

Narrator: Sia Yang
Interviewer: Sallie Anna Steiner
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STEINER: Here we are, August 3rd at the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association. I'm here with Sia Yang. Just to start off with, I just wanted to get basic biographical information from you. Where were you born?

YANG: I was born in Laos, in the jungle.

STEINER: Like a village or were you on the run or?

YANG: Yes, yes. I always tell people that it's in the jungle because I was told that I was born while my parents were running away escaping from the war, where they were traveling from Laos to Thailand. I don't know what province or what city, but I just know that it is somewhere in the jungle in Laos.

STEINER: How old were you when you came to the U.S.?

YANG: I came to the US in 1994, so I was about seven years old. I started third grade when I came to the U.S. We arrived in California, so California is my first home in America. I resided there up until 2004, and moved to Wisconsin due to marriage and also for schooling, for college.

STEINER: Is there a large Hmong population out in California?

YANG: Yes, yes. There is a lot of Hmong people. I lived in Modesto. That is the first city that I moved to. Modesto is very diverse. They have a lot of Hmong people, Minh, Laotian, Cambodian. It was a very diverse place.

STEINER: How is that with the other Asian communities, is there a lot of mixing between the Hmong people and the other communities that are there, or do they tend to keep to their own?

YANG: They are very cohesive. They do a lot of stuff together. I remember in grade school I had friends that were either Cambodian or Laotian or Minh.

STEINER: What is Minh?

YANG: Minh is another population similar to the Hmong but they have a different dialect, different language. Very similar culture and religion, but different dialect. Physical wise they look very similar to the Hmong but they are a little bit different.

STEINER: OK. And they are also from Thailand or Laos?

YANG: Yes, yes.

STEINER: Have you visited other Hmong communities (obviously yes), and how is being Hmong in Eau Claire different from being Hmong in other places?

YANG: I think I want to speak to California first. I lived in Modesto and then I moved to Sacramento. So Sacramento is the capital of California, of course, so you have exposure to more people, Hmong people and every one. I guess from my experience, when I was living in Modesto, back then it was pretty small but now it is pretty huge. So the population back then was pretty similar to Eau Claire where everyone knows everyone, and they are very connected. It is like a community.

STEINER: Strong community bonds?

YANG: Yes, yes. But then when I moved to Sacramento because it's a bigger city, more population, it's more developed, people tend to not be connected as much because they are out and about and doing other stuff. You know people are working. They have families to raise, and they just don't seem to interconnect with each other very much.

STEINER: Hmong people specifically, or just the community as a whole?

YANG: I would say the Hmong people, just the Hmong population specifically, because when you have more people involved like living together, you just don't see the cohesiveness. People are kind of to themselves. I know I was involved in a lot of organizations when I was in Sacramento. I also think that has to do with the more resources that we have in the community also has some kind of impact on the way that people interact with each other. So for an example, in Sacramento we used to have the Hmong Association. We also had the Hmong women's circle. We also have another extension for the youth, and then another like a radio show specifically for the Hmong people. So when you have a lot of resources like this people tend to go separate ways. They tend to go wherever fits their interest. So you don't see the connection within the community and within the people.

But here in Eau Claire, we don't have Hmong women's circle. All we have is the Hmong Association. Therefore, the Hmong Association brings everyone together. I guess when there is one center like this, everyone just comes to the center for resources and to feel connected to their culture. But when you have a lot of resources like Sacramento, people go to different resources to be connected and to feel their culture. So here in Eau Claire we have the association, and all the programs are within the Hmong Association, so everyone comes to a one stop center to remember who they are, to remember their roots and their culture.

In bigger cities like Sacramento... and another thing I want to tap into is St. Paul or Minneapolis. I've been there, I was also involved in some of their community resources like community events, I was a part of lot of their events. I was involved in St. Paul and Minneapolis and I do see a lot of differences, too. It is very similar to Sacramento because they have a lot of resources, a lot of organizations. If you go to the city, Minneapolis and St. Paul, they have a lot of services, a lot of organizations for the Hmong population, therefore people tend to go into different.... I want to say that it is almost like organizations and clubs. People go to the club that best suits who they are.

STEINER: Yes. They make little sub communities within the larger one.

YANG: Exactly. For example, in Minneapolis, in the city--when I say city I am talking about St. Paul and Minneapolis--they have professional organizations for professional women. They have another

organization specifically for the police officers. They also have another organization for women who are into politics. So different stuff like this. It is just that in bigger cities with more resources and more organizations, people tend to go where they feel whatever best matches their interest.

STEINER: Do you like being in a smaller place where you have more a sense of just like single community like they have here, or there are negatives and positives of both?

YANG: I would say that they each have different positives and negatives. For example, in a smaller town like Eau Claire we have one center we can go to, and sometimes I really wish that we had more. But when it gets too much, it can also be a problem because now everyone is doing their stuff, and you don't see the interconnectedness. I want to give the example like Minneapolis and St. Paul have two Hmong New Year's events, and in my perspective it's like we should just have one like Eau Claire because why have two and separate the people.

STEINER: I see.

YANG: So that's what I am talking about. So that is the disadvantage of being in a big cities. However, I do know that in small towns people are more connected. They feel enriched with their culture just because you go to one center and that is for everyone, and there is no separation. You don't have options. I guess sometimes not having options is also better.

STEINER: Do you think there is anything about the landscape or the environment that Hmong people have connected with here, or it's been a challenge here? Especially coming from California....

YANG: Yeah.

STEINER: I was thinking Southeast Asia is a very hot and humid place.

YANG: Yes, definitely.

STEINER: California is a dry hot.

YANG: Oh, yes. Very dry in California. I just came back from there not too long ago, in July. It's very dry. It is like a desert. I know that here in the Midwest it is very like this weather we have now, especially the rain this summer, also with all the green stuff that we have, it is very identical to Laos, like the forest. At least I was told that what we have here is very similar to Laos. The landscape, the trees, rain in the summer--that doesn't happen in California ever. The mountains, especially here in Wisconsin...

STEINER: Like the hilly....

YANG: Yes. A landscape like that just reminds a lot of people of Laos, about their homeland. I know it was weird for me at first when I came to Wisconsin from the flat low land like California, the valley, to Wisconsin was like wow! Here in Wisconsin we have a lot of mountains, it's up and down, and when I got here it was almost like going back to Laos and Thailand. When I saw all the green stuff it was like whoa, it's beautiful. It is very beautiful. But, here in Wisconsin in the Midwest we have snow, and that is...

STEINER: Not so much in Laos and Thailand.

YANG: No, it doesn't happen ever. So that is a big change, but I know that in the summer it's very identical to homeland, to Laos because of all the green stuff that we have. Very tropical.

STEINER: Do you have a lot of memories of Laos or Thailand, or were you young enough that you don't really remember much?

YANG: Not in Laos, to be honest. I don't remember anything from Laos. I was a baby. However, in Thailand I do remember parts of it. I still have recollections of landscapes, the buildings, people, food.

STEINER: Were you living in a camp at that point?

YANG: Yes. My family moved from Laos to Thailand and they landed in Ban Vinai. That is a camp. We resided there for about two years, and then moved another camp in Thailand again, in Chiang Kham. Then we moved to another camp, and then we came to the U.S. So three camps all together. I want to say that I didn't have a lot of reflections or a lot of memory because we were in camps. When you are in camps there are curfew times, rules and regulations to follow. There are limitations on the places you can go to. So we were being restricted, so that didn't give me a lot of exposure.

STEINER: Stressful sort of making a lot of memories.

YANG: Yes.

STEINER: But do you see a difference between, I don't know, maybe you were too young to remember a lot of how people practiced the culture at home, or maybe how people practiced the culture in the camps was probably a lot different than they practiced the culture, before, during peacetime. Did you experience a shift between how you practice Hmong culture at home and then how you did when you came to the U.S.?

YANG: Yes, definitely. I can speak a little to that. Back in Laos and Thailand, one example that I want to give is funerals. In Thailand and Laos when someone passed away, we could do the funeral at our home, inside our house without any restrictions, and that is normal, that's normal cultural practice. And that is the way it should be, that when someone passes away and you are going to have the funeral, you do it within your house where the person actually resides. So funerals were done in that respect, without any complications. They cooked there, and they do the whole funeral. It's about three or four days, and you don't have to wait for a couple weeks out. For example, if someone passed away today you could start the funeral later or you could start the funeral right away without having to wait.

So back at home it's more convenient to practice culture. And it looks very real because that's how it has always been practiced. However, when we moved to the United States, we could no longer do that. We cannot do the funeral at our house. We had to go to the funeral home. We had to take the body, freeze it, and wait for a funeral home to be available. Then when someone passed away, you had to wait maybe a week or two before you can actually do the funeral. When you do the funeral, because it's a different society, people tend to do it on the weekend, not the day shift. We have to wait a couple of weeks out. You have to not do it at your house. There may be some restrictions with the funeral homes.

So for example, we use a lot alcohol when it comes to funerals, and alcohol is part of the culture, it is part of a sign of respect.

STEINER: Ritual drinking?

YANG: Yes. Definitely. But here in the United States, there are some restrictions. Some funeral homes would not allow the Hmong people to use alcohol on their premises. When that happens, then you are losing the culture. You are losing the richness of the culture when you don't practice a piece of it. So I think those are some differences. We are restricted to do the funeral from Friday to Monday. It's just different. Then you have to do the cemetery. Everything is different. You have to go through the process. There is a process in place now in the United States, and we had to follow that process. Again, things have changed. Culture has changed with time. It's not very convenient anymore because we are in a different society. So, like for an example here in the U.S. people work, they have a job, and they're busy. They are contributing to the workforce. Therefore, when stuff like this comes upon them, they have to plan. So you can't just do the funeral, OK, we are going to do the funeral and we are going to do it at home, we are going to prep, we are going to do this, so it is definitely different.

STEINER: It's not built into your life in a natural way.

YANG: Right, so that has been different. Another difference is the New Year. In Laos and Thailand, each city has their individual New Year. And we still do that here in the United States because of the different timing. But back in the homeland, we don't have to rent space. It's a real New Year celebration where families, friends, people all come together to spend time together. It's a time for young people to come together to find their significant others, and that kind of stuff. But here in the United States, we are restricted too, because you can't just go out to a park and be like, OK we are going to the New Year. You cannot just do that.

STEINER: You have to get a permit.

YANG: Exactly. You cannot publicize something. So you have to get a permit, you have to pay rental fees. There are policies to follow and you can't just be anywhere. You have to be within your space and you have to let the people know what exactly you are doing. So again that kind of restricts cultural practices. For example, like here in Eau Claire New Year's, the New Year event is indoors versus back at home all New Years are outdoors. All of the New Year's events are outdoors, but here in the Midwest most of the New Year's events are indoors, and it's only for a couple of days.

STEINER: When does the New Year happen?

YANG: Here in Eau Claire, the second week in November on Saturday and Sunday. So it's only two days. We cut down from five to seven days like back at home to two days or three days. So this year the New Year is November 10th and 11th. So for two days. So those are just some changes to culture, to practices. Right now with the New Year, Fresno has retained the longest, the New Year that is closest to home. They have their New Years for seven days, and that's the closest. That is the international New Year. That usually occurs the week before Christmas all the way through New Year's day. And it is outdoors, so it is very identical to home.

STEINER: Speaking of home, have you been able to go back to Thailand or Laos or anything at all?

YANG: I have not. That's one of my goals for the future. I have not visited home yet.

STEINER: Have you heard from other people who have gone back at all? I wonder how life there has changed for Hmong people.

YANG: I've heard about it. I've talked to a couple of my students who did the over....

STEINER: Study abroad?

YANG: Yes, the study abroad. And things have changed a little bit culture wise. I know outfits, clothing wise have changed. But the New Year's is still outdoors. There are more people involved with ball tossing and that kind of stuff. However, here in the United States we don't do a lot of that. The ball tossing at least in small towns like Eau Claire and other places don't really...

STEINER: It is like a traditional game?

YANG: Yes. It's a traditional game but it is technically for single people to come together to get to know each other. Courtship. Yes.

STEINER: What is it called?

YANG: Ball tossing. *Pov pob*.

STEINER: So how does that bring people together?

YANG: So this is how it works. All the single people... so if I am single and you are single, we are women, then we would ball toss each other to start off with. It is usually the guys that don't start the ball toss, it is usually the single women ball tossing to each other. And then single men would walk around, and if there is someone that they are interested in, then they would go and talk to that person. So for example, if they are interested in you, then that person--that man--could talk to you and get to know you, and then ask to ball toss with you so that you guys can ball toss and get to know each other better. In the process, you may chant to each other because with the Hmong people, we are not very direct. So the guy could walk over and be like OK I am interested in you, but they're not going to say that I like you and I want to get to know you more, but they are going to express their feelings through chant, through *kwv txhiaj*. So the ball toss is like an activity to give you guys the time to get to know each other. But really it's so you could actually chant to each other.

STEINER: What do you chant, just like little word games?

YANG: It is a really long chant depending upon the person's strength. So for example, the guy could chant "And now I met you, I walked through the whole New Years and I couldn't find anyone, and today I find you and I really like you. Where are you from?" in the chant. It could be like a five minute to ten minute chant.

STEINER: He just comes up with impromptu?

YANG: Yes, yes.

STEINER: So it's not like a set line.

YANG: No, no. It is not set. I always tell my students that it's on the spot. They say whatever comes to their mind. But then it is all connected, so its proverbs involved, rhymes, and rhythm all involved.

STEINER: So there is a style to it.

YANG: There is a style to it.

STEINER: Have you ever, did you meet your husband doing this?

YANG: No. [Laughter] Back here in the United States that was not....

STEINER: So it is not something people practice around here?

YANG: Not so much here now with the young generation, but with elders, they still practiced that.

STEINER: How do young people tend to meet here, do they still practice some of these courtship rituals?

YANG: No, here in the United States they are very direct. As society changes, and we have new generations now, and they are very direct. With technology, too, people are just so direct that if they go to New Year's events and they like each other they'll ask for phone numbers. Like "What is your phone number? Where do you go to school?" They are really direct now so they don't chant. I also think that they're direct because they don't know the culture. They don't know the chant. And if we don't know the chant, you want to do just go with whatever is convenient. So part of that is some of the young generation don't know the language very well, because to practice and to chant you have to know the language well. So I know that here in the United States, most of them just ask for phone numbers so they can get to know the person. They are very direct.

STEINER: What do the parents think of that? It seems like it is not right?

YANG: I think that they are now used to it. Early in the 1990's was kind of awkward for someone to just be direct. But here in the 21st century in 2018, parents are very direct and they are accepting it because they know that the young generations don't know how to chant anymore. So therefore they have to be direct.

STEINER: Are proverbs important in Hmong culture?

YANG: It is. Proverbs are very important. We use a lot of proverbs in the culture, in rituals, for *maj koob*, negotiators. The *maj koob* are people that negotiate during a wedding. So lots of proverbs in the chant. Lots of proverbs in the language. And *kwv txhiaj* is another chant that we talked about, there's a lot of proverbs, too. So proverbs are used very deep in the Hmong culture, especially when it comes to funerals, weddings, and any kind of chants that we have. To understand the processes and also the chant the person has to know the language.

STEINER: Yes. Really deeply not just...

YANG: Exactly.

STEINER: Speaking a language is one thing, but then being able to speak in proverbs, it's another level above that.

YANG: Yes.

STEINER: Can you give me an example of any of the proverbs that may be out of context and not as powerful but it would be interesting to hear an example.

YANG: Let's see, a proverb that is used often.... So one example is [speaks in Hmong], meaning that you see the bird, and birds are beautiful when they fly, but [speaks in Hmong] you don't see the bird's nest ever. So the meaning behind it is that when you see someone out in the public they may look very beautiful, very nice, but you don't know their true character. So their character could be not so good, their living environment may not be so developed, because you compare the bird, birds are very beautiful, they fly, they're free and they look beautiful when they're out in the public when they're flying in the sky. But if you look at a bird nest, it's messy and it doesn't look very stable. So therefore that is another example of like, your parents always say "OK when you are out scouting for a wife or husband be careful" because they may look very good on the outside, but their true character may not portray who they are in physical appearance.

STEINER: I see.

YANG: So those are some proverbs that we use. Another one is [speaks in Hmong], meaning that when you're not stable, you don't see anyone that's beautiful or cute or that kind of stuff. So that is exactly what it is.

STEINER: You need to be stable in order to find someone.

YANG: Right. And then when you are stable it's kind of different. So that's how it is. So saying, for example, when someone is single they are too free and they don't see the essential beauty of a person. But when they are finally married and they have committed now they start seeing other people. Yes, that is what it is. So you don't see any flaws until you have built something up.

STEINER: Then you begin to see the complexities of the person.

YANG: The flaws, yes.

STEINER: I wonder what women's roles in Hmong culture are. How are women supposed to be, or what is a woman's role in a family?

YANG: I would speak not to make comparison in a way, so in Laos and Thailand traditional role women are to do the domestic chores in the house. Taking care of the children. Tending to their husband and his family.

STEINER: Is that the kind of thing where when you marry you go to your husband's family?

YANG: Yes. So when you marry, like myself, I am married, so I am a Yang, so I have not changed my name and that is not something traditional that we do.

STEINER: So it is not traditional that you don't

YANG: That we change our last names.

STEINER: OK. So you keep...

YANG: I keep my last name.

YANG: I was born into the Yang clan, and then when I married my husband he's a Xiong. Now I have to go to his side and I am one of their people now. So I would help him with everything, devote all my time and energy and strength to him and his family. So meaning that when we have ritual parties, the woman are to cook. They are to prep the food, to be the hostess to guests. We have to find a place for our guests to sleep so it was providing a lot of hospitality to guests. Also if we have in-laws then we have to help the in-laws. Meaning we cook and we clean for them to show respect and to show love. And also that is part of the traditional role of the Hmong women. We do a lot of stuff as Hmong women. You also discipline the children. You just do a lot of stuff. The majority of...

STEINER: Stabilizing the home....

YANG: Yes. So stabilizing the home, the children, keeping everyone at peace. So traditionally, that's how it is. However, with the current society here in the United States, we have a lot of Hmong women in the workforce, so that changes the role. So we may not always be able to tend to the family needs. For example, if we have in-laws, we may not be able to cook and clean all the time. We may not always be able to go to extended family's events because of work, or we may not be able to give them more time than we used to because of work. And the society has changed now that we have children, our children go to school and we have to tend to their needs, too. So the roles have shifted a little bit. I know some Hmong men are contributing to helping with domestic chores. We still have other men that are not willing to let go of that.

STEINER: So some Hmong men are changing to adapt in some ways, but maybe in other families the women have to fill two roles now rather than...

YANG: Yes. I want to say that with the young generation now, the men are more open minded and they are helping with the chores, they help with the children, they help with cooking and cleaning which really helps because we are in a very competitive society where the workforce is in the middle. So to stabilize the family, both husband and wife have to balance their role of cleaning, cooking, and disciplining the children. However, that is not always true for some families, especially for some older men that are not willing to let go of the role. They still keep the very traditional role of, I am the man, I don't cook, I don't clean, and I am here to serve the community.

STEINER: The man is the public face and the woman is the private face.

YANG: Yes. You used to see a lot of that. I am involved in a lot of different stuff in the community, and it's very transparent that the men are still very involved in events. They are like the leaders and the women are subordinate to it. You don't see a lot of women in leadership roles, especially when it comes to organizations to serve the Hmong population. You don't really see a lot of women involved because they are behind the scenes. And I'm talking strictly about married women. If you are a single woman, you do have more flexibility. But again sometimes your involvement may have to be cut off when you are married, depending on the husband, whether the husband supports you to be involved. So for example, my husband is very supportive, so whatever I do in the community, he supports me so I can do a lot of stuff for the community. For example, I teach and then I'm also part of the New Year committee. So on the New Year committee, I engage with the vendors and all that stuff. In that role I do a lot of communications with the vendors, setting stuff up, talking to the building people, making sure we are using the space correctly. So I am able to be involved in those, but it also means I have to come to meetings. When I go to meetings, it is usually men that are there, not a whole lot of women. I want to say that in my committee, in the New Year committee, we only have two women alone, and the rest are men. So again, being a married woman, you really have to have a husband that supports you to go to school.

STEINER: In order to vouch for you kind of with the other men...

YANG: Right. To support to be involved so that you can put your face in the public. But if I were to be single, I could still be involved, but the risk is will my husband support me if we were to get married?

STEINER: Is it kind taboo to be an unmarried woman, an older unmarried woman in Hmong culture?

YANG: Kind of. It depends on the woman. If the woman is an educated woman, then the taboo kind of alleviates. But if it is someone who just simply doesn't want to get married, has no education, no job, then yes.

STEINER: It is a complex status thing.

YANG: Yes, it is. Again, the role is also influenced by family members, too. Extended family. So the example I gave you about involvement, so if I were to be involved as a married woman now my extended family can have an influence on my husband's perspective. So meaning if they felt that I am out of my role, that I wasn't fulfilling my role correctly, they could tell my husband, "Hey your wife is not fulfilling the right role," and things could change and that could cause a lot of dynamics issues. But I've never faced that, but I know people that have encountered situations like that and it's very difficult.

STEINER: So the family in Hmong culture is very involved in the marriage, and family life and stuff.

YANG: Yes, yes.

STEINER: That was sort of my impression from... I had done some work previously with an archive of recordings, and there was one with a Hmong marriage broker guy, and he was talking about the wedding and it sounded like it was not so much about the two people but about the two families.

YANG: Yes.

STEINER: I had very much the impression that Hmong families are very involved in...

YANG: They are very involved, very cohesive.

STEINER: I do want to get to some of the stuff you have but I just have one last question about this family stuff. Since Hmong people are kind of scattered around the country and the world, I wonder how that is for maintaining family bonds and clan bonds and stuff like that?

YANG: Sure. That's a perfect question for me. My husband, for example, he has a lot of family members, but they don't live together. They don't live together because of work. So they don't get to do the daily activities together like the picnic. They don't get to hang out together very often. But they have a scheduled annual meeting for all the family members to come together. That's their way of staying connected to each other, or they call each other on the phone. Right now with technology with phones and Skype, Facebook, and all the social media stuff, it allows families to be more connected although they don't live physically together. So it kind of costs the bonding, but I haven't really seen families being disrupted because they live far away from each other. They are always connected one way or the other.

STEINER: The technology is becoming a new tradition to keep families together.

YANG: Definitely. Or they call each other on a monthly basis or maybe every six months just to see how things are going. And with Facebook and social media, you get to see each other, what exactly you do, you can go live, you can tag someone. We have a relative in Texas, and he will do something live and then he can tag my husband or tag all the relatives. They have a group and they can connect to each other. They are far away but they are still connected. So it still keeps them bonded together. It still keeps the relationship together.

STEINER: I do want to see some of the stuff you have here.

YANG: Sure.

STEINER: You want to pull some things out and you tell me what you've got?

YANG: So I brought some, these are outfits.

STEINER: Do you mind if I take pictures?

YANG: No, definitely. You can do whatever.

STEINER: OK.

YANG: I bought this hat. This is a Hmong women's hat. I brought my kid's pictures and I dressed them all.

STEINER: Cute! What is this on the front?

YANG: OK, so this is dye. It's handmade. The cloth is purple and they have to dye it. I forgot what it is, but it's a cloth that they have to dye it first, and they let it dry. If you feel, it's stiff.

STEINER: Yes.

YANG: So they dye it.

STEINER: I wonder what kind of fabric that is, linen or hemp or something. Did someone you know make it?

YANG: Yes. A woman up in the city makes this, handmade. I think she has a mold. So this is size twenty-two. She molded it together, and then hand sewed all of these together. I really don't know how she does it, but it's very nice.

STEINER: It is beautiful.

YANG: This is one of the very nice ones from the past.

STEINER: Is that yours?

YANG: Yes, it is mine. It is very like this to put it with my Hmong outfits, but I don't have it here. So this thing lines up here, and then this is a hat for White Hmong females. White Hmong – we have two different Hmong, two dialects, White and Green. So this tells you what dialect the person speaks. Traditionally we would wear what represents us, so a white dress like my daughter's, that represents White Hmong.

STEINER: Is this the young girl's version?

YANG: No. This is another outfit.

STEINER: Oh, ok.

YANG: Just a different hat, a White Hmong hat. You can wear this hat with these outfits, or you can wear this hat with the outfit. So it's just a different style.

STEINER: And this is a *qeej*?

YANG: Yes, I brought the mini one. This is my son's.

STEINER: Cute.

YANG: So this *qeej* is used for a lot of stuff. This is just a tiny one for playing for fun. But then traditionally this is used for a funeral, and for entertainment at New Year's, or just showings. It's bamboo, handmade.

STEINER: OK. Is it made around here or...

YANG: This is made up in the cities. Handmade. There is a bigger version which that they actually practice and use it, but I didn't bring that because it was too heavy. Then [jingling] this is a woman's sash, handmade.

STEINER: Also made in the cities?

YANG: No, this is made in Thailand.

STEINER: Oh, OK.

YANG: This is for a woman. This is a sash like this. And this is handmade. So if you look at this one and compare these two, you can see the difference. This is machine-made.

STEINER: Oh, I see.

YANG: So you can tell the difference. Machine made and that is handmade. They literally have to sew everything together. These tiny ones, they have to sew it together.

STEINER: Do you know how to do this?

YANG: I do not. I could learn to, but with work and life...

STEINER: Yes. You have to pick your battles.

YANG: Because this would take forever to make.

STEINER: Oh, yeah.

YANG: They have to cut the pattern first, and you put it on it, and then you sew it together. Then you put all these in, and once you are done you have to use the sewing machine and put the red stuff on. So it's a process.

STEINER: Why did they use plastic, is it just for preserving?

YANG: Oh, yes. I put the plastic on just so that it doesn't ruin the actual *paj ntaub*, because this is very expensive *paj ntaub*. This one alone without the coins, I paid about 170 [dollars] for just the *paj ntaub* itself, because this is real *paj ntaub*.

STEINER: And do you keep that plastic on all the time?

YANG: Yes. So I keep it on all the time, and then I would wear it and when I am done wearing it, then I have to put it back in to preserve the coins so they don't turn dark.

STEINER: I like how these are French.

YANG: Yes.

STEINER: So the history of the area.

YANG: It is because if you remember the history of the Hmong.

STEINER: It was a French colony in that area.

YANG: A French colony. They came and they opened business to Laos, and that is how we obtained these coins.

STEINER: Interesting. These are reproductions I am assuming?

YANG: Yes. These are reproductions.

STEINER: They're beautiful. What did you say this was called?

YANG: *Paj ntaub*. Real *paj ntaub* made by hand. So this is very expensive. You don't find a lot of these nowadays because they are hard to make. So you get a lot of this stuff. This is for my daughter.

STEINER: Good to have the quicker made things for the kids so they are growing fast.

YANG: Yes. Definitely. And this is the skirt. This is one that's machine-made with elastic on. But there is another one that is handmade, so they stitch all of these together.

STEINER: Yes. I am going to talk to Waneng [Xiong] and his wife [Chou] who makes costumes. So that will be interesting to see. I was over there yesterday just to stop by, and she makes really beautiful outfits, so I'm looking forward to talking with her.

YANG: So this is a woman's sash with the money, and this is a man's sash.

STEINER: Ok.

YANG: So this is for men. If you look at my boy's outfit, men just have a red sash with the pants on. They wear a vest and the sash. And these are the necklace.

STEINER: Oh.

YANG: So the men' necklace. This is a boy's necklace, but the men's necklace is usually bigger than this. And then these are hand designed.

STEINER: Beautiful. Is that from Thailand?

YANG: This is from Thailand. So you can see from the curve here, it is all men...

STEINER: These symbols you associate with men?

YANG: Not really. It is just a design that they have.

STEINER: What makes it a men's necklace?

YANG: Because it's longer and it doesn't have a lot of design. If you look at my daughter's...

STEINER: Oh, yeah. I see.

YANG: I didn't bring mine because it is too heavy, but you look at the woman's it has more design and it actually covers the front. So for men, it is just very simple but woman usually have bigger plates and it covers the chest. So this is another one, I just wear this casually. I can wear this not a daily basis but to casual events. Like to trainings, or if I have to do my diversity training, I would wear something like this.

STEINER: OK.

YANG: Yes, I usually wear something like this. As you can see, it has the snail, and that image represents who I am.

STEINER: Beautiful. And that's also from Asia?

YANG: Yes. This is from Thailand.

YANG: Another version [jingling]...

STEINER: This is machine done?

YANG: Yes, machine done but then putting the coin on, that's still handmade.

STEINER: I see. Is this one made here or also from Thailand?

YANG: I want to say that this is made in Thailand. They actually have a print in Thailand now that does this, all the printing. So they do the print. I think that's maybe in Chiang Mai, or somewhere in there. They do the print. This is the sash, the front color. That's my daughter's. And then I want to show one that I made.

STEINER: Oh, wow!

YANG: So this is one I that I made. This is a man's shirt and it's all handmade. So men can wear a vest, or they can wear an actual shirt like this. This is White Hmong.

STEINER: Beautiful.

YANG: So this is my husband's. I made it when I was single.

STEINER: OK. For him.

YANG: For my future husband.

STEINER: Oh, with your specific husband in mind, or you made it kind of like as someday I will give this to my husband?

YANG: Yes, with that mindset.

STEINER: OK. That's lovely. Is that common to make items like that for a future partner?

YANG: Yes, not very common, but then again part of the role, women's role, is to be able to sew. So you would have to be able to do this kind of stuff. Like make new outfits for the family, for the husband and the kids. This is when I didn't have children, so I had a lot of spare time.

STEINER: That is beautiful.

YANG: Thank you.

STEINER: What do you call this kind of stitching?

YANG: This is hand stitch, almost like embroidery.

STEINER: English call it cross stitch.

YANG: OK, yeah. It is cross stitch.

STEINER: Is there a Hmong word for it?

YANG: *Paj ntaub tawm laug*. And this is the one here, *paj ntaub mos*, because it is very tiny stitch. I can write it for you.

STEINER: OK, thank you.

YANG: The men's pant is like this.

STEINER: Did you also make that?

YANG: No, I did not make this. This is made in Thailand. Actually, I made this but I got the design from this one.

STEINER: Oh, I see. I see the similarities in there.

YANG: This was made in Thailand but then we can always copy the design. This pant is a Hmong type Green Hmong type because of this....

STEINER: Yes, I've seen that kind of stuff. You see those kind of pants in places.

YANG: Yes.

STEINER: You have some applique on those?

YANG: Yes. And these are print.

STEINER: So they're mass produced?

YANG: Yes. And something that's more modernized, now if you look at this skirt, usually it's one and it goes with the shirt there, but now it's black and blue, again it's just a different style. And this one over here, this is *paj ntaub chia*.

STEINER: *Paj ntaub chia*. That is a kind of embroidery. Can you spell that one for me?

YANG: Yes.

STEINER: And that is just a straight sort of embroidery.

YANG: Yes. Embroidery, and I think we call it *paj ntaub chia*. *Chia* means animal, and *paj ntaub* is the cloth. Animal because of the different animals and stitches.

STEINER: OK. So this is the one you can make forms with.

YANG: Yes, some people can draw it on first, and then they embroider them, and then they sew it to this.

STEINER: I have a Hmong tapestry I inherited from my grandma. She had a Hmong family that she was friends with. Let's see if I can find it. Maybe you can tell me something about it.

YANG: Yes, definitely, if I know what it is.

STEINER: Oh, here it is.

YANG: Oh, yes, *paj ntaub qwj*, it's still the same as *paj ntaub mos* because, they call it *qwj* because it's the snail, so it's the circular...like these are the *qwj*, and the way they sew this is by hand. So it's almost like these styles. So it's *paj ntaub mos*, small stitch.

STEINER: How do you spell it?

YANG: Q-W-J. This is snail.

STEINER: OK. So this was to represent snails then?

YANG: Yes. It has a different meaning but we haven't really finalized what it means.

STEINER: OK.

YANG: So it's *paj ntaub qwj*, but the actual way to make it is *paj ntaub mos*.

STEINER: That is the technique. Ok. Yeah, I have that hanging over my study table.

YANG: Yes. And you can use that for placemats. You can put it on a table and then put glass on top of it.

STEINER: Yeah. My grandma became friends with a Hmong family and they gave that to her.

YANG: Oh, okay.

STEINER: Then she left it to me in her will because I knew I like tapestries and things like that. That is a very special object for me. But I was looking forward to finding out more about it.

YANG: Now I'll put this one on, just so you know. Notice that the men's shirts do not have the back to them.

STEINER: Oh, I see. OK.

YANG: This is called *da chua*. Men, they just have an open back.

STEINER: Ok.

YANG: All women's shirts and girls' shirts have a back, so you can see that this one has it, too.

STEINER: Oh, yes. And do you wear things hanging down from the hat, too, so you get a kind of layer of things down the back?

YANG: Sometimes we could do that, too. This is the closest to the traditional Hmong outfit. It's black and blue, but as you can tell we have changed to a modern design with modern styles. Then you just crisscross this. It will have a pin inside. And for the under shirt we would do the white shirt. I will put this on and show you why the woman's necklace are bigger because it covers the chest.

STEINER: Was this outfit from the U.S. or from Thailand?

YANG: It is from the U.S. So simple outfits like this we can make in the U.S., but the bigger one that takes time like this one, we definitely cannot make out here because it just takes time, and not a lot of people have the time to do that, especially if you work. So now this is the *daim sev*. So women always have the *daim sev*, and then there's a red sash, too. I don't think I brought the red sash but this goes on top of it. [Jingling] This is to add accessories.

STEINER: It is beautiful. Would you like your hat as well?

YANG: I just want to show you that one.

STEINER: Thank you.

YANG: Everything is so heavy to bring.

STEINER: Yes. Would you like some help?

YANG: I think I got it. Thank you.

STEINER: OK.

YANG: So this is how it goes, and then again my necklace here is just.... I have a bigger necklace, a very heavy real silver necklace but I didn't bring that one because we don't make a lot of that now. They are pretty expensive, too. The real necklace costs about \$1900, depending on how many bars there are.

STEINER: So can I take a picture of you with that nice background?

YANG: Yes.

STEINER: Thank you. Very beautiful. So the different parts, what are they called again?

YANG: *Tiab*, the Hmong word for dress, the skirt.

STEINER: OK, maybe if I draw a body....

YANG: So this is the *tiab*, the skirt, and then this is the *daim sev*, the one that goes in front of it. And then the money belt is the *paj ntaub mos*.

STEINER: OK.

YANG: And there is another version, like you can wear the pant suit, but a lot of women like to wear the dress because it's more stylish.

STEINER: But the women can wear the pants. And I see that it is almost 10:30, so I should probably let you get going. But thank you so much for this.

YANG: Oh, you're welcome.

STEINER: Is there anything I didn't ask you about that you think that I should have asked, that sort of came to mind?

YANG: Not really. If you think of any other questions and you want to know more, you can give me a call or email me or text me. I would be happy to show more.

STEINER: OK. Thank you so much. This has been really great.

YANG: Thank you.