated extremely difficult situations yet enabled themselves to adapt and overcome traumatic circumstances. Having witnessed their mothers’ sufferings through their first-hand trauma, they experienced an awakening of consciousness. This changed the way they viewed their traditional roles. The women spoke of their mothers’ experiences to illustrate not only the lessons learned about gender inequality in traditional Hmong society but also to illuminate their resilience in surviving Hmong patriarchy.

Such received wisdom included lessons about the fulfilment of familial duties and the need for resilience to survive displacement, poverty and war. It is from these lessons that they drew strength and recognised their ability to carry out their roles in the diaspora.
Chapter 4
Thriving in the Material: Reconfigured Hmong Womanhood through Work

My mother taught me everything I know. I learned at an early age how to clean the house, wash the dishes, wash the clothes. I learned to cook at age four. I did a lot of chores. I collected water and filled the drums in our kitchen, and I chopped vegetables that I fed the pigs, the chickens, and horses. I did everything I was told by my mother at home and on the farm. We planted rice and corn. I learned about washing the vegetables that were harvested. I also learned how to remove the weeds from the soil.

The above recollections by Zhou Lee exemplify the type of work that a Hmong woman performed daily to prepare for her future role as a wife and daughter-in-law. Traditionally, a Hmong woman’s worth is defined by assigned gender roles in the family. When she marries, which usually occurs between the ages of 14 and 16, she partially cuts her ties and responsibilities with her original family to become a member of her husband’s patrilineal household for life, or even after her death, by virtue of marriage (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009; Liamputtong-Rice, 2000; Symonds, 2014). The Hmong women in this study strongly condemned this social practice. They deemed their fate unfortunate because they had to conform to such norms at an age when a good education or employment could have changed the course of their lives.

The three women discussed in this chapter—Ntsuab, Huab and Da—were newly married and were in their teens when they migrated to Australia. They had just left their homes for a committed life as members of their husbands’ patrilineal households. Just as they had been dutiful to their biological mothers, they also lived up to the assigned gender roles in their new households by assisting their mothers-in-law in their day-to-day domestic responsibilities. The roles they were expected to perform daily included building a fire, husking rice, fetching water, cooking, and tending to the home garden and domestic animals. Leisure time was spent sewing and stitching paj ntaub29 (pan daw) while keeping an eye on young children or attending to the needs of elderly household members. Traditionally, Hmong women took significant pride in being recognised for their hard work and in embodying the qualities of an ideal daughter-in-law.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the issue of Hmong women’s exercise of limited agency within a highly patriarchal culture while growing up in Laos. In this chapter, I consider how their agency

29 Traditional Hmong embroidery.
has been strengthened by migration circumstances, particularly by a shift in their economic activity. I argue that the Hmong women’s self-assessment and valuation, as perceived through the lens of the Hmong value system, has been transformed by migration. They have developed a new sense of self that stems from the notions of self-reliance and freedom of choice brought about by the shift in the valuation of their labour.

Following their undervalued and unpaid labour, the three Hmong women’s migration to Australia afforded them initial employment opportunities. Later, they found economic niches that provided new meaning to work. Consequently, the initial monetary gain from these jobs had a great impact. This development paved the way to the formation of a new subjectivity as their latent agency began to evolve into empowered selves.

Such new subjectivity contrasts with Hmong culture’s definition of a woman’s sense of self that fundamentally rests on her ability to perform unpaid domestic and reproduction work. Ntsuab’s, Huab’s, and Da’s participation in paid labour have strengthened their previously limited agency into one that accommodates autonomy and power. It has changed their concept of womanhood. To this day, despite being more financially secure in the later years of their respective lives, Hmong women migrants are continuously driven by their work ethic, which is a central feature of Hmong femininity and womanhood.

However, by observing them and by participating in their work activities, I realized that there was more than just work ethic driving Hmong women migrants’ continued engagement in paid employment and entrepreneurship. As we shall see in this chapter, the different economic activities of Ntsuab, Da and Huab reveal other meanings and motivations behind their sustained participation in economic activities. Their reasons include having purchasing and decision-making power, cultivating social networks and cross-cultural friendships, obtaining economic autonomy and freedom from discrimination through entrepreneurship, and gaining a sense of self-worth influenced by the merging of Hmong and Australian value systems. These conditions show how participation in work and work-related activities following migration strengthened the ability of some Hmong women to exercise their agencies.

To make this argument, I first describe the sexual division of labour in Laos before Ntsuab, Da and Huab migrated to Australia and the value they attached to their work. Then, I provide the historical background of their participation in the Australian workforce, with a brief discussion on how the shift from unpaid labour to paid work brought initial changes within the home and how they viewed their
gender roles. Finally, I present the analysis of ethnographic data gained from participating in the following workplaces: (1) Ntsuab in her backyard farm and market stall at Jamison’s Trash & Treasure Market in Canberra; (2) Da in Tribina, a factory that manufactures and sells pet products and accessories, which is located in Rhodes, Sydney; and (3) Huab in “Hot Bread Bakery”, located in Campbelltown, Sydney. Drawing from their work-related experiences, this chapter explores how Hmong women were able to create a new criterion of self-evaluation and arrived at the new concept of womanhood as migrants in Australia.

**The Value of Women’s Work in Hmong Culture**

To illustrate the shift in Hmong women’s valuation of labour, I have examined how their work was valued in Laos and how their valuation of self and perception of womanhood is influenced by traditional views of women’s work.

The narrative at the beginning of this chapter is a common narrative shared not only by Ntsuab, Da, and Huab, but by other Hmong women I interviewed in Sydney. They said that the value of hard work had been inculcated in them at a young age. Thus, as years passed, they were accepting of the rigours and discipline of manual labour.

As previously discussed, the exemplary performance of domestic roles such as cooking, feeding the animals, tending the garden, fetching water, sewing and looking after the children were expected of all Hmong girls. Their domestic roles extended to the work in the fields. All the women in this study remembered that at the age of four, they were taught by their mothers how to weed to clear the land for planting, turn the soil, wash the vegetables and other agricultural tasks. Although there was a gender division of labour, as they grew older, their work and those of their sisters included planting and, at times, harvesting—work that was mainly relegated to boys. The boys also shared in childrearing because Hmong mothers would take their eldest daughters to the fields, while the younger boys looked after their small siblings.³⁰

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³⁰ This gender division of labour extended to rituals. Although Hmong women could become herbalists and Shamans, they had been from the most sacred and valued aspects of rituals which concerned the patriline. For instance, only men performed rituals that concerned the ancestors. Such rituals included calling the soul of a newborn at birth. It also included guiding the souls to the grave. Women, according to nonetheless, were the ones tasked to guard the body of the dead before the burial (Symonds, 2003, xxvi).
Moreover, as mentioned earlier, young girls were groomed for their roles as future wives and mothers, with emphasis on their reproductive work, mainly childbearing and rearing. Likewise, they were forced to assume adult roles before being emotionally and intellectually prepared.

Nakauj Lee, for instance, held adult responsibilities from the age of ten until she got married at 15. Young women performing and making adult decisions when they were not mature enough was common in Hmong culture. Nakauj’s husband, Zab, explained how his wife Nakauj became a mother figure in the family:

Nakauj’s mother, my mother-in-law was a very laid-back person. She was not imposing or pushy. So, it was up to Nakauj to discipline her younger siblings. If you ask her (Nakauj) about this, she would start complaining, she would tell you all her responsibilities to her siblings when they were young. She looked after them, fed them, washed them, dressed them up. She did everything for them. Because of this life experience, she became physically and emotionally capable at a very young age.

Finding from my interviews affirmed that young Hmong women’s domestic responsibilities extended to agricultural work in the fields. However, in contrast to Hmong men’s productive work, Hmong women’s work, whether perceived as reproductive or productive, was always undervalued at home or in the fields; it also often had no monetary equivalent.

The patriarchal system further contributed to women’s marginalisation. As heads of households, fathers-in-law controlled family income from the sale of crops. Ownership of lands was also passed from one male head to the male heir of the next generation through the patrilineal system (Bouapao, 2003; Cooper, 1979). Hence, at a young age, the Hmong women did not possess economic independence and the decision-making power to change the course of their lives. They had no direct access to income and held low position in the family.

Such conditions changed minimally when the Hmong were in exile in Thai refugee camps. The women had to earn despite scarce work opportunities. However, their scant income was not enough to survive on; it had no economic impact on their lives. It was not until they migrated to Australia that their work participation served as a catalyst for change.

Migration to Australia and Integration into the Australian Workforce

When the Hmong moved to Australia, they lacked the material and cultural capital relevant to their new context. They did not possess basic knowledge of the English language, which was necessary for
their adaptation and critical to their fulfilment of employment requirements (Lee, 2010). The disparity between their agricultural life in post-war Laos and the industrial situation in Australia during the early 1980s was significantly wide.

Coming from undeveloped rural communities, both men and women experienced an initial shock when introduced to Australian culture and society. This shock was not far removed from the experience of members of other migrant and refugee groups whose skills were not readily transferable to industrialised Western standards (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003).

Equipped with only their domestic and agricultural skills, the Hmong fell into the category of unskilled workers who received the lowest pay. Tomlinson speaking about the disadvantaged position of refugee women, refers to their situation in the labour marketplace as the “ethnic and gender penalty plus” (2010: 279). Hmong women had to rely on members of their kinship groups and church groups for basic knowledge of their new country and everyday survival, because they had no steady source of income to support a growing family. They were also dependent on migration officials for gaining access to housing and welfare benefits, as well as for referrals to employment opportunities. It was in these precarious circumstances that they experienced an unprecedented move from employment in farming-related jobs to low-paid, low-skilled industrialised work.

At this point, Hmong men welcomed the integration of Hmong women into the paid labour market. Like Hmong women, migrant Hmong men faced similar disempowerment and alienation. Before leaving Laos, they held the highest social position in the family and in the community as the head of patriarchal households. However, in the Australian labour market, both men and women were perceived and treated the same way, i.e., as migrants and unskilled labourers.

The experience of Hmong men corroborates with the studies conducted by Ong (2003), Gordon (2004), and Thomas (1999) which revealed that refugee men dealt negatively with displacement, when they lost their primary roles as providers after moving to the United States and Australia. In this case, Hmong men came to recognise the stoicism, industriousness, discipline, and resilience that had been inculcated in Hmong women from a young age as an economic advantage. They understood that the income earned by both men and women was critical in assisting their families establish themselves in Australia.

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31 Only a few educated Colombo scholars who were all men had high skills in English in addition to their literacy in Lao and French.
Slowly, Hmong women’s traditional association with the private sphere eroded, and the public space of factories and processing zones became familiar grounds which they shared with Hmong men. They also brought and introduced to the Australian labour market a repertoire of deeply ingrained skills and positive attitudes. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) described it as a “habitus of behaviour” that the women developed as a matter of daily routine within the home and in the fields.

Drawing from their once undervalued production skills and discipline, the commodification of their labour gave Hmong women access to financial resources that they never had before. Through the monetary exchange of their productivity, they began to recognise their contributions giving them a sense of pride. Their participation in the Australian workforce transformed many aspects of their individual lives. They gained greater power to purchase, negotiate, make decisions, and access multicultural networks. They also broke gender barriers within households and communities. They ultimately attained higher economic status, affording their respective families middle-class status. Furthermore, exposure to their host country’s ways, values, rights, and privileges led to new gendered subjectivities premised on gender ideologies prevalent in Australia.

Throughout the years of accumulating financial capital as labourers, the Hmong were also able to engage in different entrepreneurial activities that allowed them to apply their agricultural knowledge and skills such as backyard farming and working in a bakery. Amid these changes brought about by migration and employment, Hmong women found a new sense of self, a reconfigured sense of worth, and a redefined version of womanhood beyond the dictates of Hmong value system and cultural norms. Consequently, they have realised their rightful place and status as individuals, and as equally valued members of society.

**Hmong Women and Work in Australia: Three Case Studies**

Earlier in Australia’s migration history, there was a presumption that migrant women (or women in general) were mere dependents or “helpmates” of migrant men. Their skills and work were considered as supplementary to the income of their husbands (de Oliveira Assis, 2007; Fincher, 1995; Lan, 2008). Thus, their pay was minimal for piecework that required more patience and the use of their nimble hands.

Surprisingly, when Hmong women began working, they earned more than the Hmong men because they rendered longer work hours in multiple places and in various roles as cleaners, kitchen hands or factory workers. The following sections contain ethnographic accounts of my participation in
the workplaces of three Hmong women, interspersed with theoretical viewpoints based on migrant-related studies.

**Case Study 1**

**Ntsuab’s story – A Vendor’s Life at the Trash & Treasure Market**

Ntsuab, known as Vang to her friends and associates, first worked as a farmhand harvesting strawberries and grapes in Yass in the 1980s. Afterwards, she found work as a cleaner in a government office. Later, due to ill health, she shifted to backyard farming, a form of livelihood that she knew very well. She then was introduced by an Asian friend and fellow refugee to the Trash & Treasure market in Canberra where she has been selling her harvests for over two decades now. It was a decision that changed her life, and which made her a major contributor in the transformation of Jamison’s marketplace with her being its very first trader of Asian vegetables.

To date, Ntsuab’s stall is one of the enduring stands at Trash & Treasure. As a participant-observer of her work, I familiarised myself with the process involved not only in tending her vegetable garden but also in her market activities. I started this undertaking in December 2016 and continued to do so for almost eight months.

**The Marketplace**

Trash & Treasure is one of Canberra’s outdoor markets operated by the Rotary Club of Belconnen. It rents the car park from the government of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). It is located opposite the Jamison Shopping Plaza. In this market, sellers bring their produce and set up individual stalls on their designated rented lots.

When the market was established in 1974, employment opportunities were limited and less accessible to unskilled nonlocals within ACT. Although the Rotary Club of Belconnen did not have the welfare nor the plight of migrants and refugees in mind, their initiative appealed to entrepreneurial foreign settlers from Europe and Asia. Therefore, the unemployable and unskilled migrants like

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32 A town within the Yass Valley Council located in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales.
33 Ntsuab’s garden would be robust with herbs, spices, and vegetables mixed with ornamental plants during late spring and summer months. She raises poultry in large cages that she opens every afternoon to allow the animals to roam around and feed on insects. The vegetables that are cultivated and harvested from her garden include chives, onion leeks, garlic, ginger, chillies, coriander, beans and leafy vegetables such as rocket, mustard greens, bok choy, spinach, kaffir, etc. She also sells prickly pears, limes, and lemons from her backyard.
Ntsuab, who had very limited capital, gambled at the prospect of running a small scale business which through the years proved to be highly beneficial.

Since the early years of Trash & Treasure operations, Ntsuab has joined other migrants in the weekly market activities. At the market, sellers fall into three broad categories: (1) Permanent sellers who are always present in the market all year round except, perhaps, when they or members of their families have fallen ill or if they are overseas for holidays; (2) Seasonal sellers like Ntsuab and other fruit and vegetable vendors who depend on their farm yield during the spring and summer months; and (3) Interim sellers or people who want to dispose of old belongings that they no longer wanted, that others might still find useful. Typically, they would display pre-loved clothes, shoes, furniture, and other sorts of “bric-a-brac”.

*Working at the Markets with Ntsuab*

It was five o’clock in the morning. The temperature outside my house in Tuggeranong was -4°C, and it was not even winter yet. I surmised that if I went out without my scarf and windbreaker, the cold wind would shoot straight to the marrow of my bones.

I walked out of the house to my car and started driving through the long stretch of Tuggeranong Parkway, heading towards Belconnen where Jamison’s market is located. At 6:05 am on this dark, freezing Canberra spring morning, I had expected the market would be quieter than days when it was not as cold. Instead, the car park was packed when I arrived. Buyers brought empty recyclable bags and worn out baskets, expecting the best bargain. Merchants clad in thick cardigans carried boxes filled to the top with vegetables, fruits, and all sorts of products (e.g., food, trinkets, handicrafts, pre-loved articles, mementos and belongings) that they unloaded from the open boot of their work vehicles. Well-dressed Lebanese fruit vendors in high spirits jested with each other as they set up their booths.

I walked towards Ntsuab’s stall. She was sitting on her folding chair, wearing her beanie. She was bundling the chives that I had left unbundled the night before.

Since she started selling at Trash & Treasure, Ntsuab had been preparing her vegetables all by herself. She would harvest them, bundle them, and set up her stall for the Sunday market. It was an enormous task for a woman nearing her 70s and who had survived two strokes. However, every time anyone advised her to slow down, she would always say, “Oh, don’t worry about me. I do this all the time. What would I do if I stop working? I’d get very sick and die”.

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Despite being aware of her wish to work and that she enjoys what she does, I still felt a surge of guilt seeing her at dawn in the same spot where she had been selling vegetables for the past 25 autumns and summers in Canberra.\textsuperscript{34} Helping her at the farm for eight months during the summer of 2017 taught me that farming is back-breaking work, with either little or incremental monetary gain. Ntsuab continued to labour, enduring the strain of cultivating her 20 x 30 square metre garden. Always, she would display enthusiasm and a palpable sense of fulfilment.

During the first months that I started working with Ntsuab, I immediately recognised her qualities of being industrious; she was hardworking and tireless. I also believe that despite the meagre income from her sales she developed a sound business sense earning her profit to compensate herself for her labour. However, I doubt that profit represents the primary motivation in her regular participation in market activities.

Her weekly work from dawn to mid-afternoon at the market was of immense interest to me. Therefore, I explored the tangible and the intangible reasons behind her motivation. Ntsuab emphasised that her desire to become the family’s breadwinner after her husband started having health problems prompted her to search for sources of income. This search eventually led her to the Trash & Treasure market:

Before, it was only my husband who worked for a family of seven children. It was good that I did not have to pay for school and doctors. The government (Centrelink) helped us also although, it was not much. I started planting vegetables, so that we did not have to buy food from the shops. Then, my husband became so unhappy with people at work. They were hostile to him. He started getting sick. It was then that I decided that I should do some paid work. My older children were then big enough to look after the younger ones. I told myself if something would happen to my husband at least I had some money saved.

Over the years, Ntsuab employed her agricultural knowledge and expanded her backyard garden. Since she started selling in the market, she had established a steady income from regular customers. From then on, Ntsuab had full control of the process of planting and harvesting. She also gained enough knowledge of the kind of crops she could grow according to Canberra’s unpredictable weather. Further, she gained full control of pricing, sales and the income from her produce. She told me that when her market activities had been established, she realised that she had the capability to “make some money”.

\textsuperscript{34} Autumn months in Canberra are from March to May.
Other than the desire to have a steady income, I learned from chatting with Ntsuab that she had always wished for autonomy, however, she had never acted on that wish until she was prompted by health problems. She said,

I had a stroke and could not continue working anymore. When I recovered, I started planting more vegetables. This way, I don’t have to go to work every day. These days, I am mostly at home and I also mind my grandchildren. I don’t have to rush to do things for other people. Now I do things at my own phase. If I am slow, it doesn’t matter. I can do whatever I want to do and whenever I want. If I feel tired, I’d stop and continue at a later time. Now that I am bit better, I just continue with my own business.

Ntsuab’s Sunday market participation was always something she looked forward to every week. In the months that I worked with her, I had never heard her complain about going there. Instead, she was always enthusiastic for the market day. The patio would be full of her harvests contained in large round basins. She would cover the vegetables and herbs with wet towels to prevent them from withering. Then, she and I would bundle them individually and place them in large buckets that she would take to the market. I would usually leave her place at around 6 pm, leaving her to finish bundling until around 8 pm to 9 pm. The next day we would meet at Trash & Treasure.

*Market Work: Ntsuab’s Agency as a Migrant Hmong Woman*

During the early stage of my immersion at the market, my encounters with customers were random and fleeting. However, over the succeeding months, I observed a sustained interaction among people who were familiar with Ntsuab. They also became familiar with me. There was an obvious display of camaraderie between Ntsuab and the people (both sellers and buyers) in the market. I suspected it reflected a deeper social bond that had emerged from her years of engagement in market activities.

Ntsuab considered the market’s social space as a neutral ground and a melting pot of different races and cultures. “Here you see [people] who come from everywhere: China, Laos, Thailand, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Italy, Iran, Croatia...Everywhere!”, she said.

“The Philippines”, I added.

She quickly agreed with a chuckle. “Yeah, yeah. The Philippines. I know a lot of them now. That is why I love the market. I like the people.”

The notion of social network formed through the development of connections within a localised marketplace environment, where social interactions are the primary focus, has been the topic of previous studies (Barnes, 1954; Gutkind, 1965; Hiebert et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2013). These market
spaces, where small-scale informal economy takes place are sites of reciprocity, equality, and belonging for migrants rather than sites of power relations.

In a study conducted by Daniel Hiebert et al. (2015) on Dappermarkt, a Saturday market in Amsterdam, parallel findings with this chapter are noted. These similarities show that connections formed from market activities and interactions bring about a sense of equality, belongingness and a kind of social order. People from ethnic backgrounds, who are relatively invisible in the wider society, come face to face with each other in the markets. They interact and connect on a deeper level in this environment. The markets then become a microcosm of ethnic diversity, where people develop methods of cultural engagement, learn a repertoire of intercultural skills, and coexist across their differences (Hiebert et al., 2015).

In Ntsuab’s case, the market served as her place of comfort, security, and self-worth. Equipped with a support system she nurtured within and outside the commercial milieu, she had evolved from being a traditional Hmong woman in Laos into an empowered female migrant Hmong in Australia. Her journey shows how entrepreneurship and the ensuing social relationships have contributed to her improved sense of agency as reflected in her capacity to sustain herself, her family, her business relationships, and her role as a productive member of her host country.

Through market participation, Ntsuab developed friendships and established social networks mostly with people of other multi-cultural backgrounds. At the market, Ntsuab shared a parking space/stall space with a Thai named Doua, and a Filipina named Flora. Collectively, they paid a rental fee of $20 per day. All three women had individually established strong networks of friends at the market that had become their social as well as business connections. In the early years of market activities, this social network afforded Ntsuab an unexpected respite from emotional and cultural isolation. She told me that she felt so far away from other Hmong people who live in Sydney. Over time, she also lost support from the migration personnel and missionaries who had assisted her upon arrival. Therefore, intermingling with other Asians who shared some affinity with Hmong culture despite competition and normative differences was an advantage.

The marketplace was where all the characters in Ntsuab’s economic activities took centre stage. Aside from Flora and Doua, Ntsuab was friends with Pon and Loui from Thailand and Vatsana from Laos. She was also on good terms with a Greek vendor whom she called the “honey man”. Her important business associates were the Italian farmer and his Thai wife, and the Chinese vegetable wholesalers whose stall was directly adjacent to hers.
On the first day I helped Ntsuab at the market, she introduced me to Doua, referring to her as “my sister”. She said,

In Laos, we call the group she belongs to as Tai Dub or Black Thai. Like me, she came to Australia as refugee in 1979. First, we were neighbours in Ainslie and then we became friends. I don’t have a sister here in Australia. She is my sister here. She and I grew vegetables in our backyard gardens. But she was the first one to sell vegetables in the market. She was selling onions, shallots and garlic. She told me she was making good money. She said, “Come with me, you could sell some garlic and onions too!” So I started selling garlic and onions, then later we began selling Asian vegetables.

Doua’s encouragement and support enabled Ntsuab’s entry into the market business.

Doua talked about Ntsuab with concern and affection. She explained, “I have known Ntsuab for more than 30 years. In the early days Ntsuab could barely make ends meet. She has a big family with seven children. Although her husband was working, they struggled. She was always worried about money. I told her to sell in the market”, Doua narrated. When the demand for organic Asian vegetables grew, Ntsuab became popular among Asian buyers.

Ntsuab’s network of friends included those who did not do business in the market yet were involved in Ntsuab’s economic activities. Pon, 58, is Ntsuab’s friend and neighbour. She would come every week to assist Ntsuab selling her produce especially in the morning when the market was busy. Pon was brusque with Asian buyers who wanted to haggle for cheaper prices. Despite not being fluent in English, she snapped at customers asking for discounts, telling them—“You go Woolies. Price high, three times more!” Or she would say, “Ve-ge-ta-ble, long time to grow, too much work, one bundle one dollar only. You can’t pay, go!” Ntsuab found her behaviour funny rather than irritating, which shows an understanding of Pon.

Another of Ntsuab’s trusted friends is Vatsana, 64, a Lao woman she met in the early 1980s. After meeting, they formed a very close relationship as they witness each other’s children grow up together.

Through her garden and market activities, Ntsuab sustained her friendships with the three women which developed in varying degrees. This would not have been the case if she lived among the Hmong in Sydney. This is so because as I have observed, Hmong women in Sydney who belonged to the same kinship and clan groups kept their bonds tightly among themselves. Thus, they left little room for friendships with individuals from other ethnic backgrounds. I also observed that Sydney Hmong women spent most of their time after work with their closest family and clan members. It was then

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35 Ntsuab’s nickname among friends.
that I became familiar with the sociocultural significance of blood relations and marital affinity within clans through my attendance in cultural and family gatherings. I also learned that when a Hmong man or woman calls someone a "friend", that person would turn out to be a fellow Hmong or a member of his or her clan.

As expected Ntsuab had succeeded in creating her own extended families in Canberra through her non-blood kinship bonds with the three women mentioned above. She reciprocated the generosity and friendships that the women extended her. Of the three women mentioned, Ntsuab formed a filial kind of relationship with Vatsana.

Vatsana told me that, "When her children were young, I used to cook food and gave it to them. I know they did not have enough, and I only have one child, so we were not short of food". Vatsana, in the past and to this day, always looks after Ntsuab everytime she has a medical emergency. So, when Vatsana became ill with cancer many years ago, Ntsuab attended to her needs in the hospital and at home. On the other hand, when Ntsuab suffered a major stroke Vatsana and Pon assisted in her day-to-day needs as she recovered.

As mentioned earlier, Ntsuab’s garden and her market stall are the places where her relationships with the women were nurtured. Surviving cancer, Vatsana also started growing vegetables in her backyard. During fieldwork, I observed that she would come to Ntsuab’s house with the vegetables she harvested from her garden. Ntsuab would bundle the vegetables and sell them in the market the next day. It was her way of returning her kindness. I also observed that whenever Ntsuab would be away, Vatsana and Pon would continue to do work in Ntsuab’s backyard garden. Vatsana told me that one time when Ntsuab left for Laos, she and Pon harvested, bundled and sold the vegetables at the market. “We did not know what we were doing!!” Vatsana laughed at the thought of them doing Ntsuab’s job. “It was really hard work that Ntsuab was doing! She is a hard-working woman. I cannot do what she does every week. If I do it every week I am going to die early.” The three women would often help each other out. Whenever Pon left for Thailand for a long holiday, Ntsuab would tend to her ornamental garden daily. And Pon, as Ntsuab’s neighbour, would be looking after Ntsuab’s garden and poultry whenever she was sick or away.

Apart from the familial relations Ntsuab developed with close friends, her mercantile relations with other sellers motivated her to continue her economic activities. At Trash & Treasure, I found it very interesting that many seemingly trivial activities would go unnoticed when the market was busy. For instance, a system of trading based on trust and honesty existed. Sellers who knew each other would consign or exchange produce without accounting for it. Silent agreements and rules had also
been established. Mutual relationships that did not necessarily elevate to deeper friendships had emerged and had been maintained over the years. In these relationships, familiarity, loyalty, and sincerity were essential requirements. Over the years, Ntsuab had cultivated these kinds of relationships with fellow sellers and had also done so endearingly with her customers.

I came to know an ingenious way by which women, who have little capital or produce to sell, earn extra income during market days. They purchase goods in bulk and collect them in their car parking spaces.

Having no driving skills, Ntsuab and her friends relied on their husbands to transport their produce. Ntsuab expressed her frustration at being unable to go to Sydney’s Flemington market where she could buy vegetables in large quantities and sell at a reasonable mark-up. Therefore, like other women who came to Trash & Treasure during early mornings with very minimal cash on hand, she would browse all stalls and check them for goods sold at wholesale prices. Then she would resell them at higher prices.

Ntsuab would usually buy garlic and onions from an Italian farmer. Then she would buy lemons and oranges from a Chinese seller. I realised that wholesalers would encourage this kind of trading especially towards mid-day when the market finishes. Customers, who do not want to be caught among the frenzied crowd of wholesale buyers, usually opt to purchase from small retailers like Ntsuab and her fellow vendors.

In addition, I also observed a familiarity that existed between Ntsuab and her buyers. Further, I surmised that her weekly interactions with clients, and with those who randomly showed up at her home garden and in the market invigorate her. There was always excitement and joy in her brief and lively conversations with them. For instance, there is the elderly Iranian couple who never failed to drop by to exchange sweet pleasantries. The man would always start the conversation with a warm, “Hello, how are you today?” Ntsuab would instantly brighten up whenever she saw him and his wife. They would exchange updates about each other’s personal lives and activities. It was from these exchanges that I learned more about Ntsuab’s buyers—who they were and where they came from. “I have not seen you both for a while!”, Ntsuab would sometimes greet her customers. Then they would update her about their recent activities. In one particular instance with the Iranian couple, the man told Ntsuab that someone had fallen ill in their home country and they had had to visit.
Often, Ntsuab would be engaged in this kind of brief personal conversation while I was present. Afterwards, when her customer had left, she would give me more information about them. Ntsuab told me that the wife of the elderly Iranian man does not speak English very well and that Ntsuab assumed the wife was perhaps too shy to talk. She added delightedly, “They are very nice. I have known them for 20 years”. I understood at that moment why she was friendly with them and why she trusted them. I noticed that every time they came around, they would just pick bundles of vegetables of their choice and would pay Ntsuab the exact amount. Ntsuab would just drop their payment into her money box without counting.

Most of Ntsuab’s customers would serve themselves. They would get a plastic bag, pick several bundles of assorted vegetables and hand me an exact bill. Confused, I would usually ask, “What did you buy?” Their usual reply would be, “The usual”. I would protest sometimes, fearing that Ntsuab might have been cheated. However, when I looked at the customers, they would just smile at me. They would normally say, “Bring me some more of this, some more of that next time!” pointing at the assortment of vegetables before leaving the stall. Happily, Ntsuab would reply, “Okay, okay”.

I sensed that Ntsuab’s primary motivation for getting up early and preparing for the Sunday market was the camaraderie she has with her buyers. After many months of working with her, I became accustomed to her customers myself. I also started to look forward to spending time at Trash & Treasure and conversing with people from multicultural backgrounds.

As I closely watched Ntsuab while she worked, I could not help but wonder if she ever felt the same kind of boredom that people complain about after several years of repetitive, rudimentary work. One time, I told her, “You need a break. Besides, it has been forecasted that Sunday will be unbearably hot, and you have asthma”. She said, “Yes, maybe”. The next day, when I went to do my weekend shopping, I was surprised to see Ntsuab in her usual spot surrounded by customers. It was business as usual for her. It was then that I realised that more than the weekly income she got from her work, her greatest motivation was to maintain her regular social contact and networking. It was clear that she did not want to break away from her life’s routine.

Case Study 2
Da’s Sense of Self-worth at Tribina Factory

When Da arrived in Sydney from the US she joined the Hmong women working in the factory where she initially worked as a seamstress. However, in 1993, she and her husband Zoo, encouraged by the success of other Hmong banana farmers in Queensland, decided to migrate with their family to Cairns.
They left their low-paid work in the factory, sold their house and bought a banana farm which they owned for ten years. Zoo, called the secondary migration of Hmong from Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart to Far North Queensland as the “Banana Gold Rush”. In 2006, cyclone Larry hit Cairns and the banana farmers suffered loses. It was then that the couple and their children decided to sell the farm and return to Sydney and re-engage in factory work. When I asked Da whose idea it was to buy the banana farm, she pointed at Zoo who was then seated beside her, as if telling me it was his fault. Da admitted that she did not enjoy working on the farm. It was hard work. She explained that the very long hours of tedious work took her away from looking after her young children at that time. It was evident in her story that farming did not give her the sense of fulfilment that she had found working in the factory. She admitted that working in Sydney was far more fulfilling for her and this was the reason she had worked in the same place for more than 25 years. I gathered from Da’s stories and by observing her in the workplace that she found a sense of self-worth and agency in routine factory work. I inquired further and found out more through participating and observing her in the factory with co-workers.

Da’s employment in the factory during the 1980s was an opportune time for her and a few other Hmong. Globally, migrant women’s work in factories came after two parallel socio-political trends that took place during the 1980s and 1990s. The first trend was the increased participation of women in the labour force. The second was the influx of international migrant women into industrialised capitalist countries where they started working in processing zones (Amott, 1995: 207; de Oliveira Assis, 2007: 34; Duffy 2007: 315; Parrenas, 2000: 563). Described as “dirty work”, this term included low paid jobs in the “ethnic enclaves” of factories and processing zones that were consistently relegated to racial-ethnic women migrants (de Oliveira Assis, 2007: 33; Nakano-Glenn cited in Duffy, 2007: 315). Tribina is one of the so-called ethnic enclaves in Sydney where Da and other Hmong had found work.

The Tribina37 packing area would come to life at seven every morning. Before seven, all workers would be seen moving briskly and busily to their usual spots on the long table in the non-smoking dining area where they had their breakfast. Outside, there was a small square table usually used by the few “Aussies” for breakfast and lunch whenever they had their smoko. The dining room was spacious and equipped with all the kitchen utilities needed. Everyone would share the space and be mindful of the minimal break time they had. Everyone would sit down, eat and chat during meal

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36 Zoo’s sarcastic way of comparing it to the Gold Rush in Australia that started in the 1850s.
37 Pseudonym.
breaks. Each person usually would sit beside a member of his or her ethnic group or within a group that she/he could identify or be comfortable with. Da would usually sit with the Laotian and Vietnamese women at one side of the table. On the other end, two Fijian men of Indian descent would sit with two Filipinos—a man and a woman.

Tribina is a subsidiary of Castle—an American company that produces pet food, toys, and other accessories. It is the second-largest pet food and pet care company in the United States.\textsuperscript{38} Due to consumers’ high demand, it expanded its manufacturing operations in 2002 by opening factories in Europe and Australia. It was the same year that Lee (Da’s sister-in-law) started working in Tribina until she was laid off late in 2016. Da had been working seven and a half hours every day for the last 15 years. Many of the workers like herself considered the factory a second home. “We spend more hours here than in our homes”, Da told me. “I leave the house at 6 am, and I go home at 4 pm E-VE-RY-DAY for more than ten years” (she emphasised by syllabicking the word). “After my work here is done, I do a second shift at home, doing chores”, she said jestingly. Da explained that they still have a traditional set-up at home wherein, she does all household chores. She said there was not much difference from her role when she first got married to her husband and to her current domestic role. However, Da emphasised that the most significant difference was that she now earned her own money.

However, spending time with Da and the way she talked about work and her co-workers informed me that it was more than the money that motivated her to continue working. For her, the cultural diversity of workers in the factory was a contributing factor in her enjoyment of work. In the warehouse, workers were mostly Laotian; then the Vietnamese come next in number, then there are two Filipinos, two Fijians, two Hmong and two Australians. Asian women outnumbered male employees in the entire company as well as the Aussie workers in the warehouse. A year ago, around 25 women had been offered redundancy. The company started outsourcing jobs to China where labour is cheaper which led to the closure of the production unit where many Hmong women worked as machinists. The company’s decision reduced the number of Hmong workers. Consequently, Da and another Hmong man, whom everyone called as Mr Lee were the only Hmong workers who were left at Tribina at the time of my fieldwork.

Since the retrenchment of fellow Hmong workers, Da was thankful that she had asked to be moved from the production to the packing section. She told me it was the best decision she had ever

\textsuperscript{38} Pseudonym.
made, otherwise, she, like the others would have been unemployed. The first day I joined Da, she took me on a tour of the warehouse and introduced me to the administrative employees. After I finished all the paperwork required to participate in their work, I stood at the second-floor docking area waiting for the administrator. This gave me a good view of the factory which measures around half an acre. From that vantage point, I could see how spacious the warehouse was. I also could see the way the workers went about their day. Once the women started picking and packing orders, they moved in synchronised motion, like tiny ants marching in lines. They started from the left side of the first aisle and finished on the second aisle. They located, picked, scanned, and packed the products to be delivered to companies such as Woolworths, IGA, and several individual pet shops around the country. They repeated this procedure over and over again for 7 hours and 45 minutes every day. From time to time, the women would pause randomly to exchange a few words with each other secretly. It is against company policy to talk during work, yet they were sneaky and secretly engaged in short exchanges to break the boredom and the monotony of the routine.

I watched Da while she stood beside her trolley. With a height of four feet seven inches, she was barely taller than her cart. She noticed a slight smile on my lips when I saw the proportion of her height to her trolley. She warned me, “It’s not that heavy. Here, if you think something is heavy for you, don’t lift it. The management doesn’t want you to get hurt. Here it is safety first”. Da was assigned to be my trainer and therefore, had to teach me all aspects of the job. As we walked further, she introduced me to all the products, and I was impressed with her knowledge and efficiency as a trainer. She described, “This aisle contains all the pet grooming products and accessories. We have shampoo, powder, brushes, clippers, then as you move forward, we have all the toys of different kinds, around a hundred of them”. She informed me that Tribina sells more than 150 different products of various kinds from pet food, toys, vitamins, medicines, kennels, grooming products as well as mats, beds, houses and even nappies. I chuckled at the mention of nappies for dogs. She understood how such luxury for pets sounded a bit extravagant for someone hearing it for the first time. She said, “Yes nappies Teena, that is why it says there on the sign at the door, ‘Your Pet, Our Passion!’ Some people love their dogs like they are their children”.

Da is an interesting woman. The more I got to know her, the more I became intrigued by her character. I had known her for over a year. She was a regular in the adult Hmong classes in Liverpool which I attended weekly. I observed that although she was often quiet during these classes, she was, however, the most attentive. I found her displaying the same demeanour when working with her in the warehouse. She demonstrated a great sense of responsibility, maturity, intelligence, sophistication and grace which was recognised by the people around her especially her co-workers.
One Filipina worker told me that Da was the most senior employee in the factory. She said, “She was the one who trained me. She was good”. I could attest to her ability in training new workers when she taught me the procedure of the job. I was amazed how logical and systematised she was and how clearly and patiently she explained the whole process of work until I was familiar with it.

Even people from the administrative office could recognise Da’s abilities. The Filipina administrative worker told me, “Da is so good at sewing. One day she made this lovely scarf from loose pieces of fabrics and it was so beautiful!” She was also aware of Da’s proficiency in the English language. “She speaks very good English. It is straightforward to talk to her because she is smart. Among all the employees here she is one of those who could speak English very well. She is also respectable.”

With Da’s dignified manner, the way she carried and conducted herself, she earned the respect of her co-workers. Da explained:

I have always been disciplined. I guess I learned this at a young age. You know, arriving in America as a teenager where I grew up, school was hard. I didn’t know how to speak English. I remember just sitting in the classroom not understanding anything. I understood Maths though, because of the numbers! When my children were young, I often told them they were lucky because they could speak English. It was easy for them to understand the teachers. They asked me how did I pass my classes when I could not understand the lessons? I told them, “because mommy never missed a day in school. I just showed up every day and the teachers saw my determination”. It was the same kind of discipline that I brought here in the factory. I follow a personal rule: Do not complain, do not miss work and give your best.

However, Da insinuated that there had been challenges in the workplace. Curiously, I asked her if she had ever been mistreated in the factory. She mentioned that at times she could sense a degree of animosity from the Australian women towards Asian women workers, however, she said none of the conflict was intolerable. She told me, “The trick is you just come to work, worry about your work and go home”. There was, however, a young Australian man who worked in the reception who used to talk to her in a disrespectful manner. She said she felt bad about it. So, one day she confronted him. “I told him in my culture older people are highly respected. We treat them with respect and kindness. I am old, much older than you; if you treat me with respect, I will treat you with respect.” Da’s action of confronting her young co-worker was prompted by cultural values that she still upheld after migrating to Australia. In Hmong culture, senior women are respected and revered for their life experiences. For an elderly Hmong woman, this virtue of respect and honour for elders is highly observed and valued (Symonds, 2003). Da also admitted to me that both she and her husband still maintained traditional gender roles at home. Now that they were in their senior years, they
emphasised their roles as elders within their family and the Hmong community. They valued their status as elders. Da enjoyed a similar status in the workplace. Receiving respect outside the Hmong community was not common. Therefore, it was of high importance to Da. Over many years of working in the factory, she had demonstrated an exemplary work ethic and high integrity that had earned her the respect of her co-workers. Da proudly said, “I worked hard. I was always early, I never stole anything, and I showed my respect to everyone”.

At home and in the Hmong community, Da was seen as a devoted wife and mother. In the workplace she was recognised and respected for her diligence. That is why she valued her role in the factory.

I asked her, “What would you do if you were laid off one of these days?”
She smiled and replied, “What can you do? If it happens, it happens. It is not the end of the world”. I sensed she was prepared for an impending loss of job. I gathered that with her children now all adults, her mortgage fully paid, Da and all other respondents in this chapter no longer have to work hard for survival.

From the time Da started working in the factory to the present, there had been a radical shift in priorities. In the 1970s when Hmong migrants like Da first arrived, their immediate concern was to establish themselves. Economic survival, therefore, ranked high in their priorities. At present these needs have been replaced by other needs. Now, the annual return to Laos or to the country where their closest kin reside, such as the US and France, ranks high. In Sydney, Hmong men and women save up for these trips through a “credit system”. This same group travel together. Like the other women in this study, When I met Da, she was at the stage of her life when they wanted to enjoy the use of their hard-earned money.

Aside from the monetary aspect of work and the independence they gained from working, the emotional benefit that employment brought them is significant. Da said she had always been used to working. Even if she were not working in the factory, she would be working at home or perhaps would continue to have a banana farm in Innisfail. Through her and her husband’s work, they had been able to buy their house and provide for their children’s needs. Having fulfilled their obligations to their children, they used their money “to enjoy life”. Both Da and Zoo primarily saved money for travel. Just recently, the group travelled to Laos, Thailand, and Japan. Travelling is one of the top and most meaningful priorities of the first generation.
The time I spent with Da was highly productive. With her ability to express herself in English, she provided me with highly useful information and gave me an insightful look at her life and agency in the context of the workplace—a place where she found belonging and self-worth. At the end of one working day, while I was changing my boots in the small office, the day manager was teasing Da. “Oh, the Hmong, they are the worst workers of them all! They are lazy, and they wing it a lot, am I right Da?”, he asked her.

Understanding that he was being cheeky, Da laughed and asked him a series of questions. “Tell me, in the 15 years that Mr Lee has worked here did you ever hear him complain about anything? Did anyone complain about him? Was he ever lazy? Did he miss work?” She beamed with pride.

The manager looked at me and winked. “See how proud they are of their work.”

Da smiled at me as we walked out of the office towards the parking lot.

Case Study 3

Huab’s Story: Autonomy in Entrepreneurship at Hot Bread Bakery

Of all the Hmong women I have met in Sydney, none was as hardworking and as business-minded as Huab. I lived with her in Casula and during her workdays in the bakery, she would be up at 3 am and would drive at 4 am towards Campbelltown where the bakery she worked in was located. After work, she would often invite me to accompany her and her husband to a Hmong farm in Bonnyrigg Heights owned by a younger first generation Hmong couple where we fed the chickens they were raising. I told her that her activities and her high energy level made my head spin. She found it ridiculous whenever I told her this, thus she would laugh at the absurdity of my thoughts. Huab, in her more than 40 years in Australia had held many jobs—a cleaner, a kitchen hand, a curtain sewer, a retail assistant, a factory worker and most significantly a businesswoman. The succeeding accounts will reveal many facets of this woman’s life and why she, of all the women I came to know, displayed her agency most boldly and confidently.

Huab was cleaning up the baking bench preparing it for the two cakes she was making. The large oven was on and, while the sink with all the half-cleaned utensils was being filled up with hot water, she finished mopping the kitchen floor. She was keeping an ear out for the bell chime at the bakery’s entrance, while she glanced from time to time at the video camera installed at the corner of the kitchen, which showed the counter and doorway for incoming customers. Singlehandedly, Huab
was running the bakery. She asked me if I could turn off the tap when the sink was half-full. “Careful, the water is hot! Floor wet!” she warned. A kitchen hand would have been useful, but she seemed to be used to multi-tasking. She placed two containers on top of the bench, one with rainbow coloured sprinkles in it and the other with chocolate sprinkles. After which, she coated the sponge cake with white cream, which she acknowledged was, “Thirty-five per cent fat. Very, very bad. But very, very delicious”. She smiled naughtily. She started decorating the cake with ease and mastery.

Curious, I asked her if she had undergone skill training like that offered by TAFE. She replied, her eyes still glued on the cake, “No, I just learned on the job”. After a short while, she looked up at me and confirmed, “Just here”. She got a piping bag and slowly wrote the words, “Happy Birthday” on the cake. Huab only learned to read and write in English when she moved to Australia. It was a joy watching her write the words on the cake. I realised that Huab knew how to run the business like the back of her hand. Why wouldn’t she? She taught herself to do many things. Through determination, she bought and built this business with her husband many years ago. She had mastered the operations of the business and acquired several regular clients. Also, she had operated the business together with her whole family for many years until her husband Kub became very ill. After 17 years of operation, she sold the business to her niece for a low price, who in turn sold it to a Vietnamese couple. The couple, who bought the business, learned about Huab through her niece and, therefore, decided to employ her. It was because of Huab’s skills, mastery of the business, and her connections, that the new owners of the bakery entrusted her with running the bakery. “When we used to own the bakery, Kub and I worked together with the children.” Risa, Huab’s eldest daughter, shared memories of working in this family-owned bakery:

All I remember is that she had a bakery, and the bakery was not only her job but the job of the whole family. My mother was the strong one who would never give up working no matter how sick she was. She would start work very early in the morning and finished very late at night.

Huab was grateful about having her in-laws around when the children were growing up. Having them take on her domestic roles allowed her to be a breadwinner. Before buying the business, Huab and Kub held multiple laborious jobs. “I worked in an Asian store then in a brick factory. It was hard work, but the money helped a lot. If I was still in Laos, I wouldn’t be earning that much money. I wouldn’t even be paid over there! I would be at home looking after the children, planting vegetables, cooking, and sewing.” Huab said that every time she goes home, she is reminded of how lucky she is to be living in Australia.

Nalia Kabeer offers valuable insights into how women’s lives are transformed by migration and participation in work. In one of her studies of Bangladeshi migrant women in the UK, she identifies
agents of women’s emancipation besides economic participation. Kabeer (2008) points out that when analysing the transformative potential of women’s paid work one should take into consideration, “the benchmark and status of women as citizens [of a country that affords them rights and privileges] and not merely from their perspectives and priorities (such as economic survival)” (28). The empowerment of women who are migrants and refugees and who come from a patriarchal society is highly challenging and does not occur through mere participation in paid work alone. She reiterates that empowerment could transpire only when women could make strategic choices through their agencies and with the assistance of institutional agencies. The institutional agencies she refers to include kinship groups, social networks and communities. More significantly, she identifies access to social services as an important factor that aids women in transforming their lives. Further, Kabeer also stresses that one of the most significant indicators of women’s empowerment is their cognitive ability to choose and carry out actions that best suit their circumstances (28). It is through these abilities that women and meaning in their experiences. Huab believed that the timing when she bought and sold the bakery was perfect. She invested in it when they were young and strong and were able to gain profit from it. For many years she was able to exercise her economic agency. Therefore, when she sold it, she was also ready for a new phase in her life—to focus on herself and her husband’s health. Thus, she now feels contented doing limited casual work in the same place.

Having reached middle-class status, Huab was contented with life in Australia. One afternoon when we were chatting, she described her gratitude for being in Australia. “We are lucky to be in Australia. If we were in Laos, Kub would have been long dead.” She was referring to the lack of access to free Health Services in Laos. In Kub’s case, he had to undergo a liver transplant that required health care for an extended period. “I am thankful that through Centrelink I was able to look after Kub as his carer.”

In addition to this, both she and Kub believe that without Australia’s social services, they would be left with nothing. “A liver transplant would have cost everything we have”, Kub told me. “It was a long wait for a liver donor. I was in and out of the hospital. I almost died many times, but when it [the liver from a donor] arrived it was worth the long wait.”

It always brought tears to Huab’s and her children’s eyes whenever they were reminded of the ordeal. They said it was a time when they relied on their kinship groups and the Hmong community for moral and emotional support. They said that without those things it would have been hard for their family to overcome the financial and emotional crisis.
Huab often compared her life in Australia with those of her female friends in Laos who have had no access to work and social services. “I feel sorry for Hmong women in the village. They are still poor since I left 30 years ago. Because I am here in Australia, I could do everything that I want.” She emphasised the shift in gender roles and expectation that Australian rights and values had effected. “Here in Australia, Hmong women no longer stay at home just cleaning, cooking and serving the men. Now, women and men do the same things. It should be like this a long time ago.” I analysed Huab’s assertion of the equality that she believed both men and women should be entitled to. Of the four women in this chapter, it was Huab who stayed the longest in the camp, doing every kind of labour with her husband in order to survive. I assumed that the many years of toiling and living in hardship developed her resilience and had made her realise her capabilities. She now saw herself as an individual with the same capacity and capabilities as those of men. In her home, there had been a reversal of roles. Since Kub’s surgery, he had been staying at home while Huab continued to work. Huab explained that her husband did not mind staying at home. However, because of her financial independence, her husband would sometimes complain about major decisions—financial or otherwise—that she had made without consulting him.

At times Kub seemed to be resigned about his current role and acknowledged his wife’s role as the sole income earner. When I asked what happens when Huab makes a major decision without consulting him, he laughed and gave me a funny reply. “What can you do? You just get shocked.”

Huab’s display of leadership challenges Hmong men of her generation. When organising community or clan events, Huab would be on top of the logistics. I once complimented Huab’s professional skills in coordinating events to a Hmong man. The man replied with a bit of exasperation in his voice, “Yeah, yeah, she is too good. She thinks like a man”. This reply could be interpreted as a negative reaction to a woman’s display of non-traditional qualities.

Huab at times would muse about her leadership ability. “I don’t know, I have always wanted things that Hmong women did not. I wanted to study, to work, be a leader, have my own business, be the boss.” Huab and Kub had been recognised in the Hmong community as the most entrepreneurial and successful in business. Their drive to attain financial stability through business had always been their priority. Huab admitted that she was determined to succeed in business. Between her and Kub, she mentioned that she had more courage in taking financial risks. She told me, “If it was not for my courage, Kub would not even think about borrowing from the bank and investing in a business. He was afraid to lose money”.

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Because she had worked in the bakery for many years, Huab could run it alone even without the other workers. During my stay in her house, I observed that her work would start before dawn at around 3 am and would end around 1 pm. She did everything from opening the shop, heating up the ovens, kneading the dough, baking, doing the cashier work and cleaning up at the end of the day. The long day in the bakery was enjoyable during winter but unbearable during summer. Yet she worked hard regardless of the season of the year. During the times I assisted her in the bakery, she was often by herself. The two owners came only for their shifts to assist her. Otherwise, Huab did everything on her own. She was so immersed in her work that she could be doing four things at the same time—almost automatically and effortlessly. She liked working alone. Once, she told me, “The reason why I thought of starting a business was that I did not want to work for others and with other people anymore. When you work with other women, sometimes it is too much trouble”. When she opened the bakery, she enjoyed a great sense of power and independence.

Risa recalled the sense of fulfilment her parents acquired from running the bakery, despite the long hours of physically taxing work. She said, “I saw how my parents got so much satisfaction from the bakery because it was theirs, they didn’t have to answer to anyone. They make their own decisions, and they were their managers”.

Huab had been involved in several manual labour jobs in factories, restaurants, hospitals, and farms where there were workers from multi-cultural backgrounds. Huab and Zhoua, who was mentioned in chapter three said there were racial and gender stereotyping when they first started working in the nail and curtain factories. Most of the women who worked in the factories came from ethnic and agricultural backgrounds. Racial and gender stereotypes concerning these backgrounds served as platforms for the assumption that they were suited for highly intensive and repetitive production work, which Australian employers found desirable. There was an assumption that refugee-women were more patient workers, who would accept longer shifts under challenging conditions for relatively low wages. Huab and the other women had told me that they worked for long hours and were compensated meagrely. Ruth Pearson and Kusakabe Kyoto (2012: 9) find a similarity in their study of Burmese refugee women working in factories in Thailand, where the women worked long hours but received very low income. Christine Koggel, citing Mohanty’s study of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, confirms the above kind of stereotyping because of gender: “Women are placed at the lowest and least visible part of the chain of a global industry” (2003: 171). However, refugee women like Huab had little choice but to accept the work and face exploitation to survive. Huab explained, “The pay was low but we did the work anyway. Because we needed money for our house and so that we could buy the things that we wanted”.

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Also, the abuse of migrant-refugee women in the workplace has been a pervasive global phenomenon. Kornau Knappert et. al (2018), in a similar study of Syrian refugees in the Turkish workforce, examines the interplay of work conditions, environment and the personal feelings of inclusion and exclusion. The Syrian refugees and the Hmong mentioned similar organisational forces that were deemed unfair such as dangerous practices that could cause accidents or injuries to them. Huab mentioned that she worked even when she was pregnant. “I carried bricks and the boss permitted the practice.” Another factor that caused the women’s feeling of non-inclusion was the lack of secured and fixed contracts. “We all worked casually, so if you get sick then you [wouldn’t] be paid. Sometimes they [would] contact us to work, sometimes they [would not]. It was hard when you have a big family.” Huab also knew that because she could neither speak nor write in English, the probability of upward mobility was low. Therefore, she resigned herself to the fact that she would always occupy the lowest rank. This was hard for a person like her, with a strong personality and a great sense of leadership. She felt discontented about her status. Therefore, she strived to achieve hard and, like Ntsuab, she admitted to being driven by economic factors as well as the need for autonomy. She said she also took serious actions towards finding other sources of livelihood that would free them from discrimination, control and poverty. This action included the deliberate accumulation of capital enabled by paid employment. She saved enough money to start up a business.

Risa, Huab’s daughter, painted a picture of how hard her parents worked during those years: “They did all the hard work because they had a dream to have their own business. They wanted to be free from exploitation and abuse from co-workers.” Risa’s further accounts reaffirmed her parents’ motivation in establishing their own business:

I remember my mum for many years had a job in the factory sewing curtains. My dad, on the other hand, worked in another factory making glass windows. My parents saved from their earnings and my mum, being the more decisive one, put those savings into good use by investing in a bakery in 1995. Between my mum and my dad, I believed my mum gave more hours and efforts in the bakery. She was strong and very determined. She worked hard and for long hours no matter how sick she was.

I saw how much my parents got so much satisfaction from running the bakery. Suddenly, they have become their own managers. And my mother was just happy to have the freedom to make her own decisions... she became the rock and matriarch of the family. From the bakery’s income my parents, mainly my mum deciding, were able to purchase assets, buy a house, cars and send us to schools. My mother realised her material and immaterial dreams through hard work.

For Huab, autonomy was a main motivation away from the stress caused by working with other people. She explained, “I have worked with people from Croatia, Lebanon, Vietnam and Laos. I
find that there was always a problem working with them”. She admitted that she preferred working on a small farm where there were a few workers than in a huge processing zone.

Risa confirmed the challenges that her mother had previously faced in the workplace. “It could be quite vicious working with other people, even with other Hmong people. There was much backstabbing, everyone had their agenda. My mum was just happy to get away from that.”

Huab used to worry about interracial conflict and the experience of racial prejudice in the factory. She told me that it was humiliating being mocked and called derogatory names. She had been mistreated because she could not speak English at that time. She recalled one incident when she was working in a manufacturing company. A group of women from a European refugee background bullied her by bossing her around. The women thought she could neither speak nor understand English. Huab told me that the women had been stealing stock from the factory and the women knew that Huab was aware of what they were doing. But they were confident that she would not be able to tell the supervisor about what they were doing. However, one day when Huab could no longer tolerate the actions of her co-workers, she informed the supervisor about it. When the women found out what Huab had done, they waited for her at the exit door and bullied her. Dismayed, she told the story. “They said, ‘China woman say something in English! Come on talk in English! Say something!’ I just kept quiet, [then] I walked to the exit, and when I [reached] the door, I turned around and looked at them. I shouted the word “bitch”! Then I left.” She burst out laughing recalling this story. Huab told me she felt that she never really belonged. She said during that time, she followed a regimented daily routine that she summed up in the following: “Go to work, do the job, do not talk much with others, collect your pay and save”. Therefore, with her savings, she was able to buy the bakery.

For Huab, having the same kind of independence that Ntsuab enjoyed, and thereby being free from discrimination, motivated her to continue to work in the bakery. Although she was no longer the owner of the business, the new owners gave her the latitude to run it her way because of her skills and knowledge. She felt that with this kind of arrangement she was more valued as a worker. She informed me nothing had changed much since she sold the business, except that she did not have to worry about the financial side of things. “Oh, it is too hard when you worry about how much you earn and how much you lose. Now that is no longer my business.” She said her business was to bake, decorate the cakes and make the daily sales. Beyond that, “It is somebody else’s headache”, she stressed.

Huab only worked a few shifts and did not earn much but she admitted that she enjoys the work. “I work as early as 3:30 am. When we owned the business, we worked every day, every hour
with the children. We did not have time for ourselves.” She also told me that now that Kub was no longer working and was enjoying his second chance at life, she wanted both of them to enjoy their money and do the things that they loved.

Conclusion

Anja Rudnick wrote that “the power of habitus is derived from the thoughtlessness of habits and habitation, as opposed to the thoughtfulness of consciously learned rules and principles” (2009: 40). It is from these habits that Hmong women’s behaviour towards work was formed. In doing household chores, working in the fields and selling in the markets they learned to be disciplined. Therefore, the value of hard work is deeply ingrained in their psyches. Today they no longer perceive their worth as women as being based on their fulfilment of the roles attached to their subordinate positions, but rather as individuals who have discovered their capabilities.

The Hmong women’s entry into the paid labour market has shaped their consciousness and transformed their traditional view of themselves. From being dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers, the women were transformed into economic partners, decision-makers, active members of multicultural communities and travellers. Growing up in a culture where the highest aspiration was confined within the boundaries of the domestic domain, the material value of work led them to see themselves in a new light. Ntsuab and Huab’s discovery of their business inclinations and insights led to their involvement in retail businesses, which facilitated important social contacts outside the Hmong community. These social contacts blossomed into business networks and meaningful long-term relationships. Both Ntsuab’s and Huab’s deliberate ventures into the business were driven by their wish for autonomy and freedom from gender and racial discrimination. Having had negative experiences in a restrictive work environment, both women aimed to enjoy life as sole traders. Da’s sense of worth on the other hand, despite her continuous performance and practice of traditional roles and beliefs at home, has been enhanced in the factory. As a respected senior worker, her knowledge, work ethic, and integrity have been valued and appreciated in a similar kind of high regard to that she has received in the Hmong community as an elder. All of the women’s work experiences and their outcomes have made them worthy and authoritative members of their respective households and community. Thus, Hmong women’s roles and status have undergone radical changes over time.
Chapter 5
Homemaking and Domestic Authority

The large wooden front entrance protected by an aluminium security door slowly opened to reveal the medium stature of a decently dressed, middle-aged Hmong man. I greeted him and he replied with a warm “hello”. He introduced himself as Kub (Koo). He apologised for the delay in answering the door, he explained that they have relatives visiting from the US and they were chatting in the kitchen.

The moment I stepped into the receiving area of the house I felt my expectations had betrayed me. I had been informed that I would be renting a spare room in the house of an elderly couple who live by themselves. I expected a bungalow, big enough for two, with, at the most, three medium-sized bedrooms. Instead, I found myself in a six-bedroom home with three toilets and bathrooms and a garage, large enough to fit four cars. Needless to say, this two-storey house in Sydney which became my home for the duration of my fieldwork had exceeded my expectations.

To anyone entering the house for the first time, the high ceiling and the wide receiving area give the impression of space and grandeur. Inside, the large wall mirror facing the front door further adds to this sense of space. On the left side of the entrance, a steep carpeted stairway led to a mezzanine. On the right is a huge living area with a long stylish wooden table seating eight-to-ten people. From day one, I was intrigued by the architecture of this particular house and the belongings found within. As I got to know other Hmong families throughout my fieldwork, I noticed similarities in the architecture and design of their suburban houses. These similarities covered the homes’ structures and spatial organisation and furniture, appliances and adornments within. I also observed during my stay in Sydney, there were similar ways Hmong families used the kitchen and living spaces to entertain specific guests. As Kub ushered me towards the inner room, from whence the sounds of lively chatting came, my eyes were drawn towards the adornments on the walls: maps, large panoramic coloured photographs of waterfalls in lightboxes, Hmong musical instruments, artificial flowers and photographic portraiture of long-departed and living kin members adorned the walls of the front section of the house. I wondered what role did Kub’s wife, Huab play in designing and organising the spaces of the house. Intrigued I sought to find out the conscious and unconscious messages that Hmong women like Huab conveyed through their own symbolic representations.
Building on the idea that there is power in the symbolic, this study agrees with Geoffrey Benjamin that the act of using objects and other forms of material culture, including the physical structure of a house, is beyond words and “the grasp of consciousness” (cited in Waterson, 1991). There are emotions and experiences that words can barely express. Thus, the way people express them through the everyday act of homemaking is both unconscious and profound. Hmong women were unaware of homemaking’s impact on their ability to exercise agency.

**Emplacement of Hmong Women in Australian Society**

When Hmong families arrived in Australia, they brought along with them only a few belongings — clothes, photographs and mementoes of a life lived in homeland Laos and Thai refugee camps. As noted, during the first years after arrival, they managed to engage in low-wage labour in the Australian workforce. Through their paid work, the women reached a modicum of financial success and gained a considerable presence in the public sphere. It was also at this point that the first-generation Hmong families started investing in properties and creating ideal homes in the suburbs of Sydney.

Co-owning their first Australian homes contributed to women's sense of belonging that eventually led to an exercise of domestic authority. During the early years of adaptation to Australian culture and way-of-life Hmong patriarchal practice persisted within the domestic sphere. However, the significant changes in socio-economic circumstances brought about by the women’s workplace participation led to positive changes in gender power relations within the household. This afforded the women a sense of authority within the domestic sphere. They started expressing their tastes through the spatial organisation of their homes. Moreover, when they finally established their homes and embellished them with “objects of comfort” (Miller, 2008), they had finally emplaced themselves into the fabric of Australian society. 39

This study will explore the material world of Hmong in Sydney by analysing the simple act of homemaking and organising spaces. The focus is on the ways by which the women’s aesthetic tastes (as influenced by memories and nostalgia) is materially inscribed in the structure of their houses. This chapter looks into how women maintain cultural and kinship relationships through their participation in rituals and ceremonies within their Sydney properties.

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39 Derived from Daniel Miller’s (2008) concept of objects of emotions, which emphasises the profound relationships humans have with objects. It is through analysis of these relationships with objects we are offered insights into human emotions.
In this chapter, the link between memories of past dwelling places and the act of homemaking within the diaspora is examined. Nevertheless, this study does not dwell on nostalgia or longing for a lost home alone, rather it is also about memories and imagination. It seeks to answer to how the things that were perceived in the past are emotionally remembered in the present. Further, this study explores how memory affects the creation of new homes. As foreshadowed, the emphasis is on how such remembering influenced Hmong women’s imagination, well-being and creation of domestic spaces. This study demonstrates that in the domestic space of home the women had been able to exercise both agency and authority.

**Home as a Site of Migrant Memories and Agency**

The physical construction and the creation of “homely spaces” following displacement is a desideratum for migrants and refugees. Whether consciously or unconsciously performed, it is guided by past sensory memories of a time and space that the mind and senses remember (Tolia-Kelly, 2004: 321; Thomas 1999: 44-45). These creations mimic a familiar environment that produces strong emotions of comfort, confidence, security and belonging in an otherwise unwelcoming, unfamiliar place that generates new experiences. These new experiences, more often than not, do not resonate with the past and personal lives lived in the homeland.

For those who fled their countries due to political unrest and persecution, or who were forced to stay in refugee camps for a protracted period, these newly established homes have become places of freedom and refuge, wherein “embodied experiences of (trauma and) healing [is] heightened” (Walsh, 2011:517). I add that for newly-arrived women migrants, creating spaces within a new dwelling is a fight-or-flight response to the unfamiliar, to the unforeseen future, to marginalisation, to the feelings of not belonging and of being lost. This is an action that is done performatively by the women as an emotional mechanism to survive in both material and spatial terms.

Academic scholarship have explored the relationship between material objects and the creation of migrant homes, as representations of nostalgia and symbolic of the desire to belong and form new identities (Jirattikorn, 2012; Levin & Fincher, 2010; Dolakoglou, 2010; Miller, 2008; Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Savas, 2014; and Christou & Janta, 2019, Thomas, 1999). Oslem Savas (2014) conducted a study on the topic of diasporic aesthetic taste, wherein, she examined the spatial organisation and use of furniture in the homes of Turkish migrants living in Vienna. For these migrants, experiences of “estrangement and loss of familial and social relations” marked the first years after migration (Savas 2014:189). Thus, Savas interpreted the relationship between migrants’ and material objects as a result
of nostalgia. Further, she analysed that the collective taste formed with the diaspora “is enunciated in the aesthetics of the everyday” (186). Her finding revealed that the absence of familiar objects reminded migrants of their displacements. Further, after many years of being away from the place of origin, their aesthetic tastes and identities are reshaped by diasporic experiences (186).

The production of diasporic identities involves the processes of homemaking (Brah, 1996; Christou & Junta, 2019; Dalakoglou, 2010) and culture-making. Individuals in the diaspora will never feel at home anywhere, because they are always engaged in reconstituting their homes and reinventing themselves. Further, Stuart Hall (1992) wrote that diasporic identities are in flux and “constantly producing and reproducing anew through transformations and difference” (253).

Having established the fluidity of migrants’ identity, this study acknowledges the importance of examining the particularities of a migrant group’s relationships with the home. One must also look into the historical, socio-cultural processes of displacement and emplacement of the group in focus. For instance, in Thomas’ (1999) study of Vietnamese homes in Cabramatta she observed the blending of two cultural spheres—those of Vietnam and Australia, which she argues aided the creation of a sense of permanency.

Savas emphasized on the effect of the act of homemaking to the well-being of a displaced individual. She asked, “Can the creation of home spaces appease feelings of isolation and estrangement? (2014: 189)”. In this chapter, I ask, “Can homemaking make displaced people feel more powerful in knowing that a house belongs to them and they belong to that house?” . This study explores the cultural economic factors that influenced Hmong women’s domestic authority.

**Concept of Home as Shaped by Memories**

Many previous studies argue that memories are embodied in objects that, in turn, influence the formation of new subjectivities. They theorised that the view of the past changes during displacement (Belk, 1992; Berger, 1975; Mehta and Belk, 1991). My chapter explores the influence of memories and how they shaped Hmong women’s diasporic identities and authority through the materiality of their homes.

When I started exploring Hmong women’s memories, I learned that nostalgia played a big role in the way women organised the spaces of their homes. I observed that they organised and decorated the said spaces according to what was culturally familiar to them. I identified the link between the memories of the former homes in Laos to the spatial organisation in the Sydney homes.
A Mental Picture of Laotian Home

When I probed into Huab’s mental picture of her Laotian house and what it meant to her I asked her to draw it for me. She held the pen in between her fingers, as she rummaged her brain for the image of the house. “The roof was like this”, she started drawing. Then she slowly outlined an image of a house with one door (Figure 6). “It was a simple one,” she said. She paused, held the paper at a distance to study her drawing for a brief moment. “No, there are two doors, one in front and one on the side (Figure 7),” she corrected herself. She grabbed another paper, this time sketching a similar house with two doors. Her simple, almost childlike drawing intrigued me. However, I did not pay any special attention to it until I saw another illustration of a Hmong Laotian house, based on someone else’s memory (Images 8 and 9). The memory belongs to her aunt, her mother’s younger sister, who embroidered this image of her former home entirely by hand on a paj ntaub (story cloth). This storycloth chronicled and immortalised her Aunt’s young life.

Image 6: Huab’s first sketch

Image 7: Huab’s second sketch

Image 8: Embroidery illustrating a Hmong house

Image 9: Embroidery illustrating a Hmong house

Huab recalled living in that house which brought back fond memories:

I lived in this house with my mother, father and siblings. It was a house that my father built. It had a dirt floor and there were two doors, the side door was slightly bigger than the front door wherein we brought in produce from the garden. This backdoor led an outdoor where the toilet was located. I have fond memories living in this home. Outside the house, my mother had an acre of a vegetable garden. My father

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40 According to Cha (2010), the front door (qhav roaj txuas) is on the side of the traditional Hmong house. This front door although commonly used is not considered the main door (131-132).
had a place for one horse and a pig, while the chickens roamed freely around the house. This house was also surrounded by trees and had a continuous supply of water coming from the mountain. Inside the house, our sleeping area [had] a bamboo bed. It was right next to the front door, while that of our parents was near the other door. We had a kitchen where there [was] a stove (*qhou cub*). 41

I also gathered from Huab’s stories that the structure of a traditional Hmong house in Laos varies in size, style, shape and materials used among White Hmong families. According to Robert Cooper (1979) the elements of a Hmong house also depend on the geographical location where it is built, the size and composition of families and the family’s wealth. Further, the structures of Hmong houses were either made from wood or bamboo; while the roof was built from materials such as palm, grass, rattan lashings, bamboo and wood shingles made up the materials used for the roof (1979: 16). According to David Moore (2012), the father, who was the head of the household determined the overall elements of the structure and design to serve the day-to-day activities (2012: ). Customarily, women had little or no participation in the design and construction of the houses.

Unlike Zhou, who in chapter three mentioned her mother’s participation in house building, Huab has no recollection of her mother taking part in such activity. Yet, Huab believes that the home was the domain of women. It was where they exercised a degree of power through their everyday domestic activities. These activities varied from preparing food, cooking, washing and bathing the children through what they considered to be more leisurely and communal activities such as planting the garden, gathering the produce, drying and threshing the corn, and weaving. It was through these shared activities that the women cultivated special bonds within kinship groups. This is the reason why Huab holds on to positive memories of home. She told me that although her family was poor, she was glad that she grew up in Long Chieng, inside the US base. This made her life easier as compared to the other young girls at the time who grew up in remote villages, where water and electricity were not easily available. She added that modern amenities like the mechanical rice thresher and corn crusher were available, making housework easier for her.

Memories of home for Huab do not evoke hardship, rather it reminds her of a pleasant physical and emotional space to which she remains strongly connected. She said her family moved to a bigger concrete house when she was older. This home brought more pleasant memories. She recalls, “On the walls, I remember hung the *xim xau* (two string violin), there were also photographs of my mother and father and our grandparents.” An interesting memory was of her mother’s traditional white Hmong skirt made from hemp. Huab told me that, “It was very old, but she still hung it on the wall. I think she liked it there because it reminded her of her young days”. The simple act of decorating the home with

41 With assistance in translation from Huab’s husband.
a wearable cultural object such as a skirt made from hemp impacted Huab’s aesthetic sense. Among the women in this study, Huab possesses a penchant for embellishing her home. More interestingly, she is the one who is the most active in acquiring Hmong dresses from flea markets in Laos and circulating them among Hmong women in Australia.

In contrast, Ntsuab’s notion of home is different from that of Huab’s. For Ntsuab, her former home was the central place around which all agricultural activities gravitated. It was pivotal to the families economic and everyday existence. I learned more about the meaning of home to Ntsuab when I moved house closer to where she lives. It allowed us to develop a close friendship and from then on we learned more about each other. Apart from the short distance between our places of residences, our interest in vegetable gardening sustained our friendship. I frequented her home and helped her tend to her vegetable garden for almost a year. Ntsuab’s outdoor living was not surprising. She often told me stories of her parents taking her to the farm when she was a young girl. She remembers a shack made from bamboo that her father had built, when, as a toddler, she would play and wait for her parents to finish work. Working in the farm had shaped Ntsaubs’s identity from childhood to adulthood. Her memories of home were happy albeit the regimented farm work. Thus, it was reasonable that the meaning she ascribed to the concept of home is attached to agricultural activities. The agricultural activities that she had been trained to do include preparing and turning the soil, planting, tending and harvesting. She told me when she does all these routine in her backyard garden in Canberra she feels very much at home.

Ntsuab, similar to the other women in this study, uses the outside spaces of her modest home as an extension of the living area. She conducts business with friends and buyers at the garage or patio. It is also at the patio where she does her everyday activities. Also, while the patio faces her large vegetable garden, it is there where all her garden tools are kept.

From the stories of the two women, I found out that Hmong houses were more than just dwelling places for them. Their houses also served their shifting and agricultural lifestyles. Ntsuab said they cohabited with animals. “It was normal. They were part of our lives. We did not care. Chickens, dogs, goats, pigs walked in and out of our house, we all needed them in our work”. She added that most of the objects found within their house were also used in farming and food preparation.

Further, both women emphasized the centrality of the kitchen in Hmong everyday living. They talked about the significance and functions of kitchen objects, the most important of them was being the hearth. Ntsuab told me that in Hmong traditional homes the kitchen was also used as a living area.
apart from where they cooked and dined. It was there where her family gathered and where extended farm work was done, particularly the airing and crushing of corn for animal feed.

Ntsaub’s family kitchen was located in the centre of the house which she described below:

We had a stove (and a fireplace) at the centre of the house. We sat in front of the fire to keep our bodies warm whenever it was cold. We sat on low round benches around the (qhov cub) (Image 10). It was also in the kitchen where we had our meals while we talked.

She also vividly remembered work tools that members of her family used in food preparation and cooking, such as the wooden rice crusher that was placed on one side of the house (qhov cos) (Image 11) and the clay stove (qhov txos) (Image 12) in one corner. She also recalled the bamboo water poles she used to fetch spring water. She leaned against the kitchen wall.
"We had many of those (bamboos) wherein, we stored our water for drinking and cooking. They were usually left leaning on the wall of the kitchen. It was efficient, we could allocate our supply for cooking, washing dishes, washing our faces. My [chore] was to fill them up every day".

Apart from rudimentary kitchen objects mentioned above, other functional belongings were also found inside the house, among them was a platform made from split bamboo materials that served as the family’s communal sleeping space. She recalled, “All of us [slept] on the same ‘bed’; my mother, my father, and all of us children.” Then she added, “I remember we hang a piece of long cloth to separate our sleeping spaces from our parents”.

Image 11: Illustration of a qhov cos or rice mortar

Image 12: Illustration of qhov txos or clay stove.
Huab confirmed Ntsuab’s accounts of not having a living space inside the home. She explained that the open space outside the rear or side door was often their recreation area. It was at this outside space where women did sew and chatted during afternoons. Men also used this area to chat and relax. None of the women I talked to mentioned areas that were specifically designated for men and women. However, because the women were the ones who stayed mostly at home, thus they did most of the chores.

Both Ntsuab’s and Huab’s narratives reveal how the home, being the domain of women was also closely associated with the reproductive roles of females. Ntsuab explained to me what Nyob Nruab Hlis, a cultural and religious belief. She said it is the 30-day confinement of a woman who had given birth. She pointed out the relevance of the front door to the religious belief mentioned above. She said, a woman who had just given birth was only allowed to pass through the front door. Entering or exiting through the back door or side was highly prohibited and was considered bad luck.

Xiong, a younger first-generation explained the Hmong beliefs regarding childbirth and death. She told me the structure of Hmong houses reflects the reproductive roles of women and dimensions of their spiritual lives. It is believed that the front door was meant for the entrance of newly born child into the world of the living when the soul is called from the spirit world. The rear door was through which the soul of the dead would exit and from there it would journey into the land of the ancestors. “During funerals, the dead body was always taken out through the rear door, not through the front. That was how I remember it”.

I told her that during my fieldwork in a Hmong village in Thailand I observed that many of the houses did not have concrete or wooden floors. I asked her if this was the same case in the village where she came from in Laos. She exclaimed sounding dismayed, “Yes, I know! I left many years ago, yet still, whenever I go back to Laos, I often notice that”. She told me that she knew for a fact that the dirt floor is used in rituals during the birth of a child, “When Hmong babies are born their placenta or birth shirt, as we call it, gets buried in the ground. Female babies’ placentas are buried under the bed, while those of male babies are buried near the main pillar” she explained (also cited in Symonds, 2014: 81; Helsel & Mochel, 2002: 283; Liamputtong-Rice, 2002: 824). She added, “Hmong elders dug a hole on the ground inside the house. If they had wooden or concrete floors they would not have been able to bury the placenta”. During my stay in Sydney I was informed that particular religious belief is no longer practiced. However, I learned that there are other rituals and ceremonies that Hmong continue

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42 Tapp also pointed out the relevance of the dirt floor in Hmong homes. He wrote that a Hmong house is believed to be a reflection of the cosmos, with the roof representing the vault of heaven and the earthen or dirt floor representing nature (1989: 63-64 ).
to practice within the vicinities of their suburban homes. In later sections of this chapter, I will discuss the conduct of *Hu plig* and a wedding ceremony in the homes of the women. All these point to the connection of the house to the vestiges of Hmong spiritual beliefs.

**Domestic Authority in Traditional Hmong Households**

Domestic authority in the Hmong households was based on the hierarchy within them. As mentioned in chapter three, young Hmong girls when they married the became part of the husband’s household. The father-in-law held the highest position followed by other male member, who were ranked according to their seniority. Next to the rank of the men were the senior women, the mother-in-law, held the highest position among the females. The least senior among them, the daughters-in-law held the lowest rank. These daughters-in-law were often considered as outsiders even after they had become permanent family members. Three of the women in this study had the experience of being treated as an outsider after they had been married to their respective husbands.

When the Hmong women in this study married in their late teens I gathered from their stories that they lost the limited agency that they exercised in their parental homes. They lost the limited freedom they had enjoyed within their original homes. Stories of the abuse of daughters-in-law and stepdaughters were common. As three of the five women in this study were first-born females, they held a degree of domestic authority within their original households. Then, when they married into their husbands’ families, they had to abide by rules imposed in these households.

I learned from the women that if a daughter-in-law was not favoured then a strict set of rules was imposed on her by her mother-in-law. The rules dictated the allocation of food and assigning objects and utensils that they could use. Roxana Waterson (1991) in illustrating how space [and objects] could determine relationships of people within households, explained that “through rules about how space is to be used, people are obliged to act out their relations to each other in a particularly personal and immediate way” (167). The women during the early years of marriage had to accept their lowly positions in their husband’s family.

Before they married their husbands, Huab and Ntsuab were already aware that their would-be mothers-in-law, were in-charge of domestic affairs, therefore, they had to please and serve them with utmost dedication. They also learned from the stories of other women that they did not have the full authority to change the order of things in the house. Even though they were already considered members of the household, the house however, was never theirs. Moreover, their subservient roles meant that they had to assist their mothers-in-law in the day-to-day domestic and farm work. The
roles they held in the house of their in-laws ended when they were exiled in refugee camps. Below I discuss their displacement.

**Restrictive Dwelling Places in Thai Refugee Camps**

Exile in refugee camps marked a significant phase in both Hmong men and women’s lives: an important period for women when they experienced hardship and extreme poverty. Huab described the deprivation and helplessness she experienced in the camp:

> Living in the camp would have made anyone give up on life. You wait and wait. I waited for letters from families back in Laos, I waited for money for the things we sold to Hmong in America, I waited to get out of the refugee camp. It took many, many years of waiting to the point that I thought we would not be able to leave Nongkai at all.

With neither enough belongings nor money they survived camp life managing to live in the cramped spaces provided for each family. Nakauj and her family were one of the very first Hmong who crossed the Mekong in 1975. Based on Nakauj’s recollections, when her family arrived in Nong Khai, the camp was already overcrowded with more than 10,000 refugees. That year Nam Phong refugee camp’s population, where the first Hmong refugees were airlifted from Laos, grew from 3,000 in May to 12,700 towards the end of the year. Thus, Nong Khai camp was opened to help accommodate Hmong refugees (Vang, 2013: 338). By 1980, there were 48,937 Hmong refugees registered in the camps along the Thai-Lao border (Lee and Tapp, 2010: 18).

Zhou similarly recalled arriving in Thailand after a seven-day journey by land, air and boat from Pak Khao to Vientiane. When they arrived in the camp it was overcrowded with refugees. Zhou’s family stayed in Nong Khai for only a few months before they were transferred to Nam Phong, which closed down by the time they left for Australia. They departed from Ban Vinai. Below is her recollection of the camp dwelling:

> When we arrived there were many people. They were sleeping on the ground in temporary tarp houses in the refugee camp. The better houses were for the camp officials. It was like a big tent - no partitions. There is no specific space allocated to families. We just slept where we found a space to lie down.

In Ntsuab’s case when she arrived with her son after a very traumatic crossing of the Mekong River, she was placed in temporary detention for many days. She and her young son were assigned a small room, after which, she joined her in-laws who arrived in the camp earlier.43

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43 According to Ntsuab and her Laotian friend Vatsana, the refugee camp was divided into three sections among the Lao, the Vietnamese and the Hmong refugees. Lao families were assigned to reside on the west, while the Hmong families were assigned the east side.
There were 36 wooden buildings with iron roofing, which they referred to as *akhans* on the east side; these *akhans* were built on stilts and there were six *akhans* to a row of six (image 16)—in each akhan they were 32 rooms, 16 on each side facing each other. Each compartment measured roughly four by five metres. These compartments were constructed to accommodate a family of up to five members. Both Hmong and Lao families had many children in a single room of such dimensions.

![Image 16: Sketch of the spaces in an akhan in the refugee camp.](image)

Ntsuab who stayed in Akhan 37 shared her story:

Two rooms were given to us because my father-in-law had two wives at that time. Sometimes he would stay with my mother-in-law, who lived with me and my two children. Sometimes he would be in the room of his other wife. Our room was small for three adults and two children. I gave birth to my second child in that room. My eldest child would also play in that same room. Sometimes it was so noisy at night, men would be snoring. There would be occasional wailings of women in labour. Aside from the curtains used as partitions of our sleeping areas and a few functional belongings, the walls were bare. It did not even cross my mind to put anything on them. I knew that my stay was temporary because my husband was going to take me to Australia.

For Huab, however, living in Akhan 17 for a period of three-and-a-half years had brought anxiety during the later years. Camp conditions, the scarcity of food and water and the absence of electricity made it unbearable during the summer months. Huab recalled,

> It was so hot in the camp and there was limited water supply. The children who were sick of malaria cried endlessly. Mothers tried to appease them by rubbing their bodies down with pieces of wet cloth. Ah! the

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44 Lao word for house.
crying wouldn’t stop. Every week a person died, usually a child, an old person or a young woman, then they would start beating the drum used during funerals. 45

Both Ntsuab and Huab vividly remember the kitchen in the camp. It was significant to both because they felt that this was a place where they found some freedom from the camp’s restrictive environment. This kitchen was attached to individual rooms, with an adjoining door to separate it from the sleeping area. This was the place where they cooked their meals and ate. Unlike the sleeping area, this space had been filled with a few belongings, which they had been able to collect, or had been given by others. Huab remembers the outside kitchen in detail:

The Thai camp officials gave us utensils for the kitchen. We did not have much of our own. They gave us everything; everything was Thai - a charcoal stove made from clay, a sticky rice steamer, and other utensils. There was also a small square table. I asked Kub to make me a shelf where I could put the plates and keep cooked food.

We also used the kitchen as a sleeping area. Usually, the old people were the ones, who slept in the kitchen. This was also the only space where we ate together and talked.

Because of the multiple uses of the kitchen in the refugee camps as a dining, living and sometimes sleeping area, it became a significant part of their memory of camp living. It was the place where they enjoyed the closeness of family during that time of uncertainty. In this space, they were able to appease their loneliness by dining together. They relied on rationed foo but they also cooked Hmong dishes that they shared together. Interestingly, they are able to relive these memories when they recreated identical kitchens in the backyard of their Sydney properties.

Both Ntsuab and Huab recalled the difficulty of living in confined spaces and not having a space to relax and socialize. To add to the physical discomfort they also had to face the constant danger of being abused. Huab shared,

There were so many things that we could not do, it was a very busy area with people walking back and forth. There was a curfew at ten in the evening. Thai police, who patrolled the area, put young people in jail when they were out past ten in the evening.

Huab remembered the feeling of terror of not being able to have the comfort and security of home. Huab recalled how traumatic it was for women who lived in the camp:

45 Nearly half of the population of the camp were children (Lacey, 1987:23).
“Hmong women, married or not, were raped by Thai soldier. We were afraid of being alone. Women, who worked outside the camp, and who always walked home late, were raped.

Because none of her husband’s family members served in the military, Huab stayed in Nong Khai longer than the other women. Ntsuab and Nakauj as mentioned were sponsored by their respective husbands who were Colombo Plan scholars in Australia. While Da, whose father was a war veteran migrated first to the United States with her whole family, later she migrated to Australia where her husband stayed. When Zab and Nakauj settled in Sydney they sponsored many members of the Lee clan who were left in Thai refugee camps, they included Huab’s husband’s family. Zab was able to sponsor them through the family reunification program (Brew, 1985:12). Huab arrived in Sydney in 1979. She was 19 years old and two months pregnant with her first child. She remembers vividly how they were met by immigration officers who showed them around the city and later took them to the East Hill migrant Hostel, their initial accommodation.

Migrant Hostel Living in Australia: A Space of Transition

The above discussion of past dwelling places in refugee camps and the initial accommodation in migrant hotels demonstrate how living in these places had left a profound impact on the women’s sense of displacement. They never felt at home nor did they feel they belong anywhere. The presentation of data in the succeeding sections will show the impact of Hmong traditional and camp living as well as migrant hostel stays in the women’s act of homemaking.

Most Indochinese migrants settled within the vicinity of Fairfield, Bonnyrigg, Bankstown, Canterbury, Liverpool and Cabramatta where other non-English speaking migrants from Europe and the Middle East had settled. The proximity to public transport and the offerings of cheap rental accommodation and migrant hostels made the area appealing to migrants. Also, the Indochinese refugees tended to live close to each other for support due to their lack of knowledge of the country and their limited skills restricting their day-to-day activities (26). East Hill Hostel, where Huab and Kub’s families were taken upon arrival, was located north of Georges River, only a few kilometres outside Liverpool on the outskirts of Hammondville, under the councils of both Canterbury and Bankstown. The Hostel sat along Heathcote Road, a major arterial road in the south of Sydney.

46A humanitarian program that allowed those who had already arrived in Australia to bring family members still left in Thai refugee camps. There were around 40 distinct groups according to ethnicity, religion and nationality in the same category of Indochinese refugees.
Huab and Ntsuab confirmed that the living conditions in migrant hostels were more pleasant than that of the living quarters in the refugee camp. In some ways, it provided them with comfort but then, they again felt restricted. Below was her account,

It was free housing. Each family was given a place. There was a small bedroom, a living area and a toilet. Among the things I remember was that inside that space was a bed and a heater. Nothing on the walls. Kub’s parents had their room on the same floor as ours. We stayed there for eight months and I didn’t even have a friend in this place. Refugees and migrants moved out of that place once they had found jobs and new places to live in. It was hard to live in that place. No place for children to play and roam around.

Huab and Ntsuab emphasised that there was no kitchen in the room. There was a dining hall, where all refugees queued up to dine and eat together. Not having a kitchen, which was an integral part of Hmong homes affected the wellbeing of those who stayed in the hostel. To them, it was important to have a kitchen where they could cook and eat together. Huab said, “We always had to queue up for food. Then we had to join other refugees around the table. People were not very happy. I could tell. We could not talk to them or share some food with them because they did not speak Hmong and they did not eat Hmong food”. Huab also told me that there were times that some Hmong who had already settled in other suburbs would bring food to her in-laws. They could not eat the food in the hostel and were becoming homesick, so they brought them boiled vegetables and sticky rice. The Hmong missed their comfort food and they wanted to shop and cook in their own kitchen. Food rations were not to the liking of many refugees, therefore many of them strived to move out of the hostels and rented cheap accommodation around the Fairfield and Cabramatta areas (Brew, 1985: 28). Another factor that affected their movement and settlement was the establishment of Indochinese communities in the said areas encouraged by affordable Housing Commission dwellings.

Huab, Kub and his parents moved to Carramar, a suburb next to Cabramatta. While Ntsuab lived in Narrabundah in Canberra with her husband and two children. Ntsuab remembered that it was such a frightening experience for her to be in a place that she found bizarre and foreign. "There were many houses, but I did not see a lot of people outside”. She was terrified that someone would just come and do her harm, and therefore she secured all the doors and windows. She also mentioned that the house was almost empty as they had no furnishings. She explained “The former tenants left some of their furniture for us to use. We didn’t have much of our own, I used to make beds for my children.” Despite their destitute condition the two women considered the houses they lived in as places of transition and were grateful. They knew that these houses were temporary, and they needed to work and save money to finance the purchase of their own house in the suburbs, where they would feel safe.
Sydney Homes

Many years later, with savings from hard-earned work and additional funding from bank loans, Hmong families were able to buy their first homes in Australia. Huab told me that she worked hard because she always wanted a big house. The initial goals of the first generation were to find work, raise their children and provide them with basic needs and quality education. Hard-earned savings from highly laborious work in factories were used to purchase homes—a top priority among Hmong people in Sydney. According to Waterson, “the idea that a woman’s place is in the home may have very different connotations where she’s the house owner” (1991: 170). I tried to find out if Waterson’s assumption was true in Huab’s case. I sought to find out Huab’s role and position in the family further changed when she became the “co-owner” of her own house?

Huab explained that during the time that their house was under construction she was adamant that the kitchen would be facing her vegetable garden. Therefore, she insisted to her husband that this would be the case. Also, she also wanted another room in the inner section of their house. As noted earlier, Hmong women in Laos had no say in the structure of their houses. However, in Australia, since Huab had co-purchased the property and contributed to the expense of building the house, she strived to make her dream of a big home a reality.

The acquisition of a dream home was more than just making up for the years they lived in restrictive and poor conditions. For the women building a dream home as part of their cultural survival. To prove this claim, I present data gathered from my participation in cultural gatherings as well as from observing the use of homes spaces. I also took note of the use of spaces to demonstrate a sustained connection with their kinship and traditions support my argument.

Public and Private Worlds

The first Hmong houses I visited in Sydney were spacious. They seemed to manifest deliberate efforts at making the façade, the receiving area, the spaces and their belongings both presentable and representational of middle-class status. I focused on two houses owned by Huab and Nakauj. Their two-storey houses have ground floors that are divided into two sections, the front and the rear (see image 13 of a sketch of Huab’s home spaces) that functioned as living and dining areas. Studying the furnishings inside the house, gave me the impression that there are two worlds being represented—the public and the private which will be discussed below.
The Outer Room (Front Section)

The first time I stepped into Huab’s and Kub’s home I immediately noticed the array of wall decorations, mostly cultural objects—the qeej, (the iconic Hmong musical instrument) and panoramic photographs of Long Chieng, (the US military base where they lived during the war). These objects were placed on the wall alongside photographs of ancestors. I initially interpreted their use of cultural objects as their way of expressing nostalgia for homeland. However, I later realised that they also embellished their homes with objects that expressed their desire for social inclusion and acceptance.

In the spatial organisation of the outer section I recognised the acquired aesthetics tastes of the women. The women’s acquired taste, I surmised was shaped by materials things that they had been introduced to in Australia. They were objects that had no cultural nor mnemonic significance but were acquired because of their visual appeal to the women. When I asked Huab what the reason was for her to place two large eagle figurines (measuring around 47cm high) (image 14) on both sides of the large front door, she told me that they have something to do with Feng Shui. She learned about the Chinese geomancy from a Chinese friend. According to her when the friend left Australia and she sold her. The friend advised her to place them at the door to attract good fortune.

There were other notable objects within the house. The large mirror facing the front door was placed on the wall which according to Huab was meant to repel bad spirits. There were also a number of large photographs of waterfalls in lightboxes which when turned on would make the sound of waterfalls. She explained, “A Vietnamese shop closed down and they sold them at cheap prices, I
bought them because I liked them”. Huab used other embellishments to accentuate the living area. The objects were huge flower vases matched with an assortment of artificial ornamental flowers. She said the flowers had been collected over the years as gifts from Asian women whom she befriended. Rather than following a particular design pattern or theme, I gathered that Huab display objects given by non-Hmong friends as an unconscious declaration of the belonging she felt in the wider community outside her kinship groups.

Image 14: One of the two eagle figurines that Huab bought from a Chinese friend.

Although, Huab’s eclectic use of objects was fascinating, there was much more to her house than the intriguing display of non-Hmong cultural objects. There was more to the physical divide between the inner and outer sections of the houses. I explored to find out the significance of these spaces in the functioning of families and kinship groups. Could these spaces reflect the Hmong’s cultural or gendered persona, or were the similarities between houses just a matter of coincidence?

As mentioned, both sections contained separate sets of furniture. The functions of the living and dining areas determined the kind of furniture placed in them. In the living area of Huab’s home a long table was placed quite dominantly opposite the modest living space. The heavy timber material, from which the long tables and their matching chairs were made, had the effect of making them look
formal, giving a sense of importance to those who are entertained around them (Image 15). These
dining tables were meant to be “presentable” and to some degree meant to give the guests some
sense of importance. Similarly, in Da and Nakauj’s houses, tables of the same length were located
across their living spaces of the outer section. All tables in the three houses could sit eight to ten
people. Tables of this kind were only placed in large homes where the father held leadership positions
in the Hmong community. The wives supported their husbands in entertaining the guests.

Image 15: Illustration of the long table in the rear section.

The main function of the long table was to entertain guests who are considered important in
the community. They were those who travel from far distant places such as Far-north Queensland,
Laos and the United States. They would come and gather around these tables and are joined by the
immediate members of the family to partake in well-prepared food. Kaye, a second-generation
Australian Hmong confirmed how the men would gather around long table to eat and drink every
Hmong New Year before they perform the *Hu Plig*\(^{47}\) in their individual homes.

Kaye’s claim was confirmed when, after the *lwm tsiab*, the Hmong New Year ceremony in
2015. I was invited by Nakauj and Zab to have lunch at their house, where they had some special
guests. The guests were a young Hmong couple and their young children. The man came to Australia
to pursue a PhD degree. Zab, being an academic, often hosted Hmong scholars and those engaged in
Hmong scholarship. I observed during special occasions the heavy-set long table was used to entertain
the guests. That day, those other guests who sat around the table were the non-Hmong partners and

\(^{47}\) Ritual calling a soul of a person that has wandered about and has caused sickness to that person. A *Hu plig* can be
performed on other occasions other than sickness such as during weddings to welcome a person into a spiritual clan.
spouses of Nakauj’s sisters. It was an interesting group of people from multicultural backgrounds, including members of my own family who felt welcomed by the couple’s family.

Similarly, the front living area of Huab’s home, was also used for cultural gatherings they would entertain Hmong visitors who usually come from overseas and other Australian states. Huab told me how the living area was once widely used by her husband when he had not yet become ill and was physically active. She informed me that her husband socialised often with kin and clan members. She said he formed a soccer team, that competed interstate with other Hmong teams. He also formed a band with several Hmong youngsters. The interesting part of the story was that the members of his band and soccer team included his two daughters. The band travelled and performed in various Hmong functions. “Kub and other Hmong used to meet here every weekend. Our house was always full. Of course, the girls joined the boys. Kub’s band also practiced here, so it was busy. But Kub got very, very sick and he had to undergo a liver transplant”, she explained. Nowadays, they rarely hold big gatherings, hence, the long formal table has become a fixture rather than a regular functional object. However, I observed that from time to time, Huab would host gatherings and Hmong men and women would socialise together in this area.

The abovementioned area was considered a masculine space. It was linked to the public and social life of men. It was here that the men fostered transnational relations with other Hmong. According to Huab, Hmong houses were busiest during family and cultural festivities. In Nakauj’s house, the living area has been used weekly for many years until today to hold adult Hmong classes. Thus the spatial organisation and the placement of furniture in this section was intended foster and nurture kinships and transnational relationships and as well as entertain special non-Hmong guests. In all the houses, the women were the ones who organised the living area and were the ones who chose the pieces of furniture that served the purposes for which they were needed, such as ritual and ceremonial gatherings.

To support my claim about the front section being a public space for men, I present an account of a shamanic healing ritual (Ua dab or Ua neeb) held in the home of a young man who had been ill. A shaman had been called from Brisbane to perform a healing rite. During the ritual the Shaman stood in front of the wall and table altars. He implored the benevolent spirit to heal the afflicted person and commanded the malevolent spirit to leave his body. After which, he summoned the soul of the sick person which was believed to have wandered off, to come back to the man’s body. The senior Hmong men in the community assisted the Shaman in performing the ritual in the living area of the house. This ritual could have been more conveniently performed in the garden. However, because it involved
the use of an animal, which would violate council’s laws and regulations. The men therefore performed within the confines of the living area of the bungalow of the young man and his wife (image 16).

Hmong elders invited me into the room to witness the performance of the ritual. At the start, the men prepared the table altar that stood under the wall altar (xwn kab). On top, were incense, a bowl of uncooked rice, a roll of string, a machete and the Shaman’s ceremonial bells. The man who was ill was asked to sit on a low bench in front of the altar. Then two men brought in a live goat with its four legs tied together. The Shaman then started another ritual, this time using a string and a machete. He acted out the supposedly slaughter of the animal as sacrifice. I watched and recorded the ritual. I noticed that women who were not allowed to participate, would, from time to time, peek through a small gap between the door to check the progress of the ritual. When the ritual was finished I decided to find out what was inside the room from where the women were peeking. When I pushed open the door and I was surprised to find the space full of women. Inside kitchen and another small living area. There were cooking, chatting and minding young children. I then realised that I had just entered a gendered space for women.

![Image 16: Hmong Shaman performs a healing ritual.](image)

The Inner Room (Rear Section)

There are two notable features in the inner rooms of the houses: one, they contained an indoor kitchen and two, they all have a modest dining area. In some houses, the inner living area is even bigger than
the one found at the front section. The inner dining areas that I have seen contained small and modest six-seater dining tables. During the time I lived in Huab’s house, the small and simple table was used in their daily family dining (Image 17).

Moreover, it was in the inner dining area, where members of the immediate families sat and dined, and had private conversations. Most of the women considered the inner room a place of comfort and relaxation, where they just let down their guard and enjoyed private moments with their children and their closest kins.

Image 17: Illustration of the small dining table in the rear section.

In Huab’s home, I observed that she dined with her children and relatives in the inner room. Their children would come every two weeks and sit and have long conversations with their father around this table. It was also during these moments that conversations with the closest of kins would take place. From the most mundane and everyday concerns to the more serious ones. Almost every time Kub and Huab’s children would come home, the couple would be busy preparing and cooking special meals. One time, while preparing a whole fish Kub excitedly told me, “My daughter and her husband (referring to her then partner) are coming for dinner, so I cooked a special food for them. Come and join us for dinner!” I find that moments that the couple shared with their children in this inner room as particularly endearing. In separate interviews, the second-generation Hmong children expressed discontent with their parent’s lack of time during the time they were growing up. This lack of communication resulted in feelings of resentment that further led to intergenerational conflict. When the Hmong first- generation had grown older, they became more perceptive about their
shortcomings as parents. Thus, nowadays, they spend more time talking to their children and learning about their issues and concerns, which rarely happened when the children were in their teenage years.

In Nakauj’s home, this inner area is widely used by the women before their weekend classes. Often they would enjoy a meal of Vietnamese Pho (Hmong style), which they prepared and cooked themselves. The men would be out in the patio eating their meals separate from the women.

While Hmong men identified with the outer section of the house, the women identified with the inner section. Participating in gatherings and activities, I arrived at an understanding of the importance of the rear section of Hmong houses to the functioning of families and in holding on the vestiges of their cultural practices. I also found out that women indirectly and unconsciously played roles in families and practices. They used the dining in the inner room, which, similar to the kitchens in refugee camps serve the purpose of nurturing kinship bonds.

As mentioned, more often than not, men and women socialised separately during gatherings. If the men chose to socialise in the inner section the women would in the living area of the front section or in the inner kitchen where they would work together. The women would always serve food to Hmong males and clean up after every social function or gathering. I considered Hmong women’s way of socialising as a separate ritual altogether because of the amount of time that they would devote in food preparation and cooking. A second-generation Hmong daughter told me, that it is always a big sacrifice of time and energy. She said, “It is like a major stage production, after which, we are all so haggard! We don’t sit as the men do. We cook, serve food to the guests and clean up. The men always say, Without the women, nothing will be done”.

Image 18: Hmong men socialise separately in the living area of the inner room.
In 2018, I attended the wedding of Diane, 27, Huab’s youngest daughter. The wedding was held in their home. Since the wedding, according to the bride was only for “formality”, (with the real one happening the following year), only the closest relatives were invited. All the familiar Sydney-based Hmong were present. The way Huab used the spaces of her house was interesting. At that particular occasion she took advantage of a social opportunity that strengthened kinship bonds.

On the wedding day, both the front and the rear sections of the house were full of guests. The house was congested with various activities simultaneously taking place in different corners. Before the ceremony started the senior of Hmong men sat on the sofas of the inner living area happily chatting with each other. The father of the bride was offering food in front of the altar. I observed that the first-generation women socialised separately from their husbands. While the men sat and chatted in the inner living area, the women worked together in the indoor kitchen. First and second-generation women were crammed into the tiny inner kitchen—were preparing desserts and other pre-packed savoury food. I also noticed that each woman arrived carrying a pot or container of food that they had prepared and cooked at home. I watched, as the women worked together in synchronised motion, mindless of the tight space around them. Time and time again, I would find the women engaged in the same activity cooking, chatting and nurturing their bonds with each other (Images 19, 20 and 21).
Image 19: Hmong women prepare food in the inner kitchen as a way of maintaining clan and kinship bonds.

Image 20: Second-generation women take part in food preparation in the inner kitchen.
Also, inside the inner section of the house, the simple, everyday dining table had been covered with a white tablecloth and had been extended using additional tables. Huab, the mother of the bride, took out all disposable cutleries and apportioned the food on individual plastic plates. Then she arranged the food on the extended dining table from where relatives took a plate after the ceremony. As always, she organised every little detail— from sending out invitations, to buying the clothes for the bride and groom, to choosing the food that would be served.

At the front section of the house, to make room for the large table, all the lounge furniture were pushed towards the wall. Just like the small dining table in the inner section, the long formal table in the front section was covered with a, more elegant white tablecloth. A Hmong woman had placed an elaborate Laotian inspired flower arrangement on the table. Silver cutleries and porcelain plates versus the disposable ones used in the inner dining room, were also arranged on the table. At the centre was a pre-ordered roast pig which completed the presentation.

In addition to the previously discussed use of the inner room, I found out more about the women’s use of the space, when Ntsuab and I stayed at Zhoua’s house to commemorate the Hmong New Year in 2018. Like all the other houses in this chapter she had a wall altar in the inner room. Although, the altar just like the qeej is considered a male object, I found out its connection with the women.
On my second day at Zhoua’s house she explained to me day that she had been a widow for many years. Her husband, according to her, had become very ill prompting her to seek the help from Western medical doctors as well as Hmong Shamans. However, despite the numerous rituals that the shamans had performed on him, his health deteriorated which led to his demise. The year before Zhoua’s husband death, her eldest son also passed away, therefore leaving her household without a master of ritual.

Zhoua was herself frail the day I met her. She walked around the house with a crutch. She said she had been suffering from pain and swelling of her right foot. She told me that the doctors could not diagnose what was causing her affliction. That night despite the physical pain, she still managed to slaughter chickens for the *hu plig*. She also prepared food for the big gathering that was happening in the Hmong community that night.

As I looked at the wall altar I became deeply curious. I knew beforehand that Hmong wall altars are made only by men. Therefore I wondered now that her husband and her eldest son have passed on and her remaining son is still unmarried, who would make the altar for her? Much more, who would do the offering to the *xwm kab* and later perform the *Hu plig* for the members of the house that week?

I found answers to my question the next day. Zhoua and Ntsuab asked me to help count paper money for offering. The three of us were joined by Kaye, Zhoua’s daughter and BJ, Ntsuab’s son-in-law. We started counting paper monies in batches of 200.

When I could no longer contain my curiosity I asked Zhoua who made the wall altar. She replied, “I did”. “This is the first time I have heard of a Hmong woman doing an altar in the house”, I told her. Her daughter hearing the conversation asked me, “do you want me to show you how it is done?” She demonstrated the process of how to make a golden boat from joss paper. She told me that she and her mother had already made three plastic bags of these gold and silver boats to be burned as offering during the *hu plig*. She also confirmed that Kub being a close male relative and an elder, would be coming to her house that night to do the second and third day offering for the *hu plig*. That night I watched Kub as he implored the souls of the ancestors to partake in the *laig dab* or food offering of chicken and rice.
After Kub had left, to my surprise, Ntsuab and Zhoua performed their own ritual in front of the wall and table altars. Zhoua, implored all the wondering souls of the household including her own soul, after which, she burned all the paper money in a metal bucket. Ntsuab, at that moment was speaking to a female healer in Laos via Facebook messenger. As instructed by the healer she started tying strings around Zhoua’s swollen leg. Thus, all three women, with one on the phone remotely connected via Facebook performed a shamanic ritual. The voice on the phone started chanting. She commanded the evil spirit causing Zhoua’s illness to leave her body. At the same time Ntsuab continued to tie more strings around Zhoua’s bad leg. It took around 30 minutes for the chanting to end, after which, Zhoua continued to call in the wandering souls and burned the rest of the paper boats and monies that were left. The ritual was a revelation to me. Nakauj had previously told me that she does her own (hu plig), however, I had never seen perform a healing ritual (Ua neeb) on someone in front of the altar.

Image 22: Hmong women count gold paper money and make gold boats for the altar.

Image 23: Zhoua’s offerings to the xwm kab as well as for the hu plig.

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48 Khi hluas is the ritual of thread-tying performed when the plig (self) is believed to have wandered and is called to come back to bring back the person’s good health.
I realised that I had just witnessed, a powerful display of agency. The women employed novel ways by which they asserted their beliefs, continued their traditions by perform rituals that would have otherwise been primarily carried out by male family members and shamans.

**Places of Continued Habits**

**The Outside Kitchen**

The outside kitchen of Hmong Sydney homes is the most culturally significant of all spaces in the house. The stove is considered to be the most significant object there. The outside kitchen varies from house to house. Many outside kitchens are located outside the patio where a single burner gas stove is used for cooking. In some properties, makeshift kitchen structures that were made from a combination of wood, chicken wires or metal grills (image 24) covered by an iron roof, were constructed to enclose the stove and kitchen utensils. These makeshift structures, nonetheless, made the outside kitchen more functional. The outside kitchen is a necessary part of the house because all Hmong families in this study prefer cooking their daily meals outside. Huab said, “Asian food is oily so we fry our food here. And when a Shaman comes, there are so many activities outside. We cut the meat, the vegetables and we cook them. we use the outside kitchen a lot”. 

She also told me that the makeshift structure of their outside kitchen is very similar looking to the kitchen they had in the refugee camp. The materials from which it was made were identical also. It was an open area allowing air and smoke to circulate. As mentioned earlier, it was also an important social space during exile as it was the only place where they could cook and sit together. All the women consider the outside kitchen whether enclosed in a makeshift structure or just outside the patio as the most practical part of the house.

I discovered the cultural importance of the outside kitchen during ceremonial and ritual gatherings. The frequency of its use depended upon the size of the backyard garden or farm. The bigger the garden or farm the more the outside kitchen was used to clean and butcher animals that had been slaughtered.
I witnessed the use of the outside kitchen in a bigger backyard garden during the first Hmong New Year celebration held in 2015 at Nakauj’s home. On that day Nakauj had to slaughter chickens for the *Hu plig*.

I heard Nakauj asking her youngest siblings for help in slaughtering the animals. “No way!”, Gayle, 35, Nakauj’s youngest sister said shrieking. Gayle who grew up in Australia was horrified at the thought of killing an animal. She then looked around for someone who could assist her sister. She spotted me sitting on a chair on the patio and blurted out with eyes wide, “ah maybe you can ask Teena to help you kill those chickens.” Within minutes I found myself sitting on a low rattan stool that Nakauj had placed near the stove where she was boiling water in a large aluminium pot.

The stove was placed at the end of the patio near her herb garden. She covered the floor with sacks and newspapers. She said, “We have to do this so that the blood, the insides and all the feathers can be collected”. Nakauj cut the throat of the first chicken, then the second, the third and finally the fourth. Once they were dead, she held the lifeless bodies of the chickens by the head and dipped them one by one into boiling water for a couple of minutes to soften the skin, after which, she instructed me to remove the feathers. When I finished, she cleaned and cut two of the birds into small pieces. She handed two uncut ones to her husband who offered them on the altar. Nakauj set aside the chickens’ heart, gizzard, liver, kidney, the feet and the neck. She then boiled them in a concoction of herbs and spices. Standing in front of her, looking at all the mess we had made and smelling the stench of blood, poultry and sweat on my shirt, I realised this outside kitchen was the most practical part of the house. Nakauj ran back and forth from the inside kitchen to the one outside carrying all the herbs,
the spices and other condiments. She religiously stirred the chicken soup. This ritual of cooking this traditional chicken soup meant so much to her. Her siblings, who were growing restless, came out from inside the house from time to time to check if the soup was cooked. It took her more than two hours to prepare and cook this special dish. After this, she lovingly served them in individual bowls to almost everyone sitting around the long table.

The significance of this ritual, in which the outside kitchen was used, was linked to the belief that the soul lingers. The *plig* (self) has had many versions in Hmong beliefs, one of them also referred to as the chicken self, which was presumed to be the wanderer, the playful one and the one that was easily disturbed (Tapp, 1989). This soul was believed to drift away too far at times that a *Hu plig* was performed to urge the soul to return to the body. A special *Hu plig* was, therefore, performed every Hmong New Year by individual households to call back the souls of all the persons inhabiting the house. An offering of chicken and a bottle of wine was made together with the burning of incense and paper money. It was this special *Hu plig* that Nakauj and Zab performed by the door using the chickens that were butchered and cooked in the outside kitchen. Men traditionally performed this ritual. I asked two women, who married non-Hmong spouses, who did the *Hu plig* for them. They said they usually asked their brothers to do the ritual for them. If the brothers were not around then they just did not practice the ritual at all. Ntsuab told me she did her own *Hu plig* in her backyard calling all the souls of her ancestors and children. I found Ntsuab’s adherence to Hmong spiritual beliefs interesting. She did her on soul calling ritual was because she believed that women should be allowed to perform one of the most important Hmong rituals. She said her husband had suffered a heart attack, and that this compelled her to perform the ritual for him.
The Patio and the Garage: Extension of the House

Hmong people have also transformed their garages and gardens into secret places of rituals as they had with the patios. The spacious garages in Hmong properties that could accommodate at least two big four-wheel drives were not used for parking alone. Rather, just like the patios they also served as extensions of the kitchen and dining areas wherein, food was prepared, cooked and served to guests, who could no longer be accommodated inside the house. In Ntsuab, Niam tais⁴⁹ and Nakauj’s houses it was both on the patio and in the garage where harvests from the home gardens were bundled and packed. After which, they were transported to Jamison’s market where Ntsuab and I sold the produce. The garage and patio being places where people worked, dined and congregated were also where work tools and other functional objects such as stoves, dining tables and chairs, were found.

An unlikely appliance often found in a Hmong garage is either a fridge or a freezer. These fridges and freezers were always full to the brim. I was initially curious about the reason behind the overstocking of food supplies which I learned by observing Huab’s shopping habits. I often accompanied her during the frequent purchase of food commodities in the nearby fresh Asian market in Cabramatta. Huab gave me some sound advice during one of our visits to the wet market, “If you buy a lot it is cheaper. If you only buy one it is very expensive”. It was then that I understood why

⁴⁹ Nakauj’s mother.
Hmong women buy in bulk or in bigger quantities, for the reason that they could save money. This applied to fresh and packed food. Thus, it was common to find boxes of rice noodles, spring roll wrappers in the cupboard and assortment of vegetables, and varieties of soy sauces in the fridge enough to last for a year. In the early years of settlement, they usually bought a whole pig or several chickens that they slaughtered, butchered and kept in the freezers for the coming months. This way they were able to save more money for other things. One of the second-generation daughters told me “Our parents love to hoard; you can’t blame them. They lived in extreme poverty and most of the time they were uncertain when the next supply of food would arrive. So now that they can afford to buy them, they buy in excess”.

I also observed that many of my respondents and their close relatives raised chickens within their properties— an agricultural preoccupation in Laos they continued to practice in Australia. There had been studies that found out that Asian families in the US, who have migrated to urban areas, have been disadvantaged by municipal ordinances that prohibited the raising of livestock within city limits (Corlett et. al, 2003:365). Hmong enjoyed substantial freedom to engage in cultural and agricultural practices in the garage and patio, albeit, at times tentatively. For instance, the year before my fieldwork, Huab told me they had two chickens in the garden, which they enjoyed seeing roaming around. They had not been aware of the neighbours’ disapproval of them raising chickens until the council officials came to address the neighbours’ complaints. Huab was disappointed. She asked me, “How could they be so mean? I never complained to the council about them. I mind my own business”, she exclaimed with exasperation. “I really couldn’t believe it! I couldn’t believe that they were angry about the crowing and chirping of two chickens in the morning, we don’t complain about the barking of their dogs at night?”

Huab avoided neighbours’ scrutiny by using the garage to incubate 30 chicks in a big box. “What are you going to do with so many chickens and the eggs that they lay? Are you going to kill the chickens for food and sell the eggs?” I asked Huab curiously while we looked at the tiny, noisy creatures inside the congested box. “No, no, no, no. Kub does not want me to kill the chickens. I asked him last week if I could kill the white one, and he said no! He said he likes its colour very much.” Having chickens gave them a sense of their Laotian surrounds; chickens and other animals enter the premises of their Laotian homes. I also learned that the smell of raising livestock brought back happy memories of Laos. Huab told me, poultry smelt like home, “It is just like this in Laos and also when you go to the Hmong farms in Cairns, it is like you are back in Laos”. During a period of less than a year, the couple has raised 75 fowl that include broilers, roosters and quails.
Similarly, Nakauj, felt the same restrictions Huab felt regarding the use of her land. She mentioned that they could not burn dry leaves, smoke their meat and slaughter animals within the neighbours’ view. Nakauj often felt frustrated saying, “the neighbours do not like the smell of poultry and they are worried about smoke”. She told me she seldom smoked meat but if she did she would make sure the smoke did not go towards the neighbours’ house. I also observed that the more the women felt their neighbours’ unfriendliness, the more they retreated from the open garden spaces to the patio and the garage.

During Huab’s daughter’s wedding ceremony the garage was once again used to avoid the scrutiny of neighbours. I watched how Hmong elders were giving the Chinese groom and his Vietnamese phi laj (best man) instructions on how to go about the ritual. The two young men, in Hmong designed vests attentively listened to the Hmong men, as they explained the significance of the ritual and the offering, religiously remembering each detail. The young men were required to carry a basket containing one freshly boiled chicken, some rice and a knife. “You have to extend your hands in a gesture of offering”, the younger Hmong man explained to them. “Then you will kneel and bow with your head touching the floor to show respect first to the father, then to the mother, then to the ancestors and spirits of the house”. The older Hmong man emphasized the groom’s induction into the spiritual family of his bride, as the important part of the ritual. They practiced in the garage before the actual ceremony was performed at the entrance of the house. After this, the younger generation used the garage to socialise, as they waited for the marriage ceremony to take place.

Image 26: Hmong groom and bride sit with friends and relatives in the garage.
A few steps from every Hmong woman’s inner kitchen was a garden to where she walks out through the back door. This is her sanctuary, wherein, she could contemplate and feel at peace. The meaning and the implication that the garden had on the women was often not acknowledged by people within
the communities in which they lived. Little has been written about the social and cultural relevance of gardens to Hmong women in Sydney. I consider this a big omission in the study about them, for the reason that every time I visited a Hmong home, the Hmong women would be connecting with other through the garden. It was where they would experience a collective sense of belonging. Whether they would gather for an occasion or help each other in garden activities. This phenomenon has also been observed among Hmong women engaged in community gardens in Eureka California (L’Annunziata; 2010). It was in the gardens that the women maintained traditional farming knowledge by working collectively. Further, just like in the US, Hmong gardens in Sydney encourage the sustenance of culturally appropriate diets, through the exchange of harvested crops. An example is in the use of herbs and varieties of Asian vegetables. Huab’s daughter, Diane, explained to me the simple way older Hmong cooked their vegetables. She recalled,

I remember my grandma used to boil pumpkin and varieties of green leafy vegetables like mustard leaves, spinach, cabbage, lettuce and bok choy. Often she boiled chicken with the concoction of herbs all harvested from our garden. Ah she spent countless hours in the garden”.

Hmong women expressed their love and care through garden activities and by sharing what grew out of them. Often they would cook a meal and share them with other women. A common dish that they shared among themselves was the pickled mustard greens that they fermented in jars. Other than the cooked and fermented vegetables, all vegetables are shared raw and mostly in large quantities that they packed in boxes and sacks. The varieties of vegetables include bitter melon, cucumber, prickly pear, corn, garlic to name a few. At times Huab would give me bags of cucumber she harvested from other Hmong gardens which I also shared with my own friends. At times she would boil a large quantity of bok choy that Niam tais would give her, that she and her husband and I would feast on. Every time Huab’s children came for a visit, she insisted that they took home pots of herbs. “Where am I going to put it mom? I have no room in my tiny apartment”, Dianne asked. Huab replied, “Just put it by the window and water it regularly. Quite agitated, “But mom I am not home all the time!” Huab again insisted, “Just take it and it will grow”. I understood the reason for Huab’s insistence. Every day I would watch her spend more than an hour in the morning and in the afternoon tending to her garden with so much care. I observed the same thing with Ntsuab and Niam tais when I helped them in the farm, they spent more time in the garden than inside the house. It was then that I realised how the garden became an extension of women’s affection, and through which they expressed their feelings for others. I then felt honoured when they started giving me pots of lemongrass, coriander, chilli and ornamental plants that they carefully and lovingly cultivated for months and years.

I support Margaret Brady’s (2011) claim that refugee camp experience has heightened the women’s interest in backyard gardening in the host country. In refugee camps they were not able to
garden. Hmong women spent hours in their gardens during weekends or after work. They watered their plants, turned the soil, and watched their vegetables grow. Gardening is an habitual and familiar activity deeply entrenched in their psyche. Although, formerly occupied by Hmong women elders, who were mostly their in-laws, these gardens and the elders’ traditional agricultural skills were passed on to them. These home gardens, whether they only contained vegetables or mixed with ornamental plants, were also representations of their cultural identity. Bree, a 30-year-old first-generation Hmong recent migrant told me, “You are not a Hmong woman if you don’t have all these herbs planted in your garden, no matter how small the garden is”. Brady also confirmed that Hmong women in her study also planted and consumed the same garden products. The growing and consumption of the similar varieties of herbs and vegetables in various diasporic locations affirms the subtle and consistent cultural connection of these women to their histories and origins.

Image 29: Ntsuab’s garden.
Another manifestation of women’s domestic authority was their part in the landscaping and organisation of the gardens. They also determined what varieties of herbs, crops and ornamental plants that they wanted to cultivate in the gardens. There is a notable difference between the varieties planted in the front yard and back yard gardens. Usually, ornamental plants and flowering plants are found in the front yard, while the vegetables are located in the back yard. All front lawns of the houses I visited in this study have been neat and attractive, which indicated that the design had been carefully planned. Large, expensive clay and ceramic pots are used for large plants. Aware that the neighbours’ find it unsightly to see vegetables growing on the front lawn, the women have chosen plants that bear edible leaves and flowers. Further, attractive looking vegetables and fruit such as lemons, limes and tomatoes were grown in between ornamental plants in the front yard.

The second generation does not take part in garden activities. There seemed to be a silent understanding that this was their mother’s domain and it has been this way since they were young. They understood that it was their mother’s sanctuary and the garden had played a significant part in their family’s adaptation. Doris, Nakauj’s daughter explained,

My mother and grandmother spent hours in their gardens. Especially, my grandma, it seems most of my memories of her was on the farm, planting, tending, watering and harvesting. She was in her world. She
did not speak good English and had no other social life outside the Hmong community. She socialised through the farm.

There were days when I assisted Niam tais in harvesting her chilies. I observed that she allowed the Hmong in Sydney to use a large portion of her land to raise livestock. Therefore, every day people would come to feed and check the chickens and other birds. Every day, the elderly woman looked forward to talking and chatting with them.

Rarely, do the women share the garden with men. On some occasions, they might be seen helping women with some chores. For example, Nakauj’s husband assisted her during the harvest season of dragon fruits. Moreover, communal activities in the garden occurred when fences needed fixing. On these occasions, both men and women worked together. Clan members took this opportunity to rekindle ties and friendships and enjoy Hmong food. This kind of interaction assured them that help and support, material or otherwise, is always around when needed. This was when they were able to express their mutual regard for each other as members of the same kinship or clan group. Other than this intermittent activity with men, the women enjoyed the full and uninhibited freedom to exercise their authority by deciding on what to do in the garden.

**Conclusion**

Hmong Sydney homes do not only reflect the economic stability that they have reached in more than three decades of hard work in the Australian workforce. They also reflect their nostalgia and longing for lost home and families as well as their adaptation despite the pressure of Western and cosmopolitan living.

Hmong women through their financial contributions were able to co-purchase their ideal homes. From then on they gained greater domestic authority as manifested in the spatial organisation and use of spaces of their suburban homes. The act of organising and using the spaces of their homes is both symbolic and practical. For instance, the women’s use of the inner and outside spaces express their exercise of freedom to decorate and control the activities that they hold within the spaces. It is also in these spaces where they enjoy the freedom to express their shifting identities as mothers and wives and their new senses of self that had been restrained. In Laos, they occupied the bottom of the domestic hierarchy; this low position did not afford them domestic authority.

In these new homes, the women appeased feelings of nostalgia by recreating spaces akin to those of former dwellings. Refugee camp living influenced the set-up of the outdoor kitchen. It was an unconscious recreation of a well-remembered place—the kitchen in the refugee camp, which was the
only place in the camp where they enjoyed the privacy and their coming together as a family even at the most precarious time. The memories are relived through the outside kitchens in Sydney and Canberra.

Despite the shift in gender dynamics at home, the women remained open to compromises, for example, performing traditional gender roles during cultural rituals, ceremonies and gatherings. The women still support cultural continuity, therefore participate in rituals and ceremonies. In the process, they strengthen bonds with other Hmong women when they engage in kitchen activities. Therefore, both the inside and outside kitchen contribute to the rekindling of affect and memories.

Interestingly, they now share the space of the kitchen with men who have taken over some domestic roles as a result of the women's continued participation in work. This suggests a positive change in traditional gender roles and dynamics.

Finally, the women’s gardens are reconstructed landscapes, a strong marker of Hmong identity. It is the sanctuary of women and an essential part of the continued agricultural life. Through garden activities and crops, they are able to share farming knowledge with other Hmong women. Finally, it is also through the garden as a social activity that they influence a network of non-Hmong women to engage in backyard farming.
Chapter 6
Mothers’ Legacy, Daughters’ Agency

In the early 80s, between our parents and us, it was harder for them to change to keep up with us. They were always trying to grab our tails, but we kept on running away. My parents were never around, they just wanted to work and provide. Then they’d tell us that ‘we now have everything that we never had before’. As a child, you didn’t think that way. You just wanted them around. And when they were around they were very strict, they also imposed on us to stay Hmong or be Hmong. It was hard, we didn’t know what real Hmong was [the way they knew about it], so we just became Australians. I was always good to my parents until I became a teenager and I started rebelling. I left home and went crazy.

Interview with Marlene in 2016

The above excerpt was from an in-depth interview with Marlene, Nakauj’s 33-year-old daughter, in which she summed up her experience as a Hmong first-born daughter. Like the other second-generation Hmong women in this study, she struggled with traditional roles and her identity from a young age until her teenage years. My introduction to the world of second-generation Hmong Australians was through my association with their mothers who invited me into their homes and to family and community gatherings.

One such occasion was Mother’s day in 2016. Nakauj organised a luncheon to honour her 87-year-old mother, everyone called Niam Tais — the grand matriarch of the Yang clan. The gathering did not involve Hmong traditional ritual practices. There was no animal slaughter or offering. Nakauj did not boil chickens, and there was none of the chanting often heard during Hmong gatherings. They were celebrating a popular western occasion Nakauj had adopted. I watched as three generations of Hmong women happily set up the long table to celebrate Mothers’ Day with an Asian touch—serving steamed sticky rice, Vietnamese spring rolls, Laotian larb and powpow salad alongside dishes of roast pork, fried chicken, and homemade chocolate and caramel cake.

Marlene and the rest of the women in her family were taking turns bringing out food from the kitchen to the patio, where three long rectangular tables were joined together to accommodate Nakauj’s family members. Marlene greeted me and offered me a seat at the table. I greeted her back and commented on her striking resemblance to her mother. She took the comparison to her mother (rather than her father) as a compliment and gave me a cheeky reply, “Thank God for that!” Such an honest reaction from a Hmong daughter would have challenged the machismo of Hmong fathers and

50 She passed away in November 2018.
earned the ire of Hmong mothers a decade or so ago. However, nowadays Australian Hmong daughters are more vocal about their feelings, opinions, and choices.\(^{51}\) This I learned from my association with them during fieldwork, especially with Nakauj’s three daughters, who spoke openly about their emotions.

Seated around the table were second-generation Hmong comprising of Nakauj’s younger sisters and daughters: Marlene and Sharon were both Australian-born\(^ {52}\), in their early thirties, and married to non-Hmong men. Sharon married a man of Polish descent, and Marlene married one of Vietnamese origin. Both are mothers themselves. Their youngest sister Doris, also born in Australia, sat at the end of the table beside her fiancée, a Croatian man. Their aunts, who were Laotian-born, but grew up in Sydney, sat on one side of the table beside their children and non-Hmong spouses. The mixed marriages and a gathering of such kind would have been unimaginable fifteen years ago, when elders preferred endogamy. Many years earlier, it had been even more unimaginable for Hmong children to be heard or given full attention among a gathering of adults.\(^ {53}\) It is obvious that times have changed. Second-generation Hmong agree that intermarriages, tolerance to the youngest children’s ways, and their renewed relationships with their mothers are significant indicators of first-generation Hmong’ acceptance of changes that the second generation had foreseen as inevitable.

Nevertheless, Nakauj’s generation and that of her daughters have gone through a period of intergenerational conflict and emotional disconnection. This widespread phenomenon was first studied among Hmong families who migrated to the US (Vang, 2009; Xiong, 2004; Juang and Mischke, 2017; and Xiong, 2002). In these studies, the second-generation Hmong teenagers discussed the positive and negative perceptions of Hmong parenting. A common finding of the studies was the strong dissatisfaction in the lack of discernment about the issues confronting them from childhood to early adulthood. In Australia, the commonly held reason was the general breakdown in communication. Other specific reasons given were the rigid imposition of “Hmong ways”, and strict parental control Hmong fathers instigated and mothers supported.

Many factors contributed to the intergenerational and emotional gap between first- and second- generation Hmong. In Sydney, from the view of the first generation, this was mainly a result of the economic and adaptation challenges they faced during the early years. The consumerist culture of industrialised Australia overworked and overwhelmed them. At that time, Hmong mothers took on

\(^{51}\) Traditionally, mothers trained Hmong girls to be meek and quiet and not be vocal against the male Hmong-elders’ opinions.

\(^{52}\) Second-generation Hmong.

\(^{53}\) The old saying that “children are supposed to be seen not heard” was a general rule in Hmong households.
the role of income earners. And like many first-generation migrant-refugees, for the first fifteen years after migration, they worked tirelessly alongside their husbands in their wish to provide for their family. Encouraged by economic possibilities, they worked hard initially for survival, and later for economic affluence. As discussed in chapter four, it was around this time when the roles of the first-generation had shifted from traditional, domesticated women to individuals with stronger financial and bargaining power.

The children, at that time, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, on the other hand, were in a different milieu. Growing up mostly with the traditional non-English-speaking grandparents, they had inculcated Hmong values and were obliged to follow the dictates of Hmong norms. Simultaneously, they had to submit to parental control as they faced the challenges of attending and adapting to the school environment and Australian society. They also struggled with issues of identity and the need for guidance and support. Because of their young age and lowly position in the family, they, like their mothers before them, had to navigate through Hmong patriarchal control, albeit in different circumstances. Unlike their mothers, the Australian school system socialised the new generation of daughters to have a greater sense of self, and gave them awareness of their rights and privileges. Therefore, possessing greater agency at a young age, they were able to make bold decisions like leaving home out of the desire for independence and autonomy, which they referred to as acts of “rebellion”.

Hmong mothers lost the important balance between home and workplace. The lack of involvement in their children’s lives especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood has resulted in a myriad of emotional problems and issues among the children. These issues have included childhood identity crisis and the lack of emotional support that consequently led to teenage rebellion. Specifically, the second-generation daughters shared issues of gender inequality and lack of voice at home. The issues that they had faced in the public realm, on the other hand, included the lack of a sense of belonging and the confusion that stemmed from being immersed in two cultures. The mothers did not understand the issues faced by their daughters.

Ethnographic data gathered from in-depth interviews and observation of the five second-generation Hmong girls compelled me to examine the phenomenon of the emotional gap through their lenses. Now as adults, the inclusion of their perspective in this study is essential, as they had been witnesses to the transformation of their mother’s lives and subjectivities over the years. Vang and Flores (1994) and Juang and Meschke (2017) conducted their studies on teenagers. In this chapter, although the subject matter is the same, the respondents are different—they are adults, some are
even mothers themselves. Therefore, having reached a stage of emotional maturity, they offer deeper insights than those of previous studies.

Based on the data gathered, there are two stages in the lives of the second-generation with marked challenges: adolescence and motherhood. Therefore it is imperative to examine these different views at two significant times: during the integration years and at present. This study argues for the need to examine how the differential views in the conceptualisation of adolescence and motherhood during the early years of integration had caused emotional and intergenerational disjuncture. This disjuncture is more than just a negative effect of the Hmong mothers’ participation in work. The emotional gap mentioned eventually led to teenage rebellion.

Over the years through life experiences and learnings from each other, the women’s perspectives have evolved, paving the way to reconciled and aligned points of view. With an understanding of each other’s perspective, through each other’s lenses, a significant change took place. Consequently, this reconciled view led to a change in the relationship between the generations. As a result, also, there has been a radical shift in the concept of motherhood and a greater sense of self as demonstrated by the women of both generations. Finally, the second generation also demonstrates their mothers’ positive qualities of resilience and self-determination. For the second generation, this was the most valuable learning from their mothers’ lives. This chapter contributes to the main argument of this thesis, by situating the new subjectivities of Hmong daughters and mothers as a form of stronger agency.

**Emotional Capital as Cultural Capital**

In the theory of social practice, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) situates emotional capital as a form of embodied cultural capital. Although intangible, emotional capital is argued to be appropriated materially and symbolically. In both cases, there are corresponding benefits. Both forms of capital prove to be highly beneficial to migrant groups like the Hmong, who undergo several stages of adaptation and integration. Moreover, both forms of capital can be accumulated, activated, and embodied. Stacey (2011, as cited in Cottingham, 2016: 452), stressed that cultural capital when embodied powerfully shapes character and humanizes individuals.

Emotional support from parents, particularly from mothers, is a form of emotional capital. Dyck (2018) in her study of migrant groups in Canada expanded Bourdieu’s theory of capital transformation when she analysed the impact of migrant women’s’ everyday caring of family. She
asserted that emotional support is highly important in sustaining relationships within families, as well as instrumental in shaping subjectivities and the children’s view of the world (Dyck 2018). A healthy relationship between mother and child has been linked to a greater sense of self and sound emotional functioning. A study conducted by Deborah Laible et al. (2004) found out that children who have received consistent emotional support have possessed higher feelings of self-worth and competence. Diane Putnick et al. (2014) reasoned “emotions are at the core of our human attachments, communications and interactions, [therefore] they are powerful intra and inter-personal regulators of behaviour”. I assert, therefore, those who have received an adequate amount of emotional support as children are most likely to become sensitive adults and parents. However, parenting ways vary across cultures. The key to understanding them in a cross-cultural and inter-generational context is to study closely the differences in perspectives. What might appear to be a form of control and aggression to the children could be a form of care and protection to the parents. Therefore, in this study, I will look into the differential views of the two generations regarding motherhood during the adolescent stage of the second generation.

I extend Dyck’s theory by arguing that children unconsciously learn and embody certain ways and characteristics of their parents from witnessing and co-experiencing life with them, therefore, forming an emotional capital through the process. The lessons learned from experiences, whether positive or negative, create positive outcomes in their own lives.

This chapter is divided into two major parts. In the first part, I take a closer look at the emotional challenges and issues women faced growing up in Hmong households and Australian society, by introducing the readers to the lives and experiences of the second-generation. The first part examines the differential views and conceptualisation of adolescence and motherhood. I also examine how their views impacted the emotional distance between the two generations. In the second part, I present the daughters’ accounts of their mothers’ life stories and lived experiences. These include their struggles, display of resilience, and exercise of agency. I explore the differential views on motherhood.

To support my argument, I present the following cases of five second-generation women, three of whom have become mothers. I also present how the second-generation daughters exercised their agency at a young age, when the submitted to traditional expectations, that they deemed questionable and opposed to their individual rights. Later, as teenagers, they faced more complex issues, such as, the lack of emotional support and parental guidance, which was exacerbated by their inability to exercise freedom of choice because of parental restrictions.
Marlene’s Story

The Legacy of Being a Firstborn Female

Marlene emerged from behind the large wooden front door of her newly built home. The spacious, elegant hallway led to a large and modern kitchen on the left side of the house. It also faced a medium-sized living area. The design of her house was reflective of Marlene’s modern and perhaps more expensive taste, her priorities as a mother and her social status. From inside I could see a swimming pool through the French glass doors, making the space of the house looked much bigger and wider. I could hear the joyful voices of children echoing as they ran around the wide and child-friendly space of the house. Marlene exuded warmth, grace, and elegance, a far cry from the lonely and rebellious teenager she revealed in the interview. Her relaxed demeanour suggested that unlike her mother during the early years, economic needs did not drive her to work hard. At the age of thirty-three, she was already living the middle-class life her mother had sought in the early years of integration.

As mentioned, Marlene is the eldest in the brood of four. Although this is the case, the age gaps between her and her siblings are not wide. She became a second mother when still a child. In her teenage years, she rebelled by dropping out of high school, after which she left home and lived with a non-Hmong boyfriend whom she later married. According to an older second-generation woman, during those early days, some elders would perceive the act of a woman living with a man out of wedlock as despicable.

According to Marlene, when she was growing up, her parents were consumed by work. Her mother found employment in the city that took most of her time and energy. Therefore, Marlene grew up under the guidance of her paternal and maternal grandmothers who raised her in the Hmong traditional way.

As we sat comfortably in the children’s playroom on the second level of her house, Marlene recalled memories of growing up in the 1980s. She explained how the women around her at that time, especially her grandmother, believed in the regenerative value of traditions and conventions. They believed that these traditions and conventions should be passed on to them regardless of the changing realities and context of their lives. Being the eldest female imposed an extra burden on Marlene, because elders expected her to take on the role of a second mother to her siblings, and her father expected her to excel in school.
Marlene opened up about her emotions, relating to the years when she was growing up, during one of her interviews:

To be honest with you, when I was growing up I did not have much connection with my mother. I did not know her....she and my dad were never around. And when they were around, they were so strict. It was like living in a military [environment]. Dad had a reputation to uphold. So the pressure was intense. To add to that, I was not allowed to express myself. Whatever they said, I had to listen. I had to keep my emotions inside... I resented that.”

When I was in primary school, I had to look after three siblings, when other kids were playing. I felt that I had too many responsibilities at a very young age. My mother, who is also the eldest daughter, played the part of a mother to her siblings and she expected the same thing from me. Also, they were hard in education. They expected us to do well. I would have enjoyed it if it was not forced upon so much

The above accounts present an insight into how patriarchal rules were still imposed on second-generation females, despite the already changing gender relations between their parents at that time. Both her younger siblings Sharon and Doris confirmed her accounts. Sharon said,

All I remembered about Marlene was that she was cooking rice every day. She was always busy looking after us. She hardly had time for schoolwork, friends, and extra-curricular activities. She also disciplined us. One day she was furious with my brother who was out in the yard playing, she asked him to come into the house because he had been out for a long time. He shouted at her, ‘Are you my mother or my sister?’, and you know what the poor thing said? She answered, ‘both’!

Doris, their youngest sister, observed that her eldest sister was overworked. She said, “When I think about childhood, I think about my sister Marlene. She was always running around the house endlessly doing household chores. I don’t have many memories of her playing or engaging in other activities other than doing her chores”. Her predicament was not fully understood by her mother at that time, because she, as a young girl, submitted to the same expectations, albeit at a different time and context.

**Differential Views of Adolescence: Identity Crises and Teenage Rebellion**

To understand Nakauj, Marlene’s mother lack of insight into her daughter’s predicament, it is worth re-examining her life as discussed in chapter three. Nakauj is not a firstborn daughter. As mentioned earlier, her firstborn sister died at childhood, therefore Nakauj had to take on important roles. Also mentioned earlier, Nakauj was brought up by her mother. Her father had mysteriously lost contact with her mother for almost a decade. When he re-emerged, he had a new wife and a new set of six children. Since his return, he and Nakauj’s mother produced five more children. Therefore, in her teens, Nakauj had to look after the needs of all her full and half-siblings. Moreover, when she was fifteen, she met her husband while still living in Nong Khai and got married. At sixteen she migrated to
Australia where she had Marlene in her late teens. Her transition from a young girl into a person who was expected to perform adult roles was, in Hmong culture, a marker of maturity at a very young age.

Clearly, the transition from childhood to adulthood in Hmong society was not just a physiological process, but a cultural and a social category (Whittaker, 2002, Mead, 1928, Schlegel & Barry, 1991). At the age of ten, girls assumed full adult roles that intersected with the coming of age. Girls’ participation in the ball throwing ceremony during Hmong new year celebrations signalled the onset of puberty, which took place between the ages of 10 to 17. It was a rite of passage for young girls who had become *hluas nakaui* (young courting girl) (Liamputtong, 2002). This stage in Nakauj’s life was interrupted by war and displacement. From a young girl she quickly transitioned to a *nyab* (wife) and then sooner into a *tus poj niam* (mother). At every stage of development, Hmong society required her to perform gender roles that placed her in a subordinate position which she and all the other women in this study navigated to their advantage.  

Nakauj’s case was not unusual; the four other women in this study shared her experience. Like Nakauj, they took on adult responsibilities at a young age. All of the first-born first-generation women assumed the role of a second mother to their siblings. As a consequence, the second-generation firstborn daughters were expected to do the same. Hence, the two generations had similar experiences during the same stage of adolescence. However, for the young Australianised girls, adolescence and coming-of-age marked the need for autonomy as maturing individuals. When this did not take place, it gave rise to grave issues that led to dissonant attitudes.

**Second Generation’s Issues and Concerns**

First-generation women saw the world entirely differently from their children. Apart from the reasons presented above, they viewed Australia as a surrogate homeland rather than a permanent home. Due to the circumstances surrounding their forced migration, the first generation was often stricken by loneliness and nostalgia. Adherence to old customs and traditions were coping mechanisms against the difficulty of adaptation. Thus, they enforced Hmong ways on the generation of their children, supported by highly regarded elders on whom they relied at home. The children, on the other hand, who grew up in Hmong households, were more exposed to the mainstream Australian culture, who at the same time were deeply immersed in Hmong culture. This resulted to a crises on the teenagers’ individual identities. Thus, Marlene, during her teenage years faced a dilemma shared by all of her peers, regardless of gender. Broderick (2001) in her study of Australian teenagers reported that

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54 See chapter 3.
teenagers’ sense of belonging correlates with their competencies, motivations, and achievements. On the other hand, a deficit in the sense of belonging results in alienation and loss of self-esteem. All daughters talked about the constant adjustments they had to undertake to fulfil the expectations of both cultures. This process involved re-identification, wherein, the experienced a myriad of emotions that included feelings of being lost, confusion, fear-of-rejection, and even shame; for having to switch identity to adjust to the norms and expectations of both environments (Xiong et al., 2005).

It was tough growing up as a teenager, despite the fact that Australia was already multi-cultural, and I had a lot of Asian friends. Yeah, it was still hard growing up, because everybody knew the Chinese, the Vietnamese, and the Cambodians. But no one knew who the Hmong were.

I felt that I was more Asian than any other person in school. Because, Hmong people are very traditional in the sense that they practised Hmong rituals and traditions, [which] were like 50 years old. At that time, being a teenager, all I wanted was to fit in. I didn’t want to stick out. But then around me was Hmong everywhere—Hmong food, Hmong costumes, Hmong traditions. After each X’mas break we would go back to school and my friends would ask me what did you do for the New Year? And I’d say my parents killed a chicken, boiled it and did some offerings. And I would ask them what did you have? And they’d say: “Oh we had turkey”. She then burst into nervous laughter being reminded of how ridiculously she must have sounded to her friends. “It was different”, she said in a sadder tone.

The pressure to maintain Hmong identity by subscribing to traditions and practices was a burden to young women. They were not sure of what constituted a real Hmong identity. In their time in Australia, none of them had been to Laos, and they were knowledgeable about Hmong culture only so far as the practices, the rituals, and elders’ rules were concerned. Therefore, understanding their parents’ longing and attachment to the homeland and the old way-of-life was remote to them.

**Filial Duties**

Part of the daughters’ traditional roles was fulfilling their filial duties not only within the immediate families, but also to members of the extended family. Both second-generation males and females had an ambiguous relationship with their parents and the Hmong kin groups. Judith, 27, a second-generation woman, once described belonging to the Hmong community in Sydney as both “a blessing and a curse”. Being a second generation Hmong, she valued her independence, therefore, she admitted that she felt obligated by kinship “requests”. Kinship obligations ranged from the mundane everyday favours, for example, assisting in organising a gathering, driving someone, tending after the chooks or garden, babysitting, to more important obligations, such as financial assistance when people pooled their resources together to help a family. Hmong mothers continued to adhere to traditional cultural values. For instance, I observed Huab would leave home early in morning during her day-off. When she returned in the afternoon I would ask her where she had been. Often she would tell me that she had been in the house of so and so and that she had to take Hmong elder for a stroll. “I feel sorry
for that old woman, people in their house are very busy and she needs some exercise to keep her going. So I walk with her”, she would explain to me. Because Hmong mothers like Huab were still obliged to fulfil familial roles, the second-generation therefore, was then obliged to support their mothers’ continued adherence and practice.

However, I rarely saw second generation women in this study participated in shamanic rituals or the Hmong new year ritual. However, they were present in the new year’s night time celebrations and always present in wedding ceremonies. Judith expressed her thoughts on kinship obligations, sounding overwhelmed yet at the same time proud of her culture.

You are your own individual. Hmong community is great, and, in the end, you will always have their support. But another person’s problem becomes your problem. And I think over time, you, as a young adult have to deal with the fact that you don’t have to take on everyone’s problems.

I learned that Marlene has assisted her aunty in starting up her restaurant business. Dividing her time between her three children, she occasionally assisted in the restaurant. During its opening, I saw her overseeing food preparation and assisting in serving customers. I also observed that other second-generation women like Marlene assisted in other ceremonies and rituals, such as weddings, birthdays, and other Western social gatherings.

During the time when the second-generation were in their teenage years, the differences between them and their parents were almost irreconcilable. I analysed that when Hmong daughters came of age, they were caught between two worlds—the Hmong and the Australian. The former espoused family and kinship solidarity, respect for elders, submission to patriarchal rule and hierarchy, adherence to traditional customs and spirituality. The latter encouraged a strong sense of independence, to the ideals of egalitarianism and importance of self rather than to a collective.

Both generations had gone through different processes of acculturation and adaptation. These differences stemmed from the unequal intergenerational contact to which they had been exposed in the Hmong and Australian spheres. As mentioned in chapter four, the mothers found employment in places where most unskilled migrants like themselves worked. Therefore, their social and cultural exposure were among people of various non-English-speaking and ethnic backgrounds, like themselves. Their daughters, on the other hand, were born in Australia and therefore, had adopted the language and behaviour of the mainstream culture through the school system, their Westernised friends, and to some extent the mass media (Xiong et al., 2008).
As opposed to their mothers’ experience of coming of age which culminated in teenage marriages and early motherhood, the daughters’ view of adolescence was focused on creating an identity that was not attached to the family or Hmong community. All the daughters shared that when they were young girls, partly because of their Asian features, they felt a strong need to belong and be accepted by their peers. However, their wish to socialise was restricted by the strict parental upbringing that was imposed on them. This upbringing created a wide emotional disjuncture.

Hugh Matthews et al. (1997) pointed out that a measure of independence among adolescence is time they spent outside the home. Unfortunately, Hmong teenagers did not enjoy such independence. All daughters detailed the following restrictions imposed on them while growing up: socialising with friends at school, sleeping over at friends’ homes, going on trips, attending parties, and establishing romantic relationships. Sharon lamented,

Sleepovers were a big thing when we were growing up. If someone invited you, you had the feeling that you belonged to a group among your peers. But then when you asked your parents for permission to socialise with your friends, they would just say no. And they would not even give the reason why you were not allowed to go. So you just had this feeling of hurt and anger.

Parental fear of danger emanating from the fear based on stories of Vietnamese gangs in nearby suburbs of Bankstown and Cabramatta drove Hmong parents to be more strict and protective of their children. The women told me they had curfews which they strictly followed. And before they could ever go out, there was a lot of deliberation. Patriarchal control restricted children, and there was a fear of danger. Hmong boys previously had problems with the law in identical gang-related incidences, therefore, Hmong parents were highly cautious.

**Dating and Marriage**

In addition to familial and kinship obligations, many of the second-generation resisted submitting to rules that impinged on their basic rights. For instance, all the adolescent girls admitted that certain rules brought about feelings of contempt. The younger generation also said their parents influenced their life-changing decisions as they entered adulthood. One issue was dating. I asked Sharon at what age were they allowed to have a relationship with the opposite sex. She replied with a tone of sarcasm, “Probably never”. According to a study conducted by Chue Her (2016) in the US, Hmong elders closely monitored the dating activities of Hmong girls. In Sydney, Hmong parents, to a certain degree, groomed their daughters into becoming committed housewives. Parents still preferred

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55 The most notorious of them was the 5T gang in Cabramatta.
that they dated single Hmong men, whom they would have been obliged to marry, otherwise, their parents would lose face.

Hmong marriages are traditional endogamous, meaning that members were expected to marry people who belonged to their clan or lineage (Chue, 2016). However, in the Western context it has become exogamous interracial marriages became common among younger generations, which also caused conflict between generations. However, the second generation believed that even acculturated, Westernised Hmong elders like Marlene’s father preferably wished that his daughters would marry Hmong men. He thought that if his daughters marry Hmong men it would save them the trouble of explaining about what Hmong culture and practices are all about.

When I interviewed the daughters, many of them admitted that they were more attracted to white men than Asian men. They also explained the reason why they were not keen in finding Hmong husbands in Sydney. They said they were afraid that if they chose a husband among the Hmong men in Sydney that person might turn out to be a distant cousin, in that case the union would have been incestuous. According to Risa, Huab’s eldest daughter, “In Hmong communities now in the West, the likelihood of you marrying someone in the same bloodline, intentionally or unknowingly is high. I understood that even though they did not have the same surname, they nonetheless could belong to the same clan. For instance, Marlene could have married a son of her father’s female cousin. Thus, it was common that Hmong people ended up marrying a first cousin in the US or Laos.” She paused and reacted to what she had said, “I would not do that. Not only because I am Westernised, but because of the science around it”.

Risa’s younger sister, Dianne, confirmed her sister’s statement. She said Hmong elders expressed their wish that Hmong girls would marry Hmong boys. “Make sure you marry a Hmong boy”, mimicked Dianne, playfully. “Every time you go to a Hmong party, elders would warn you about it. But Sydney is so small I am NOT going to marry a Hmong boy from Sydney! We are such a close-knit community and we call each other cousins. So you would introduce a Hmong boy to your friends as your cousins. Then, when you start dating “your cousin”, that’d be when things get a bit confusing. You wouldn’t want to tell them, ‘yeah, he was my cousin before, now I am dating him’.”

56 The marriage between individuals with different surnames, i.e. to a different clan, is allowed even though they are blood-related. This happens when a sister of a Hmong man marries a man from a different clan. The woman acquires the surname of her husband and loses her original surname and her affinity with her original clan. Her children belong to the clan of her husband and therefore, can marry her brother’s offspring, meaning cousins can marry. Interlocutors have informed me that they know a lot of couples who migrated to the West who are blood-related.
Nevertheless, the women understood how favourable it was for their parents if they married Hmong men. Doris, Marlene’s youngest sister, pointed out the emotional difficulty of having a partner who was not Hmong. When she moved in with her partner, she decided not to tell her parents about it because she knew they would object. She was already in her mid-20s, however, when her parents learned about it, and they still objected. Attempting to break the deadlock, she decided to introduce her partner to her parents by bringing him home. She recalled the day it happened,

I introduced my boyfriend to my parents, and I knew that they did not approve of him. I saw by their reaction; how unhappy they were about my decision. It was the sadness that made me seriously think, ‘if it really made them miserable, then I was willing to give up my relationship’.

However, her parents allowed the relationship on the condition that the couple would marry the following year to avoid the judgement of Hmong elders.

The preference for endogamous marriage correlates with the Hmong patrilineal tradition which they still uphold in Sydney. Hmong women who married a non-Hmong person, would still have to follow the “patrilineal rule”, which dictated that the bride would belong to the husband’s family. Thus, they were compelled to follow their husband’s spiritual beliefs. Some women married men who held Christian and Buddhist beliefs.

Kaye, also a second generation informed me that during Hmong wedding ceremonies, the celebrant would state that non-Hmong husband would get to define the expectations in that marriage. These expectations include family obligation, cohesion, interdependence, and following the husbands’ spiritual beliefs.

A number of older second generation like Marlene had left home to have de facto relationships with non-Hmong men before marrying them. A few marriages ended in divorce. According to a study conducted by Lepreecha, Hmong women who were separated or divorced, were considered “loose women” in Hmong society (Leepreecha, 2016: 148). One of the older second generation women close to Marlene had married and decided to divorce her husband. She was aware that despite of the damage that her actions would cause her parents’ reputation, she still decided to act of her own accord. Women like her as well as Marlene had to stand up for many of personal choices at a young age. Marlene admitted that she had reached a breaking point during her teenage years. Thus, she left home to protest against Hmong conventions and strict ways. She was one of the very first few women of the younger generation, who challenged the status quo, therefore, allowing her younger sisters to enjoy greater freedom-of-choice.
Jamie’s Story

Hmongspeak and the Lack of Emotional Support

Hmongspeak is a way of communication so culturally specific that if you can’t read between the lines you are screwed.

May Lee (2002:47) in Bamboo Among the Oaks

Jamie, 38, is Ntsuab’s eldest daughter. She is a mother of three and married to an American Hmong. She is also Marlene’s distant cousin. She was born in a Thai refugee camp and has been living in Canberra since she was eight months old. “Canberra in the 80s was white-dominated”, Jamie told me during our first meeting. She added that Asians were very few in number and that her family was the first Hmong to arrive in there. “Back in those days the white Australians were not completely accepting of people coming from a minority group. And being Hmong, we were not only a minority group, we were also a minority group that no one had ever heard of ”.

She and Marlene grew up in two different states. As cousins, they commiserated each other’s predicament. Jamie remembers juggling schoolwork and housework. Although her mother was often home, she was expected to assist in household chores, including the care of her six younger siblings. She complained:

My God there were so many of us! And I did not get much help from my brothers, because they were not required to do much at home. Although, my dad said: ‘go to school. Be a doctor or a lawyer, land a job that makes you money’; I also knew from young that I was expected to be a wife, a good wife.

Like Marlene, as the eldest female child, Jamie had to cope with many expectations in addition to her struggle with her identity. She also had to face the issue of being perceived as different from the rest. Being one of the few Asians in school, she was often asked about her background. Therefore, it added to the negative feeling of otherness in the school environment. Schoolmates and teachers treated her differently, because of the way she looked, even though she spoke with an Australian accent.

“I hated it. You know questions like, ‘Who are the Hmong people? Where did they come from?’ Back then people hardly knew about Laos let alone the Hmong. And just because they knew who the Chinese or the Japanese were, I just told them I was either of the two”.
She remembered one incident in primary school when a teacher asked her where the country of Hmong people was, to which she replied, “We don’t have a country”.

The teacher insisted, “you have a country. Everybody has a country”. The teacher took out an atlas and asked her to locate the country of the Hmong. It was then that she began to understand, that although she grew up in Australia, she was perceived as someone who was not "from here”. She admitted that it was a disturbing discovery.

During the 1980s, second-generation daughters whose parents had not fully integrated to Australian society faced a range of emotional challenges. Sadly, their parents were neither fully aware of the issues nor comprehending. For instance, Jamie discussed that during those years there was a high expectation from all Hmong children to excel academically (Xiong et. al, 2017). She explained,

Among Hmong relatives in the US, I think there was this pressure to live up to the expectations of the model minority. Hmong parents believed that Asian children should do better than children of other migrants. My younger sisters, because they did not do much at home, excelled in school. I have an academically gifted sister. I remember because she did well in school my parents did not push her to do chores. Instead, they left her alone to focus more on her studies. As for me, I had to look after the younger ones.

Jamie also remembered that she was duty-bound from a very young age to perform tasks for which she was not emotionally ready. For instance, she had to meet the needs of Hmong adults such as her parents and other Hmong in Canberra. It was a case of reversal of roles. Jamie could recall several instances, “I would accompany my mother to parents and teachers meetings and help her with her homework for English classes in which she was enrolled”. She also remembered quite vividly doing translations for her mother during visits to the doctor. Jamie recalled,

I would sit in doctor’s appointments with her. She would talk about her symptoms and I would be translating it to her General Practitioner (GP). Then the GP would start asking her questions and I would translate it back to her in Hmong. At that age, my Hmong was not that good... it was not a good thing for a child to do. I sort of felt responsible to get the translation right because it concerned my mother’s health and wellbeing.

In addition to her role as a translator, she assisted other Hmong adults in Canberra. Jamie described,

Back then there were not a lot of Hmong in Canberra, so whenever new Hmong families arrived, I would accompany them wherever they needed to go; places like, Centrelink, doctor’s clinics and job providers. I filled up the forms for them, answered questions for them. It was a big job for a young girl.

57 This was based on Jamie’s readings of the history of the Hmong, from where she learned that the Hmong were driven out of China during the Han dynasty and were forced to live in Southeast Asian countries.
In her teenage years, Jamie needed encouragement and emotional support from her parents, which her parents were not able to provide.

My parents were not affectionate in terms of hugging or saying nice words. They were always critical. I don’t remember them saying nice words to me when I was growing up, they were not known to be tender and affectionate to each other much more to their children.

She said that when she was a teenager, her parents never supported her academic and social endeavours. Further, she explained that her parents had their way of pushing them to accomplish something. Whenever they wanted her to do better, they would criticise her. She resented this kind of parenting approach and considered them as disrespectful and emotionally damaging, but was quick to justify it as “Hmong speak”. She explained, “the Hmong way is more focused on what you have done wrong than the right things that you have done”. They believed this would make their children strive and do better. “They would always tell me ‘you are doing it wrong, you’re bad’, there was no affection, only harsh words”. Her husband added that he witnessed how his own parents treated his sister and Jamie when they lived with them. He said, because of the harsh treatment of his wife, he had strained his relationship with them. “What kind of parents would call their daughter a whore just because she came home late? Or what kind of people would mistreat an in-law because she could not cook? It was sad. I witnessed that. But because I was young, I could not say anything against them.”

Because of the above treatment received at home, the children’s expectations of their parents were remarkably low. All of them wished they had a more respectful dialogue with them. Findings of this chapter correlate with the qualitative data gathered by Xiong (2008) on the expectations of Hmong youngsters, revealed that they did not expect their parents to praise them for their deeds and accomplishments. However, it does not necessarily follow that emotional support was of little importance to them. Xiong’s data (2008) also revealed that despite such expectations, emotional support, especially the caring and nurturing attitudes of parents ranked high in the attributes, which young people believed good parents should possess.

Further from Jamie’s point of view as an Australian, she could not understand her parents’ lacked of interest in extracurricular activities. She recalled,

“Birthdays, Christmases, and extracurricular activities they said were just utterly a waste of money! My parents were not into celebration, nor enjoyment, or pursuing your passion. It sounds very materialistic on my part, but when you are a kid it meant a lot to you”. 
She remembered that in her teens she was very interested in playing tennis and learning the guitar. She managed to win a tennis scholarship and free guitar lessons. However, her parents never took the time to drive her. She felt frustrated, “I could not understand it. It was paid for and my dad refused to take me! I remember thinking how unfair was that?”

Like Marlene and Sharon, Jamie reached a breaking point. In her teenage years, she left Canberra. She initially stayed in the Hmong community in Sydney, where, because of her funky manner of dressing up, she was perceived as a “troublemaker” and a deviant. Therefore, parents discouraged their daughters from associating with her. She felt like an outsider even in the Hmong community,

I was told off by the elders when I stayed in one of our relatives’ home in Sydney. They said, I would introduce their daughters to drugs. I got so many lectures from them. They thought that I was a bad person; that I was in a gang and that I was sleeping around. I was really hurt. So I decided to live far away from everything Hmong. I worked and did some courses for about three years for self-actualisation.

Then, through an online connection, she met her Hmong husband who lived in Oregon. Again, her conservative parents objected to her decision to marry an American Hmong. In the US Hmong youngsters were known for their involvement in gangs and their illegal and criminal activities (Xiong, 2002). Therefore, they were adamant that her Hmong fiancée was one of them. Once again she vented her disappointment of the judgement of Hmong elders,

“I thought, how could they just judge someone whom they have not met? They just based their judgement of what they have heard about Hmong youth gang activities from the US? My parents said, ‘If you marry that boy in America, he will beat you up”.

Despite her parents’ objections, she decided to marry him. She left Australia and stayed in the US, where she and her husband and three children lived for fourteen years. However, when her mother had a stroke she decided to return to Canberra to be close to her mother.

**Risa’s and Kaye’s Stories**

**Resilience in the Face of Tragedies**

Risa, 30 and Kaye, 29 are blood relatives. They grew up together in the same community. They also share the same clan name. Moreover, they also have identical life trajectories—both are educated and are career-oriented. Risa told me that, growing up with older brothers, her parents had very little expectation from her and her sister with regards to academic achievements.
“I had a conversation with my mum, although we were highly encouraged to study, she told me she had more expectations from my brother to do better in life more than me. I was so upset. I told her ‘how could she say that?’ I think she had this feeling that I would marry young”. Thus, she and her sister proved their mother wrong. She pursued university education and later on embarked on a professional career. On the other hand, Kaye, because she belongs to the younger generation of Hmong girls, received more support from her mother; therefore, she finished her studies at TAFE and embarked on a career in information technology (IT). Both women had delayed marriage and prioritised work and career.

Being firstborn females, they performed the same roles and responsibilities that Marlene and Jamie had held in their families. Risa used to live with her parents but, due to work assignments, had moved interstate two years ago. However, during my fieldwork, she would visit her parents frequently. Kaye, still lived with her mother, Zhou, and her forty-year-old single brother. I observed that both women displayed a great sense of responsibility for their ageing parents and to the Hmong community. I learned the reason behind their caring attitude. Both had experienced death and tragedy at a very young age. Moreover, in the face of tragedies, they had to provide emotional support to their mothers.

Both women, although holding traditional roles, did not emphasise the burden of their domestic responsibilities. For them, the weight of domestic roles seemed insignificant in comparison to the grief that they had experienced from the untimely loss of their loved ones. It was also during the circumstances mentioned above, that they experienced the need for deep emotional support, especially from their mothers. According to them, collectively, the Hmong community had provided their respective families financial, cultural and emotional support during the wake and the funeral. To a lesser or greater extent, the involvement of Hmong elders in funerary rituals caused distress to the families of the deceased. Kaye revealed that after the burial, both women, who were then young girls, faced great emotional crises that they were not able to confide to anyone. In Hmong culture, the display of vulnerability was a sign of emotional weakness. Although their parents showed grief and sadness, they did not, however, sought comfort or professional help in handling their grief. Therefore, they were not in a position to be able to provide comfort to their children.

Risa and Kaye’s experiences of loss were very traumatic. Risa was eleven when she lost her older brother. It happened on one winter day in September more than a decade ago. Both her brothers, Patrick and Ted, together with other male cousins, decided to celebrate Risa’s younger brother’s birthday at Sydney Royal National Park. The boys, although not trained swimmers, decided to go kayaking. However, because it was winter time, they were wearing thick winter jumpers and
boots. The park did not provide life jackets to any of the boys. When one of the boys fell off the boat, the rest of them panicked and the boat capsized. In their attempt to save each other, three of the boys died while two survived. One of the survivors was Ted, Risa’s younger brother, who was then fifteen years old.

“Their deaths changed the relationship of Hmong families, especially between the families of the boys”. Risa recalled the horror of the incident and the chaos that it caused. Families of the other boys blamed our family for what happened. It was painful. This caused our family to follow a solitary life and avoid other Hmong families. Nevertheless, it also brought positive changes to the dynamics of the relationship within her family. Risa said,

It changed all of us. Mum, dad and us. I think my mother blamed herself and my young brother blamed himself. It was tragic. My mother has not recovered from it. I don’t think she ever will. However, it changed how members of my family interacted with each other.

Before the tragedy happened, Risa’s parents were never expressive of the feelings and affection. She and her sister were envious of the kind of relationships that their friends had with their mothers. Dianne said, “My friends talk to their mothers as if they were friends. I longed for that kind of relationship”. Risa, on the other hand, said that, when she was growing up, she was not open about her feelings and she explained the reason why:

I never heard my parents say things like “I am proud of you or I love you” and I wondered why. I would often hear those words being said in movies and soap operas. You know, like in those scenes when parents say those words to the children when they leave for school? With us, they were just never used. You wondered, as a child, why were they like that? After my brother died my mum was so lonely. We were all lonely. Then we started saying the words ‘I love you’ to each other. After that, we became more expressive of what we felt.

Thus, when her father got very ill and had to undergo a liver transplant, they were able to rely on each other emotionally. “Our lives stopped. I took a leave from work and so did my siblings. We had to, we needed each other”.

In Kaye’s case, there had been two deaths in the family—those of her brother and father within the span of two years. Her brother’s unexpected death, from what she believed was medical malpractice, took a toll on her parents’ health. According to Kaye, her brother was admitted in the hospital for a torn ligament from a work-related injury. However, after a few days they were informed by the hospital that he had died from cardiac arrest. It was a big shock to her family, and she witnessed how her parents suffered from the loss. It was very unfortunate that the following year her father also passed away, eight months after her brother’s death, leaving her mother, herself and her brother to
fend for themselves. Kaye, who was then a teenager, admitted that it was the hardest time for her.

“Back then I just learned how to drive, and I had to do all the responsibilities of running errands between two hospitals where my father and brother were confined”. She added that even at that age, she was expected to be tough and responsible. However, she told me that she could hardly cope with the loss, grief, and responsibility. Besides, there had been some pressure from Hmong elders regarding her father's wake and funeral. She commented:

My father converted to Christianity. Before he died he expressed that he wanted to be buried the Christian way. However, my father's family objected to his wish and insisted that we do the Hmong way. They were up in arms against my mother. It was not the kind of pressure you wanted when you were grieving. It was more than I could handle. In the end, my mother stood by her decision.

Kaye, therefore, sought the help of a psychologist. She said, “I was a teenager and I couldn’t cope with my own much more with my mother’s grief. When my mother found out about me seeing a psychologist, she was disappointed. She said I wasn't sick, why did I have to see a doctor? For her, it was a sign of weakness on my part”.

Both Risa and Kaye, contrary to Jamie and Marlene, never left home nor went through a rebellious phase. They knew that their mothers needed them to assist at home and to be emotionally strong for them. However, both confided that they felt lost during those years. “I felt numb and was just walking around feeling dead inside”, Kaye said. Years later the women had recovered and had learned the most valuable life lesson "to be emotionally accessible to the people who matter”, Risa explained.

**Differential Views of Motherhood in the Context of the Australian Diaspora**

When the mothers started working they took on a new role as income earners. Their goals and responsibilities were simple—to provide for the material needs of the children. Huab talked about those early years and the reasons why women of her generation worked so hard. In addition to meeting their children's needs, all women in this study assisted their families back home financially. In Hmong culture, familial responsibilities always took precedence over one’s self (Mouavangsou, 2018). Therefore, women were also obliged to provide for families back home. Thus, it was less financially burdensome if they had other sources of income.

[Back then] it was very easy for us to find work. We did not know much about Australia. And we did not speak English. We learned by imitating what others were doing. Some people, who were also refugees in the factory could speak English. So they were able to work in the office. We could not do that. Our work was very, very hard. Everyday, we were tired. But we did as much as we could so that we could give our children everything they needed. Food, school clothes, a car and a house. We never had all of these when
we were young ... I want my children to be happy. I wanted them to learn to read and write, speak good English, so they did not have to work in factories. They could work in an office.

At around this time in the 1980s, the first generation’s concept of womanhood had changed from being focused on domestic and reproductive roles to one based on self-determination and actualisation. This re-conceptualisation also affected their idea of motherhood. Hmong mothers had adopted a Western approach to motherhood, learning about the Australian value system from their places of work. They believed that if they provided everything for their children, especially education, there was a better chance of them finding white-collar jobs. Therefore, facilitating career advancement and upward economic mobility.

The daughters, on the other hand, needed their mothers’ moral and emotional support as they integrated into the Australian school environment. They wanted a relationship with their mothers, than to be pushed to be high achievers and good home makers.

They worked so much they were never home ... they worked to buy things that did not mean much to the children. Well, they have a lot to show for it, but we had to suffer the consequences. I only developed a relationship with my mother in my 20s. Before that, I felt lost. I wanted a mother who could drive me to school, to a friends’ house, and to whom I could talk about things. I felt I was just left to my own devices. So at sixteen I reached a breaking point and just left home and lived in Canberra for two years with my paternal grandmother.

Sharon’s account in the previous paragraph revealed much about her expectations and frustration during her teenage years. Her feelings resonated with those of her older sister and other firstborn Hmong daughters in this study. Their past experiences had shaped the way they conceptualised motherhood. My observations in the following passages support this claim.

**Understanding their Mothers: A New Approach to Motherhood**

Sharon and I were driving through the busy streets of Sydney CBD. She was driving and I was in the passenger seat. Although she was trying to have a relaxed conversation, I knew she was trying to manoeuvre around the streets to get to her appointments on time. I noticed she had done a U-turn on a non-U-turn street earlier. She apologised for her behaviour. I laughed to assure her that I did not mind. It was past lunchtime and she was rushing from one meeting to another while keeping track of time. She needed to pick up her daughter, who was staying with her ex-husband, from whom she just recently divorced. She informed me that we should be driving back to Liverpool before four. Also, she did not want to get caught in the after work traffic jam.
While we chatted in the car, she talked about her feelings about being a single mother, “Ever since I had a baby I realised how women are stuck in this cycle...” she paused to make sure she was turning to the right street. "Oh, ok we stay home, we are the caregivers and we take care of... and the men they are just going, going and going and there is no end to this (referring to her situation as a carer). The question is who is going to look after the children because the men sure won't”. I asked, “do you feel like your life halted?” She glanced at me and continued talking, “Yeah and I, I'm kind of asking myself when I am going to start my career again?” She paused to answer my earlier question, “Yeah, your life stops, it stops for a while and I am in that place when I am restarting a career because my child is now two. It is getting back out there that is hard”. It was clear from my observations that Sharon was aware of the difficulty of doing two roles. However, she had learned from the way her parents raised her. Thus, she set her priorities and her life based on her parents’ way of raising children.

Sharon did not have to work as hard as her mother did, but she was aware of the importance of having balance within the household. Sharon was at a crossroad in her life. After her divorce, she decided to go back and live in their old house, where she grew up in.

Sharon started her jewellery line with a friend and business partner. The business was at a very early stage as was her new life. Therefore, she was motivated to make it work. “If the business flourishes”, she said, “then I will have more control of my time. I can’t do an eight to five job; I won’t have much time for my daughter.” Sharon was undoubtedly ambitious and determined to have a balance between home and career.

Similarly, Marlene was concerned about her children’s welfare and happiness. She did not want them to go through the kind of childhood and adolescence she endured. She learned from her parents’ past mistakes. She wanted to provide for the emotional needs of her children. Sitting down with her during the opening of her aunt’s Thai restaurant, she chatted about her youngest child. She told me that her youngest is on the spectrum and thus, required more attention, time and understanding. “Children with autism live in their own world. Sometimes it is so frustrating for them to communicate how they feel. It is at times hard for me as well, but I manage, there are support groups for parents”.

I saw Marlene in different places, usually in her parents' house, in Hmong traditional gatherings and parties attended by Hmong people, always with her children. Often the boys would be in their Taekwondo uniforms. At times, they would be dressed up for special occasions like parties or
Hmong gatherings and rituals such as the New Year celebration. She also encourages her children to "enjoy" school rather than hate it, “I learned to focus on the things that they could achieve, and where they could excel. That way I help them with their weaknesses”. Marlene’s father told me once that he thought his daughter had surprisingly turned out to become a better parent than he and his wife were. He also told me that there were so many things that he learned from the way her daughter brought her children up—the way she prioritised on their needs. “Maybe she learned from our mistakes”, he mused. This was unexpected of Marlene, who as a teenager, rebelled against her parents' strict upbringing and the overwhelming expectations from her as the firstborn child.

Data gathered in this study link with the study conducted by Xiong (2014) on Hmong teenage mothers. Like the mothers in Xiong’s study, Marlene and Sharon admitted motherhood had been a turning point for them. It changed their lifestyles, sense of self, and priorities. Also, it changed their relationship with their parents, especially with their mothers.

When the sisters spoke about their mother’s life and character, they expressed admiration and gratitude for her resilience and sacrifices. They developed a profound understanding of her experiences. I often heard them justifying their mother’s past shortcomings in a forgiving tone, “Because she didn’t know any better” or “she did the best that she could in those circumstances”. Most significantly, they also drew lessons from the strict and detached way they were brought up and turned them into something positive — bringing up their children the way they wished they had been brought up.

Today, all the daughters see their mothers in a different light. Their mothers’ positive qualities are magnified, not their shortcomings. When I spoke to Marlene and her sisters, they spoke about their mother with amazement. They noticed that she had become more comfortable in expressing her creativity, and was more open to new ideas. For instance, she recently learned the use of social media from which she gained knowledge of other cultures. They believed her social media exposure had influenced her views, and therefore, she had become more accepting of people’s differences. The daughters believed their teenage acts of rebellion served as “eye-openers” for their parents, compelling them to examine their traditional ways.

Sharon told me, “My mum is a doting grandmother now. Did you see how much she smooched her granddaughter to the point of making her cry? That would not have happened in the past”. She also told me that her mum had come “full circle” and is now very contented with her life.
Mothers’ Legacy

All daughters in this study have had a deep understanding of their mothers’ sacrifices and successes. They were also all aware of their mother’s transformation from the perfect young nyab (housewife) into individuals, who acquired financial independence and authority within the patriarchal households. They also attributed their present egalitarian parenting ways and their tough attitude towards work and life’s challenges to the lessons learned from their mothers. They all admitted that from the little that their mothers shared about their life stories, they had developed a deep understanding of their resilience amid hardship and sacrifices.

“My mum has come a long way. When she realised we have grown up and were trying to establish ourselves, our lives, and our own families, she allowed us to have the freedom to experience them. She has changed a lot and so did we, and because of that we have developed a new bond”. Before they got married, she and Marlene felt their mother did not have much faith that they would do well in life. Their mother’s change of attitude has fostered a good relationship with her daughters. Doris said, “I felt ever since my sisters married and had their children, they sort of returned to the ‘nest’. They spend more time with my parents, and they bonded well with her”.

Their deep understanding of their mother also gave them insights about her life on the margins in Laos, the refugee camp, and in Australia. “My mother’s generation was raised to survive”, Marlene spoke of the hardship her mother had endured, from poverty in Laos, to surviving life in the refugee camp, and struggling in Australia. She interpreted her mother’s early marriage to her father, as a marriage of necessity and a filial sacrifice, rather than something undertaken of her own volition. With a tone of empathy and sadness she shared the following accounts:

There were things that she didn’t like but she accepted it. Who is a fifteen-year-old who would accept a marriage to an older man? If your parents had told you to marry this man, then she would have to do it. You could tell even though she hated it, she had to do it to survive. She had done it for her family because if she did not, she and her family would still be in Laos. I think with mum she took whatever came her way and made it work for her.

Moreover, she and her sisters were very aware of their mother’s extraordinary capabilities and capacities. They also know that from being an innocent young girl, illiterate and unskilled, she educated herself. Often they would tell me that if only their mother had the opportunities of wealth and education, she would have equalled their father’s academic accomplishments. The statement reveals how much they looked up to their mother. Despite her lack of formal education, they recognised her intelligence. Apart from the above-mentioned qualities, Marlene emphasised, “Because my mum had such a hard life, her most admirable quality was that she was so accepting of whatever came her way”.

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Apart from embodying their mother’s strong qualities, Marlene and her sisters have discovered how much their mother’s creativity has influenced them. Sharon got very enthusiastic when talking about her mother’s artistic tastes. She said,

My mum is very smart, highly creative and talented. Growing up I remember her as being so beautiful and very stylish in her manner of dressing. In photographs, when we were young, she had the best clothes. We kept an eye on her clothes. We tried them, when we were going through that vintage phase. My sister Marlene’s style, as you have probably noticed, is so classic, yet she did not study design. We did not know until recently that we inherited all our creative talents from our mother. Doris and I studied art and design in the university and have always been interested in fashion.

As my mum grew older she started to discover her talents, our commonalities, our love for art and design. Especially now, when she is not working hard in the house and the workplace, she is doing the things that she loves, like gardening, cooking, dressing up, socialising and looking after the grandchildren. She and my dad have finally become the parents that we wanted them to be.

In Risa’s and Jamie’s cases, both hardly knew the history of their mothers’ lives. Like Marlene and her sisters, they knew that their mothers had experienced hardships and tragedies. Both of them knew that their respective mothers had lost their mothers at a young age. Jamie said,

My mum has not told me a lot, but I knew what she felt...her mother died when she was young. And she had a stepmother who was horrible to her. When her mum died, no one combed her hair. Her hair had become knotty, she told me. That meant no one looked after her.

On the other hand, Risa recalled the tragic death of her grandmother.

My mum is the eldest of eleven children. She had two stepmothers. She said her mother, or grandmother died because she drank water that was poisoned. And when my grandfather remarried, she took on the role as the head of her family [for] her original siblings.

Risa and Jamie considered their mothers as real survivors, and they saw themselves as similar to them in many ways. They recognised their mothers’ resilience and determination, the same qualities that they possess. Both women drew insights from the knowledge of their mothers’ ability to become the women they are today despite the difficult circumstances they had gone through. The daughters understood the good and sad parts of their mothers’ lives that justified their own choices. They both expressed admiration for their mothers’ leadership qualities, their endurance for hard work and their ability to form networks and friendships. Moreover, because of what their mothers had gone through emotionally, they were inspired of their resilience. Jamie shared her account of her mother with me,

My mum had been traumatised by war, and she had gone through a lot migrating to Australia. She had a sadness that had not been dealt with because she was isolated. Then, she had children, and she didn’t have the Hmong community around her. There were just things that were culturally missing in her life. Like, whenever she gave birth to each child, she should have stayed in the house for 30 days. She should have had her mother-in-law looked after her; who would have nourished her body back to life with
chicken soup and herbs. She didn’t have that; she didn’t have that much support. Looking back at the life, I now have an understanding of how difficult it must have been for her. But as a child, and as a teenager, it was hard to understand her, because I was dealing with my issues. I felt then that she was not the mother that I wanted, in comparison to parents of my friends. But in hindsight, I now realised how difficult it was to have seven demanding kids. And a husband, who may have not been the best in a lot of ways.

Jamie did not think of her father negatively. Referring to the poverty that her family had experienced in Australia, she explained, “I love my dad, but I don’t think he had been a good husband to my mum. It was a hard life for her.”

Nevertheless, she proudly talked about how her mother, despite her condition and limited resources, used her traditional skills to augment the family income.

I have a lot of admiration for her, for the fact that she turned her garden into something, that became a therapy for her and had earned money on the side. That gave her some form of independence and power. For that, I have a lot of respect for her. I have often said that had my mum been born in Australia she would have probably become a CEO, because she is highly intelligent, and very resourceful. She is good at building networks. If she had been educated it would have been so different.

In Risa’s case, learning more about her mother’s most vulnerable times taught her a lot about her capabilities. She often identified with her mother’s leadership qualities, hard work, and entrepreneurial abilities. Both she and her sister worked with their parents in the bakery, while they were growing up. Her mother introduced them to hard work. Risa told me she was not afraid of hard work, because she knew all about it by working in the bakery. As mentioned earlier, Risa, talked about her mother’s extraordinary quality of being industrious and dedicated, not only to her own family but also to her extended family in Laos. Therefore, she worked hard to provide for her extended family.

“I grew up with hard work, it’s not something that scares me. But having worked in an office for a long time, and not doing any laborious task that my parents did, your way of thinking about work starts changing. You don’t want to work hard; you just want to work smarter”. She added that her training from the bakery made her a very motivated worker.

Her narrative and that of her sister also showed a very sensitive and poignant side of their mother, despite her strong demeanour. Their mother, Huab, aware of her vulnerable physical and emotional state, did not want to emasculate her husband’s position in their patriarchal home. Risa talked about how her mother unconsciously navigated the situation, yet giving importance to her husband’s position in the eyes of the children, Dianne explained,

My mum would talk to me as if my dad has the final say, and portrays that he is the head of the family. That is fair enough, and there is truth in it. But in reality, because of my dad’s condition and my mum’s
decisive nature, she had become the driving force behind our family. If she wanted something to happen she pushed everyone, like in buying a house, starting a business or helping families in Laos.

Just like Nakauj, Huab was strict with her daughters, but now that her female offspring are past marrying age, they believe Huab has become more accepting of her children’s decision. Risa also mentioned that her father had become more affectionate to her mother over the years, “These days because my dad knew my mother’s suffering and he saw how hard she worked when he got very sick, he is happy to do things for her. He does the chores at home and looks after himself”.

I asked Kaye what she thought her mother’s legacy was. She replied, “Despite my mother’s social conditioning, the cultural and social circumstances that she faced, that included the trauma they experienced, we, as second-generation Hmong women should acknowledge that they were their own persons. I take my hat off to them for having had the ability to acknowledge our differences and accept our choices. I think it is about time that we all heal our wounds—they from their trauma and us from trauma passed down”.

Conclusion

This chapter has brought to prominence a neglected topic in the field of Hmong migration to Australia—that of mothers’ and daughters’ intergenerational gap and the second generations’ learnings from their mother’s experiences. As has been the case for Hmong mothers, their daughters’ stories have not figured in academic writings in Australia (except for a few mentions by Lee (2010) on the issue of parental neglect). 58

In Sydney and Canberra, Hmong female adolescents have been more integrated into Australian culture and society than their mothers, who had to undergo the process of integration during the earlier years of migration. However, like other second-generation women who grew up in Western societies, they experienced emotional distance from both parents, even more so from their mothers, from whom they expected affection and nurturing.

For the first time, as adults, the daughters spoke of the issues with which they had to grapple growing up in Sydney and Canberra. These cities were already multi-cultural in the 1980s and 1990s, the time when they were teenagers. We learned from their accounts of the emotional gap between themselves and their mothers. During this time, however, they demonstrated their agency in confronting intergenerational issues. This chapter found it was the differential views on the concept

58 In Cairns and Innisfail where Hmong parents’ time were mostly consumed by farm work.
of adolescence and motherhood that caused emotional disjuncture. It also included the mothers’ perennial absence from home due to work. Further, the difference in perspectives contributed to the intergenerational gap and conflict.

A recap of the impact of work participation on the first-generation Hmong women precedes my explication on differential views of motherhood and adolescence. In chapters four and five, I presented the positive impact of work participation on the lives of the first generation. I learned how it empowered Hmong women by giving them financial independence, changing gender dynamics with Hmong men, and acquiring domestic authority. Financial autonomy, stronger positions vis-à-vis Hmong men, and more power at home led these first-generation Hmong women to possess a stronger sense of self-worth. However, the women did not foresee the negative impact of their absence from home and their drive for affluence on the well-being of their children.

During their early integration into Australian life, the women changed roles. They became income earners out of necessity. It was during this time that they started adapting a Western approach to motherhood. They prioritized the provision of their children’s basic needs using the Australian standard as a basis. They aimed to buy a house, a car, and provide higher education for their daughters. They adopted the Western gender concept of self-actualisation, resulting in the reconfiguring of Hmong womanhood. While these significant changes were taking place in the mothers’ lives, the children faced issues of identity and were asserting their rights for autonomy. They needed guidance and understanding. As Marlene lamented the children did not think of material things when referring to what they expected from their mothers.

Therefore, with their emotional needs unmet, the daughters started to rebel. The mothers’ lack of understanding of their adolescent children stemmed from the different concept of adolescence as experienced Laos. The mothers did not have any framework to make sense of their daughters’ predicaments. In traditional culture, the concept of coming of age was closely intertwined with gender roles. Between the ages of 13 to 17, they had been prepared for adult roles as wives and mothers. Coming of age is a short phase between being a hluas nakauj (young courting girl) to a nyab (wife). After which they immediately became tus poj niam (mother). All stages are linked to family obligations and traditions. Needless to say, it was difficult for them to understand their daughters’ need for autonomy and individuality as influenced by Western values.

However, alignment of views took place when the mothers adopted Western views and gained an understanding of their daughters’ perspective. Also, when the second-generation reached maturity
they began to understand their mothers’ traditional experiences and adaptation during their early days in Australia. This re-alignment led to a renewed mother-daughter relationship. This new understanding inspired the next generation of Hmong mothers to have a more nurturing and egalitarian way of raising their children. In general, they attribute their strong, resilient characters to the learnings gained from their mothers’ lives. Significantly, for the daughters, resilience is their mothers’ greatest legacy.
Chapter 7
Reflections

Once Ntsuab told me a tale about a hundred-dollar US bill which she had sewn into her son’s shirt the day they escaped. She said the money saved her and her son from being imprisoned in the refugee camp when they arrived in Thailand. Just before landing, they had almost drowned when their boat capsized.

“On the Thai side, a man who claimed to be a village leader took us to the police station. They checked our papers. They checked if we have family in the camp”.

Family connections in the camp were of utmost importance. Ntsuab said the Hmong who arrived in Thailand without money or relatives were required to labour in Thai prisons and were forced to live among criminals who were serving time. She continued, “When the boat capsized I was left with nothing but a 100-dollar bill which I sewed onto my son’s T-shirt”.

I asked why she had sewn it on her son’s shirt? She replied “Thai soldiers did not frisk small children, they only frisked adults. Whenever they found money in anyone’s pocket, they would take it”.

I then asked her again, “What did the 100 dollars do for you?”, She looked at me and said ‘I exchanged it for baht. I bought a pair of shoes, clothes for myself and my son and paid for our photos”.

She said she used the photos for documentation purposes. She and her son stayed in the police station for seven days. Then one day Thai authorities summoned her brother-in-law who lived in the camp to confirm family ties with her. After several days they were released.

The above story illustrates how Hmong women like Ntsuab had survived the most challenging times in their journey from Laos to Thailand and finally to Australia. She is one of the five first-generation Hmong women whose extraordinary lives this study has examined. Hmong women like Ntsuab had been resilient, courageous and resourceful amidst hardship and poverty. Yet, their life stories and progress through the various stages from homeland to exile, through migration to
cosmopolitan cities of Sydney and Canberra have not figured in the writing of Australia’s migration history.

In a bid to redress this neglect, this study has addressed the following questions. How did the women fare in Hmong patriarchal system they were socialised into in Laos?; how did these women survive in the Thai refugee camp?; and how have they advanced in Australia? Further, how have Hmong daughters navigated life as second-generation women in Australia? This thesis has addressed these questions all throughout its chapters by drawing upon the work by other scholars which like study have strived to fill the gaps in the knowledge of the Hmong. In line with the aim of articulating Hmong women’s experiences, I began this academic exploration by learning about the history of the Hmong as an ethnic group. I situated their place in history vis-à-vis Laotian history from which I traced the beginning of their displacement. From China where they originated, they migrated southward to Thailand, Vietnam and Laos where they settled and have grown in number. It was the Hmong in Laos who became implicated in the Laotian Civil War, a complex war with many players, namely: the Pathet Lao, the Royal Lao Army and the US Central Intelligence Agency. The Hmong’s involvement in the war later became famously known as the Secret War. Through the presentation of historical facts based on the writings of Hmong historians, this study has proven that Hmong women’s roles and experiences in war and history has been neglected. Therefore, with such absence in historical accounts, this work has become more relevant in breaking the enduring silence in women’s experiences.

With that being said, it is now opportune to reflect on how new knowledge has been revealed from addressing the life experiences of Hmong migrant-refugee women in Australia. This focus leads to an assessment of the research methodology and process used to conduct fieldwork. The main findings of this thesis are highlighted and its significant contributions to the broader study of diasporas, gender and agency in contemporary Australia are identified. Then, the limitations of this ethnographic research project are acknowledged, before the implications and recommendations for further research in gender and migration studies are canvassed.

**Key Issues Revisited**

In this study, I have unearthed the special stories of women, who grew up in a highly patriarchal culture, which rendered them second-class members within households and society. Although their position in both the family and society was marginalised, they still played significant economic and cultural roles from the time that they were exiled to Thailand until they arrived in Australia. They arrived as refugees under the Australian Government’s family reunification program. Unlike some of the Hmong men who had been educated in Australia under the Colombo Plan, the women lacked both formal education and skills to qualify for industrial jobs. Initially, their families had
to rely upon state-government support. A few years later, both the men and women found jobs that enabled them to gain independence from state support and control. Since then the women have become instrumental in transforming their family’s lives and have become adept at integrating themselves into the fabric of Australian society. Thus, this study highlighted their ground-breaking contributions.

Drawing upon an awareness of their Hmong cultural background, this study discovered how the once young and “traditional” women had navigated, adapted and eventually thrived within Australian culture and society. Building upon gender and migration studies in anthropology, this study has also charted how the status and lives of Hmong women have been transformed by their efforts at maximizing economic opportunities, access to social networks and exposure to Western rights and values that Australia has offered them.

The Research Process

This study is the outcome of almost two years of fieldwork research, commencing in Sydney in 2016 and culminating in Canberra in 2018. To some extent, I feel that the study is still ongoing because of my continuous friendship with Ntsuab. During fieldwork, I collected life stories and narratives on various topics, which ranged from memories of growing up in Laos, through escape and exile, to stories of their Australian experiences. In the process, I discovered these women’s exceptional capabilities, which they demonstrated in both private and public spheres. I found out that through the women’s exercise of agency they changed the dynamics and gender relations within households, kinship groups and community.

In the pursuit of my academic agenda, I focused on detailed case studies of the life experiences of the selected Hmong women. Recognising their gendered experiences, I employed a feminist research approach that was geared towards capturing the subjective understanding of the women through a sensitive and participatory approach that took into consideration their women's creation of meanings and interpretation of their realities. An important component of the feminist research approach is the practice of reflexivity, which involved the conscious and constant examination of my valued judgement as a female researcher, who is also a migrant.

The quantity and quality of information that I have been able to collect from the women’s accounts demonstrated the effectiveness and efficacy of the following multi-layered feminist research methodologies. I gathered empirical, ethnographic data through the process of immersion, life story collection and analyses, focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, casual conversations and
participant observation. I immersed myself through weekly participation in the adult evening classes, where I began to establish rapport with my interlocutors. In addition, I took the opportunity in these class sessions to share a documentary film which I write and directed about the plight of migrant women in Australia. The women raised interesting questions and offered their opinions after the film show, which transformed that particular night class into our first focus group. Later, another focus group was facilitated in the same class on the topic of Hmong gender roles. To my surprise, the women, perhaps, already conscious of my research focus, boldly expressed their views on the inequality inherent in the performance of their domestic roles.

When I started to conduct in-depth interviews I had already established a degree of closeness with both men and women from the evening class. Consequently, I was able to hold these interviews with a high degree of ease and confidence. I found the women enthusiastic and receptive to discussions on the topics presented to them. In effect, the information that I gathered from these interviews was rich and substantial. When gathering their life stories, I felt that it was only fair to disclose certain personal aspects of my life to gain their trust. The disclosure resulted in a fruitful outcome. Hence, I was able to elicit highly personal information on delicate topics that included experiences of trauma caused by patriarchal control. Moreover, I have engaged in long, often casual and, at times, profound, conversations with the Hmong women, wherein they revealed their sentiments about the past. They talked about lost opportunities and unrealised dreams. Also, they discussed their accomplishments, and how they overcame adversities faced during the war and their subsequent displacement.

The primary factors that enabled me to empathise with the women were my migration experiences, my gender and, to a degree, as my interlocutors had told me, my Asian ways and values. This was pointed out to me by Huab, when she said, “You know we opened our hearts to you. I like talking to you. It is easy. I understand your English”. At the start of every interview, every woman would apologetically tell me the same thing, “I don’t speak English well” or “My English is no good”. And I would tell them, “I don’t speak Hmong well, so we are the same”. Each woman would laugh at my reply. Often, we commiserated with each other about difficult memories and experiences. When my 97-year-old grandmother passed away they understood as a first-born female grandchild I had to fly back to my country for her funeral, temporarily stopping the research process.

I have learned more about many personal experiences and routine activities through my participation in their daily lives. The trips to wet markets, groceries, shops, restaurants, medical clinics and visits to homes and gardens of Hmong relatives heightened my appreciation of their lives. The long
walks around the neighbourhood with Huab enabled me to develop a friendship with her. Often we would start the walk conversing about trivial things, then we would return home to have dinner and resume our talk. At the end of some days, we would find ourselves in the living area of her inner room teary-eyed reflecting upon our different life experiences.

Ntsuab became a mother figure to me. To this day we maintained a close relationship. Whenever I have been busy and could not visit her, I would give her a call. The first thing she would ask, in a worried tone would be, “Where are you?” as if looking for a missing child.

Sometime around the fourth month of fieldwork, I gained permission to participate in the work places of three women located in Sydney and Canberra. After many months of participation in their work, I had collected rich ethnographic data on both their economic and social networks. It was during this time that I discovered what motivated them to continue engaging in work activities even into their sixties, despite the tediousness of their work processes. This enabled me to comprehend the meaning they ascribed to their engagement in work and how it reconfigured their concept of self and Hmong womanhood.

I approached data gathering data through the lens of a migrant woman. This study thus accounted not only for the Hmong women's subjectivities but my own. As might be expected, there were aspects of Hmong women’s experiences that I could directly relate to, such as the feelings of alienation, nostalgia for places and families, loneliness and loss of identity and belonging and participating in low paid manual work. As I interviewed and conversed with them, I often reflected upon my own experiences of adaptation and integration. Engaging in considerable self-reflection, I was able to interrogate my position with that of the Hmong women.

In conducting fieldwork, I kept in mind the interlocking and multiple layers of women’s experiences that comprised their personal and socio-cultural history. These layers of experiences, as I acknowledged, intersected with the women’s emotional dispositions and embodiments. The amalgamation of these experiences, have been crucial in activating the women’s process of self-actualisation, transformation, and empowerment.

Consequently, I have adapted the post-structuralist stance of many feminist scholars (Tapalde-Mohanty, 1984; Mahler and Pessar, 2001; Crenshaw, 1989, 2010; Hooks; 1984 and Yuval-Davis, 2011) who advocated for the recognition of the many aspects of women’s persona and experiences, through the theories of intersectionality and the gendered geographies of power. They included, but are not
limited to gender, class, status as refugees, educational background, skills, and cultural upbringing and location within Australian society. All of these components of an individual woman’s subjectivity, agency and affective temperaments had guided the conduct and analysis of data in this study.

Main Findings and Contributions

This study has filled in a major gap in the scarce academic scholarship on the Hmong migration to Australia with its work of interrogating the existing historical discourse on Hmong women’s agency. Indeed, Hmong women’s agency has been a widely evaded topic in Hmong scholarship. It has not mattered whether the focus was on Hmong women in general or Hmong migrant women in particular. The reason has been that for many decades Hmong scholarship has been dominated by the Western masculinist gaze. Women have been represented in their traditional gender roles — subordinate and subservient, highly feminine, and the exotic subject viewed as the “authentic Hmong woman”. When a new generation of scholars entered the field of Hmong studies, they gave due reference to the above mentioned pioneering studies and replicated women’s representations in light of their traditional roles. Such a view did not redirect the gaze towards the experiences of women outside the traditional framework within which they had been perceived. This study therefore has sought to redress this omission.

The Post-Secret War era saw the proliferation of the “refugee narrative,”59 where men were still at the centre of the telling of history. Indeed, it took almost two decades of the post-Secret War before second-generation Hmong women mainly in American society, found their agency in pursuing formal education, suspending marriage, taking on community leadership roles and advancing professional careers. Henceforth, when locating Hmong women’s agency in the Western diaspora, it was easy to arrive at an impression that agency is mainly possessed by a few young, educated, career-oriented, second-generation Hmong American women. Although there was a strong element of truth in this representation, there was also a hidden and more significant truth about the exercise of agency by older Hmong migrant women in the Western diaspora.

In the field of Hmong gender studies, there had not been many deliberate and purposeful discussions of the agency of women who migrated to the West. Stacey Lee (1989) initiated a discussion on the topic of the emancipatory power of educating Hmong girls allowing them to resist the practice of wife grooming by asserting their rights to education. Thus, delaying early marriages and

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59 A popular narrative about the Hmong experiences of war and escape, as previously mentioned in chapter 2.
motherhood. Lee’s research thrust led to the agency being found in the pioneering book *Bamboo among the Oaks* edited by Mai Neng Moua (2002), which incorporated experiences that challenged Hmong patriarchy. While other studies had exemplified how first-generation Hmong migrant women circumvented traditional expectations, the agency was also located in women’s expression of voice and identity through visual arts and social media. Ethnographic studies on the Hmong during the period of the post-Secret War era was focused upon the experiences of Hmong women within the Western diaspora, which still was about their traditional roles. Academic works focusing on the transformation or changes in the evolving identities and subjectivities of women had been rare and so were the literature that had delved into agentic actions and involvement of women challenging status has been lacking. Writing along the lines of women as agentic individuals such as those found in *Claiming Place* (2016) had been ground-breaking and inspiring. Yet, none of these studies tackled the transformative power of work at the centre of the discourse. This study, as mentioned above has sought to overcome this omission by charting the initial entry of Hmong women into low-paid employment during the early years of their sojourn in Australia, this was a major catalyst in their empowerment.

Significantly, throughout the conduct of this research, I have been guided by theories and research questions leading to fresh contributions to anthropological, feminist and migration theorising in the exploration of different aspects of agency. Which to me, opens new doors for future feminist and anthropological inquiry.

*In chapter two,* evidence was presented that supported a counter position to previous narratives, which had portrayed Hmong women as powerless and docile subjects of patriarchal rule. Indeed, this study had challenged stereotypical portrayals of first-generation Hmong women. Also, this study has highlighted the writings of other Hmong scholars that had focused on the experiences, roles and contributions of men in history.60 I consider that this study’s most significant contribution to the current feminist debate on women’s agency was the additional empirical data it provided deconstructing the essentialised representation and portrayal of Hmong women.

*In chapter three,* I have argued that Hmong women were not, as claimed, docile agents. They had experienced their first feminist awakening at an early age. In particular, I discussed how, from having limited agency in traditional Hmong culture, the young women overcame their marginalisation and circumvented restrictive norms and traditions. This discussion drew upon the theory of

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60 As shown in the introductory part on the history of Hmong people.
‘patriarchal navigating’ to describe the implicit form of agency through which women navigated around patriarchal norms. Rather than using the terms of either “strategizing or “bargaining” to describe the women’s act of circumventing patriarchy within the limits of their agency, the more appropriate concept of “navigating” was employed. In the case of women, who were at the time young girls in traditional Hmong society, it had been extremely difficult for them to bargain, due to their age and position. While Zhoua was able to divorce her husband, who kidnapped her at fifteen, by entering into an amicable settlement with the village authority, who incidentally was her ex-husband’s uncle, other women had to use their limited agency to navigate around such predicaments. When I analysed the interview data, there were no signs that conscious bargaining had occurred between the opposite genders. Instead, there was evidence from the interview accounts, that the women had been conscious of their marginalisation when they were still young in Laos. Initially, they had become aware of patriarchy by witnessing the experiences of their mothers and, later, through their experiences of the practice of forced and early marriages. Also, their stories revealed how they used the very instrument of oppression — forced and early marriage — to escape poverty in refugee camps. Nevertheless, as instanced by Nakauj, who married at the age of fifteen, many were willing to fulfil this familial duty to meet their parents’ wishes. In the case of Ntsuab, who lost her mother when young and was badly mistreated by her stepmother, there was an overriding wish to belong to a family through marriage. Experiences of bigamous marriages, son preference, and the lack of opportunity for education served as eye-openers for young girls. From their underprivileged lives they had an early realisation of the ambiguity of a Hmong women’s femininity and womanhood—they were perceived as good when docile and unfeminine when assertive or individualistic.

In chapter four, I have addressed the impact of the women’s participation in paid work and the economic freedom with which they had reconfigured their traditional view of themselves. The common experiences of unskilled migrant-refugee women in Australia during the 1970s had already been canvassed in a few migration studies featuring their labour in processing zones, known as ethnic enclaves. While “dirty work” has been given to ethnic migrant-refugee women offering nimbler fingers and cheap labour, my study had drawn out that they were confronted with a new form of patriarchy in a Western context. Once again, this form of patriarchy undervalued their work and contributions. Nevertheless, it was in the public spaces of the factories that the migrant-refugee women had displayed their repertoire of skills. Indeed, the Hmong women recognised that what they had brought into the labour market, was of great value. Thus, the women capitalised on both their industriousness and hard work and understood how they could maximise the opportunities for exchanging their labour for financial gain.
This study also revealed that the transformative power of work meant more than fortnightly earnings to Hmong women. It was the sense of belonging in the resultant social network and developing their self-worth that motivated their continued engagement in work. In Ntsuab’s case, this satisfaction stemmed from working in the backyard farm and from the weekly sales at the marketplace. Nevertheless, there had been a shift in their motivation to engage in work because of their current age and economic status. During their early years in Australia, they were pressured to earn more to be able to establish a comfortable life. Today, without that economic pressure they find enjoyment from continuing to work. Huab, for instance, still enjoys running the bakery without the pressure of being responsible for returns and losses. Further, Da takes pride in the respect and high regard that she has been afforded by her co-workers and superiors — a kind of regard she never had in her subordinate positions as a younger daughter, daughter-in-law and young wife. However, she had gained respect within Hmong communities as an elderly Hmong woman. Similarly, as a senior worker in the factory she has been regarded with respect and her work valued.

The most significant effect of participation in paid work had been the radical transformation of the women from the position of young, traditional and subordinate wives and daughters-in-law into income earners and matriarchs within what was once a patriarchal home. Through work activities and social networking, the women discovered their capabilities and value in ways that are no longer derived from their exemplary performance of gender roles. Two of the women in my study capitalised on their business inclinations, while the rest of the women brought their repertoire of skills and work attitudes, developed while growing up in their Laotian homeland, into the Australian workplace.

In chapter five, I have presented how their newly acquired financial capacity had enabled the first-generation Hmong women to exercise domestic and cultural agency. This study had shown that Hmong women have integrated well and adopted Western values yet have remained attached to their close-knit kinship groups. Over the years they have shared similar life trajectories and, therefore, continued to exercise their agencies in identical ways. Apart from continued participation in economic activities, they organised their homes to express sentiments of nostalgia and shifting identities. This phenomenon, ascribed as creating “homely spaces”, had been analysed as a response to displacement. The practice has been guided by past sensory memories that both the mind and senses have recollected. While this study agreed with this theoretical observation, it extended its range and application by proving that migrant people from ethnic backgrounds use the materiality of the home as a site for domestic authority and cultural agency to maintain kinship bonds and nurture cultural dispositions. In effect, Hmong women were able to continue their roles as culture bearers by passing knowledge and values to the next generation.
Within the confines of the home, women have exercised a measure of control and authority that they were unable to exercise in traditional Hmong society, because of their former subordinate status and lowly position in the domestic hierarchy within their husbands’ households. For example, Huab designed and structured her ideal home where the kitchen faces her backyard garden. Further, all women interviewed had an outside kitchen on the patio of their homes, which was reminiscent of the kitchens in the refugee camps. The structure of their houses in Sydney, where they had built two living areas and two dining areas, has revealed the women’s wish to have their own communal spaces identical to those habited by the men. This outlay was not employed in traditional Hmong homes. Nevertheless, these spaces in Australia had allowed women to maintain kinship bonds, through the traditional roles of food preparation and cooking during ritual and ceremonial occasions. Of particular note, was the use of the garage to continue agricultural practices, which enabled them to relive memories of their rural life in Laos.

Finally, in chapter six, I have explored the lives of second-generation Hmong women. This focus allowed me to demonstrate how the legacy of their mothers’ lives had become the primary agency for their daughters’ generation who eventually derived a deeper understanding of their experiences and viewpoints. Employing both the theories of Karen Van Dyck’s (1989) emotional capital and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) transformation of capital, this study discovered that there was once an emotional disconnection and intergenerational conflict between the generations. The cause of this emotional gap between mother and daughter had been explored. Data revealed that opposing views on the concepts of adolescence and motherhood rather than from the regular absence of the mother at home had caused the intergenerational conflict. For the second-generation, adolescence was a time of independence and autonomy that had produced an identity separate from first-generation Hmong families and community. For the mothers, coming-of-age was a phase when they were forced into adulthood through becoming young wives, daughters-in-law and eventually mothers.

Further, conflicting views hinged on the concept of motherhood. For the first-generation, motherhood at that particular period of migration meant fulfilling their roles as income-earners and meeting the needs of their growing families. Conversely, their second-generation daughters had expected care, nurture, openness and affection from their mothers during their adolescence. Sadly, this type of relationship did not materialize at that stage. Many of the second-generation daughters left home as an act of rebellion and in pursuit of their identity outside the Hmong community. Later, when they became adults and mothers themselves, they came to appreciate the legacy of their mothers’ lives. This legacy had become their primary agency, and had enabled them to understand
past conflict with their mothers and therefore were able to resume lost relationships. The daughters were left to navigate the remnants of Hmong patriarchal rules at home while they established their individual identities.

**Limitations**

As I have discussed in this thesis, information and studies on the experiences of Hmong men have been rich while those of women have not. Hence, this thesis has purposely focused on the everyday lived experiences of Hmong women alone, for the reason that very rarely figured in anthropological studies. My aim was to give voice and prominence to their experiences. Since this study is one of the rare feminist studies on Hmong women in Australia, I included the experiences of the second-generation daughters in relation to the experiences of their mothers have been accounted for.

The conduct of fieldwork research in Liverpool, a suburb of Greater Sydney was exciting and comfortable yet had been limited by several factors. As an ethnographer raised in a busy city, I initially blended with ease into the urban life of my respondents. Further, there was also easy access to shops and other places of social activity that they frequented. Nevertheless, in other respects, I have found the urban milieu quite restrictive due to its rules, regulations and city ordinances. For instance, it has been difficult to gain permits to participate in workplaces other than those of Huab and Ntsuab. As permission to gain access to Nakauj’s workplace from Woolworths was not granted, the number of case studies on the topic of work participation was reduced to four as a result. Also, in Da’s case, I was only given limited time to participate in her work at the factory. Nonetheless, with the assurance that Da had given her employer about the authenticity of my research agenda, I was able to gather enough data from participating in her work activities. I was also very fortunate to have been allowed by the new owner of the bakery to participate in Huab’s work activities for four months. Later, Huab introduced me to two Hmong women who are based in Canberra. One of them was Ntsuab. For a period of one year I joined Ntsuab in her economic activities in two places: in her back yard garden and in the Sunday market.

As I had anticipated, the language barrier has limited the conduct of this research into the Hmong. Interviews have been limited to what the respondents could articulate in English. Nevertheless, I was able to validate information gathered from interviews through the help of my translators and by using the data gathered from participant observation. I had to rely on the assistance of the Hmong men for translations of their wives interviews, which may have altered the meaning and
context of what the women were trying to convey. Therefore, I had to further validate the information through the help of my Hmong translators, as well as with the data I gathered based on my observation.

Lastly, much as I wanted to deeply explore the impact of the lives and experiences of the first generation on the second generation daughters, I have been restricted by limited access to their everyday lives. Although I have become deeply acquainted with the second generation I have not been able to participate in their daily lives and activities. All of the respondents have had established professional careers and were extremely busy with daily work. Therefore, none of them granted permission that I would have liked.

With regards to the Hmong men, I have conducted corollary interviews with them to complement and contextualise the gendered data gathered from the Hmong women. Many of them were still locked within the framework of wanting to present Hmong culture as traditional. Women’s experiences were yet to be introduced to them as an important topic in the current writing of Hmong history. For them, women’s business was still separated from their own. Thus, the topics that I had tried to explore in the interviews with male participants did not draw much enthusiasm from them.

**Implications and Recommendations for Further Research**

This study is still one of the rare ethnographic studies on Hmong women’s agency in Australia. It adds to the first study published at the turn of the century by Liamputtong-Rice in 2000 and the most recent by Michelle Lee in 2013. Since 2000, this study of the Hmong women in Australia has been the first to include the voices and experiences of several second-generation Hmong women. Since 2000, Hmong women have gone through a radical transformation and, have adopted different insights due to their integration into both Hmong and Australian culture and ways-of-life.

Further, given the emphasis and discussion on how Hmong patriarchal societies control the development of daughters, this study has opened up new discussions and debates on the marginalisation, not only of Hmong girls but also those of other young girls living in culturally-diverse backgrounds around the globe. This research would encouraged the need for an examination of the continued abuse of young girls from ethnic backgrounds in Australia, who had to submit to oppressive cultural practices, such as forced child-marriages, that had been prevalent among Hmong young women in the recent past.
The special focus on the processes and meaning of work to migrant-refugee women, whether in suburban or rural areas, has been an understudied field in Australia. Thus, building upon the empirical data derived from fieldwork, this study provides a springboard for future ethnographic work. Hopefully, such work, will lead to the discovery of other aspects of the experiences of migrant women. They may include studies that will delve into the challenges faced by adolescents within migrant homes, or the life- after- retirement of the first-generation. All of these future studies would add to the discourse on the perspectives of new Australians and, in particular, enlighten the public about Hmong history, culture and diaspora.

A marked contribution of this study has been exemplified by highlighting the relationship of women to the materiality of the home. With the exploration of the home, this study of adaptation and integration experiences has made a distinct contribution to migration and anthropological studies. Migrants from different cultural backgrounds use their diasporic home spaces to express memories, emotions and the desire to belong and exercise control and authority in the unfamiliar place of a new country. As this kind of material study of migrants’ way of expressing agency has been rare in Australia, the topic offers a rich field for further exploration. A good point of departure for deriving a better understanding of the past of women that Hmong scholarship in Australia has missed would be to expand on their emotions attached to specific cultural objects.

This study also highlighted the topic of intergenerational conflict in migrant families. In Australia, the presentation of the second generation’s experiences and points of views in the academic study has been scarce. It was for this reason that this work had not been able to present and theorise their life experiences within the Australian culture and society. Still, by theorising the emotional disconnection that took place between the two generations of women I drew insights on their experiences. The findings now provide a springboard for further discussions of other issues concerning the second- generation Hmong, a field that has been neglected in migration studies in Australia.

Finally, I have emphasised that with the examination of various agencies of Hmong women this study has contributed to a better understanding of them. Regardless of what they have experienced, with their rich cultural heritage and traditions they have been able to effect a compromise with Australian values and beliefs. Also, this study has demonstrated how, through their explicit and implicit agency, the women have been able to manage their lives, and find solutions to issues and problems. Further, the research has shown how they have been capable of empowering themselves from their refugee status to becoming productive members of society. Given the positive
representation of Hmong women as agentic individuals, this study would encourage further feminist and anthropological studies of migrant and refugee women’s lives to inform Australia’s asylum debate. It is also hoped that future migration and refugee studies will incorporate a much deeper and serious interest in the plight of women from ethnic backgrounds. Only then can it be said that the vision of diversity and multiculturalism has been attained in the “land down under”.
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