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# **BETWEEN CULTURES: ORAL HISTORY OF HMONG TEENAGERS IN MINNEAPOLIS**

**DAVID L. MOORE**

Yer, the Bad Scout, sat quietly, his head lowered. He looked at the floor between his feet. Beyond him, his mother sat and talked to Yee Chang and me. Since I could not understand the Hmong language, I did not know what she was saying, so I listened intently to the cadence of her voice. But my companion, Yee, understood, and he listened, nodded, and now and then responded in Hmong. Yer said nothing. He just sat and looked at his feet. The tiny livingroom in the public high-rise housing project was bare except for three chairs, a threadbare sofa and some family photos from the Hmong refugee camps in Thailand on the wall.

I had called this meeting, or, rather, at my suggestion Yee and I had dropped in unannounced on Yer and his mother to find out if there was any way we could get him back into our all-Hmong Boy Scout Troop. A few days earlier, Yer's mother had pulled him out of Scouting, and now she was telling us why. As she talked, she began to cry. But, softly sobbing, she went on talking.

"What's happening? What's she saying?" I asked Yee.

"She's saying he's her only son, and the only male in the family since her husband is dead, and she was counting on him to get her out of this poverty. But since he's joined Scouts he's gone bad. She says his friends in Scouts are a bad influence. He wears his hair funny and he won't do any work. He just watches TV all the time. And every weekend he wants to run off on a Boy Scout activity when he has work to do. She wanted him to be a good son like his cousin Nou, but he's gone bad and so he can't be a Boy Scout any more. She won't let him."

I said to Yee, "Tell Yer if he wants to be a good Scout he has to be a good son first."

I could have spoken to Yer directly in English, but I wanted his mother to hear what I said. So Yee translated my words and Yer nodded politely, his eyes on the floor. Yee went on at length, elaborating on my remarks, adding his own thoughts. Yee Chang was an Eagle Scout, a freshman at St. Olaf College and a role model for many a Hmong boy. He had an exam the next day. He had his own struggles but he was taking precious time out to be my interpreter. Yer listened to him and nodded.

I spoke to Yer in English. "Would you like to be an Eagle Scout like Yee some day?" I asked.

Yer nodded. "Yes," he whispered, not looking up.

"Then you have to figure out how to be a good son. Yee is a good Boy Scout, but he's a good son, too."

Again Yer nodded.

I spoke to Yee. "Tell his mother I know it's hard to raise a Hmong kid in America. But I can help."

Yee translated and I said, "Tell her that her boy has been a pretty good Scout. He's very ambitious. He works hard on his badges and he's quick to learn."

"Yes. I already told her all that," said Yee.

"And he's a leader," I said. "He's recruited nineteen Scouts for us this year, practically single-handed. But I understand that of course he has to be a good son or none of that matters."

Yee spoke to the mother. They talked back and forth for a long time, Yee patiently explaining, smiling a little sometimes, with no urgency or pleading in his voice, just conversational and easy. They might have been talking about the weather. At last Yee turned to me.

"She says it's all right for him to be a Scout again. She doesn't want him to fall behind. She apologizes for making him quit Scouts. She says if you come all the way over to his house to talk to him, you must really want to help him. She wants him to be a Scout."

I said, "Thank her for me and tell her I think it's a good decision and I think Yer can change. From what I know of him, I think he has it in him to be a very good son."

Yee and I stood up to go. Yer stood up and stepped toward me, smiling shyly but not looking me in the eye. He started to give me his hand but instead he gave me a hug. I had my Scout back again. Yer, my Good Scout.

Yee and I went out to the car, and I drove him back to his dorm at St. Olaf College. On the way, I asked him what he had said to Yer in addition to my short remarks.

Yee said, "I told him to do it the way I did it."

"And how did you do it?"

"Well, before I did any Scout activity, I always told my parents where I was going and what I was doing. And then after it was over, I told them about it. I never waited for them to ask. If they have to ask what I'm doing, it's already too late. You have to tell them before they ask. Then when the big questions come, the answer is going to be yes because they trust you by that time."

"Yee," I said, "How did you know to do that? How did you figure all that out?"

"I don't know. I just figured it out. It's the only way."

We pulled up in front of the dorm. I stopped the car and gave Yee my hand. "I think we might have saved a kid tonight, Yee," I said.

"Yeah, I think we did," he said.

We shook hands. Then he got out and I watched him walk up and disappear into his dorm.

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I organized the Hmong Boy Scout Troop of Minneapolis in 1981. Yee Chang joined the next year. He was a thin, slight kid with a nice smile, hardly distinguishable from dozens of others. But he grew up in the Troop and became one of its leaders.

Yee says, "The Hmong Troop is important to the Hmong community. It gives families a chance to see what their children have learned in America. It says to everyone, Hmong can accomplish something in America, as Hmong."

Yee goes on, "I'm an advocate of Scouting to the Hmong community. I've gotten a lot out of Scouting. But everybody's different and Scouting's not for everyone. Some Hmong Scouts take advantage. Not most of them, but some. They use Scouting to get away from their responsibility to the family. Those guys probably shouldn't be Scouts. Maybe they're the oldest son or the oldest male. There are things they just have to do and they can't get out of it. They have to help out. They have to take care of younger brothers and sisters. And they have to take care of their parents. That's the Hmong way. You take care of your elders. If they work it right, maybe they can do both their family responsibilities and Scouts. Or maybe they can't do both. But some of them have the attitude that they will see what they can get away with. Anyway, the family comes first and they just have to accept that. But some of them don't accept it and that's where they get into trouble."

For the past four summers, Yee has worked as a counselor at Camp Ajawah, a summer camp for kids which I direct. He is chief of the Junior Camp, for boys age eight to twelve. He has six counselors working under him, some of them Hmong. Many of his thirty-five campers are Hmong.

Yee says, "The biggest problem for the American kids is teasing that leads to fighting. Kids will have those problems no matter what, so I try not to act on it. I try not to be an authority figure and punish kids for doing that. I just take them aside and make sure they understand that that's not tolerated. I don't say, 'You did this so I'm going to send you here and there. I'm going to punish you.' That's really bad for the kid. He'll never learn why you did that, why you punished him. Just take him aside and say straight out, 'We don't do that around here.'" Then he won't do it again.

"Camp is really important for Hmong kids. Having been a camper up there and the experience I had up there, I want other Hmong kids to have the same experience—which is learning about other people and learning a lot about yourself as an independent person. Hmong kids are so exposed to the inner-city life. Just being away at camp for two weeks, away from bicycles and TVs and from their housing units—the whole atmosphere. Just being away from the whole atmosphere for a while, it's pretty good for them, being away from their Hmong life for a little while."

Jim Masters, an American counselor under Yee, says, "I want to take a summer and study Yee. I want to watch him handle kids and see how he does it. The kids love him. They're always all over him, asking him for stuff and getting him to show them stuff. He never gets mad and he never gets tired. He really seems to like it."

When Yee was sixteen years old, his father suddenly died of a heart attack. Yee was totally unprepared for this and it affected him deeply. Yee says, "When he was alive my father meant a lot to me, but he means more to me now because he's gone. I've started to realize what role he would've played in my life. He was a really good father. He got us all to America."

Yee's dad You Mai Chang, was a clan leader. People would often stop in at the Chang home for advice or just to visit. Yee says, "When I think about him I think of him talking to other people, just talking about everyday things: life in Laos, farming, life in America, all kinds of things. He cared a lot about us, but he didn't show it as much. You just know it. You don't know it right away but when you grow up and get older you know how much he cares."

"It's different now that my dad's not around. I have to take care of my family, worry about family matters a lot more. You have to worry about a lot of things. You don't just do this and that anymore."

Yee says, "The thing about my mom is, she's my mother and she cares for every one of us. She cares about everybody's safety. She wants to know where everybody is all the time. She gets very worried when you don't tell her. She doesn't know where you're going, for what, and she's scared. She probably wouldn't be that worried if we were living out in the country. Like when I had that car accident. I called her up and said I was in an accident. She almost went into shock. I don't remember exactly what she said, but she was just glad I was OK."

Yee's oldest brother Sia has taken over the role of family head. Sia lives two or three doors down from Yee. He has six children of his own and is a bilingual aide in the Minneapolis Schools. Yee looks up to him and respects his concern for the family. Sia has high expectations of Yee, but they go unspoken. Yee says, "Sia is my role model. He sets the example and tells me what to do."

Yee is closer in age to his brothers Pao and Chan and his sister Koua. They have the common experience of being raised in America and educated in American schools, so they can relate well to each other. Do Yee's younger brothers listen to him? "Yes, but not as much as I listen to my older brothers. That bothers me. They're growing up here. They're free. They can do whatever they want."

Yee feels perhaps closest to his youngest brother, Doua. He says, "Everybody relates to him because he's the youngest." Like all the Chang children, Doua was born in Laos. On the way out of Laos, he crossed the Mekong River clinging to his mother's back as she swam. They almost lost him.

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One day at a two-day Hmong soccer tournament, Yee met a pretty girl, Chia Vang. She and her cousin played softball with Yee and his friends. After that, they sat on the grass and talked.

At the end of the day they were playing touch football when another Hmong girl whom Chia did not know came up to her and said to her, "Are you and Yee going out together?"

Yee said, "She's just a friend." But the other girl didn't seem to see it that way.

Next day at the soccer tournament, Chia sort of avoided Yee. She figured if Yee had a girlfriend, she didn't want to make any trouble between Yee and the girl. Shortly after that, Yee went away to Camp Ajawah for the summer. All through the summer, the camp absorbed most of Yee's time and energy. But still he thought about Chia. He wrote to her several times and she wrote back. She sent him some pictures. He talked to her a couple of times on the telephone. But they didn't see each other until camp was over in late August.

It was clear to Yee that if he was really going to get to know Chia, he would have to do so in the appropriate Hmong way. So he called her on the telephone and asked if he could come over to her house and pay a visit. She said sure.

When he got there, she and her parents were there, waiting for him. He found to his relief that the parents were gracious and friendly. They talked about all the correct things. They talked about Laos and where each family was from. They found out that there were mutual friends of the two families, and so Yee and Chia's family had a little in common. Yee and Chia talked. It was their first real meeting and Yee thought it had gone well. Chia's parents seemed to like him, and he had managed to show poise and confidence.

Yee saw Chia again on several occasions, always in the correct way. He also saw her at Hmong celebrations and athletic contests. Chia was on her school soccer team, and sometimes Yee would come to watch the games. Then he would drive her home. They were becoming good friends.

Was Chia Yee's girlfriend? Traditionally, Hmong boys don't really have girlfriends. At seventeen, Yee was not too young to marry by Hmong standards. And as for Chia, many, if not most Hmong girls are married by the time they graduate from high school. Chia was sixteen. The two of them started feeling pressure from their families—unspoken but palpable. But marriage was unthinkable for Yee. He had ambitions for education and a career and for doing something for his family.

And so a dilemma was forced upon him: Should he be an American kid with a girl friend, risking the subtle disapproval of both families; or should he be a proper Hmong young man and forget about Chia?

When the time came for Yee's high school senior prom, Yee decided to act. The prom was part of any American's normal high school experience. Yee wasn't all that clear about what to expect at a prom, but he didn't want to miss it. So he asked Chia to be his date. She hesitated. She wanted to go with him, but she wasn't sure her family would approve.

So Yee visited Chia's parents, as he had already done several times, laying the groundwork for just such an encounter as this. He explained to them what a prom was. It was part of the high school program, part of his education. He would bring Chia back home by midnight.

The parents listened and gave their consent. Yee borrowed a relative's flashy sports car, rented a tux, and took Chia to the prom. The two of them had a great time. But Yee was left wondering whether he hadn't taken advantage of the ignorance of Chia's parents. Hadn't he betrayed his Hmong heritage, just a little? Or was the whole prom experience a justifiable compromise, a necessity if he was to thrive in America? It was a question he couldn't answer.

Yee says, "One of the worst problems for a Hmong kid is being in a situation where you have to decide if you're going to respond as a Hmong or as an American. It happens all the time. An American kid just goes to the prom and thinks nothing of it. But for me it's almost impossible. I have to work everything out. And then I still don't know if I did the right thing. It's like that in almost every situation. I have to decide who I am. When I'm at school, I'm an American. But as soon as I walk in the door at home, I'm in a different world. If one of my uncles happens to be there, how am I supposed to address him? If I talk to him in respectful terms, calling him 'uncle,' that might be the right thing to do. Or it might not. In Laos it would be right, but this is America. How should a Hmong kid behave in America? Maybe I should just call my uncle by his name, like he's my equal. He might accept that and feel it's OK. Or he might feel bad that I didn't show respect. He might resent it but he feels there's nothing he can do about it because this is America, so he has to accept it. But he feels bad. And I feel bad."

Chia Vang says, "What do I like about Yee? Well, he's taller than most Hmong guys," and she laughs. She goes on, "What I really like about him is, he knows what he wants and he goes after it. He's not afraid to dream. He doesn't say, 'I can't do it,' he says, 'I'll try.'"

"And he never puts anyone down. He's just a nice guy. He can get along with just anybody. We had a get-together at my house. I took Yee with me. It was just a bunch of girls. Yee was the only guy, but he didn't feel uncomfortable at all. I thought he was going to be uncomfortable, but actually he was the center of attention.

"One thing is, I sort of have a bad temper. But what I like is, he doesn't get mad with me. And when I get mad with him, after a while I think, why am I mad?"

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Chia Vang escaped from Laos with her family when she was just a little girl, but she still remembers it. They crossed the Mekong River to Thailand in a small boat. When they reached the Thailand shore, a Thai woman offered to buy Chia from her parents for cash. Chia says she doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry when she thinks about that incident.

Chia says, "I'm hoping to go to law school some day. Most Hmong girls prefer to be teachers if they have a career at all, but I'm just a little weird. If I were in Laos right now, I'd be somebody's fifth wife and have three or four kids. A lot of Hmong girls have really low self-esteem. They think, 'My life is no big deal.' They don't care. I know a senior at my high school. She just married this Hmong guy who's a junior at the university. She thought it was a way out, a way to get away from family obligations. But she's not happy. She still can't do any of the things she wanted to. She doesn't go to parties or dances or anything. When you marry, a wife isn't supposed to do that."

When Chia decided to be a lawyer, she got a lot of opposition from Hmong school officials and clan members. She listened to some long lectures from them. They told her, "Just don't do it. It's no good for you. Just go to the 'U' and become a teacher."

Chia says, "I told them that's not what I want, but it seems what I want doesn't matter. That's where Yee's been good to me. He says, 'Chia, you can choose. You can choose the people to support you. You don't have to listen to them.'"

When Yee Chang comes home from college on weekends, as he does frequently, he is apt to find five or six of his friends and cousins hanging around his house—his buddies, his "gang." They like to talk among themselves and the talk turns often to the future. Yee seems to be the informal guide and counselor for this group. His friends look up to him with great respect. All of them are at some point in their educational careers. All are struggling. Some are floundering. They lean on Yee for support. Yee's friend Tsa says of him, "Yee really understands me when I talk to him. Yee can talk to me about anything. He's really open and he can relate to you really well, so it's easy to talk to Yee. We talk about life here and how hard it is to live here and stuff like that. Yee usually doesn't talk about it, he usually explains it and gives you things to think about. And it's true, after he says it, you think about it and it's true."

Yee takes the problems of his friends seriously. He takes them upon himself and they become his worries, too. There is a lot of pressure on these Hmong teenagers—from family, from clan, from school. Sometimes the pressure is overwhelming. Once a boy broke down and cried on Yee's shoulder.

Yee says, "I just say what it's like for me, and that seems to help. Sometimes it's hard for me to listen. I'm struggling myself. Sometimes after a hard weekend I go back to school with a feeling of relief."

There is pressure on Hmong youngsters. Take the case of Tou. The only son in his family, Tou is expected to marry and have children to carry on the family in a culture where the spirits of the dead depend on the living. Yet Tou says, "I have no taste at all for Hmong women. But when I showed my mother a picture of my American girl friend, she cried. She said, 'If you marry an American girl, you're no longer my son.' So the elders told me to get rid of the American girl friend. I broke up with her, but she wants me back. I told her no, it'll just make us both unhappy if we keep seeing each other."

Chue's father has two wives. Chue is the son of the second, and less important, wife. He doesn't see much of his father. Chue is a good mechanic and can fix anything from a car to a wrist watch. He wants to get an education, but he has no money. His mother wants to move the family to Detroit to be close to relatives. But this would take Chue away from his only support system, his Hmong peers.

Xoua came to this country with his older brother about ten years ago. He grew up pretty much on his own. He had fun. America was a blast. But he missed his parents, who were still in a camp in Thailand. Then last year his parents suddenly arrived from Thailand. Xoua was beside himself with joy at seeing them again. But he found it hard to adjust to being a good, dutiful son after running around free for so long. "I feel like a Hmong, but I'm a changing Hmong. You have to adjust to both cultures." Xoua goes on, "I don't think about my future. There's nothing to think about. Sometimes I think I should have been dead instead of coming here because I have to struggle—not just for me, but for my parents. They're depending on me. And I just have to struggle. Sometimes I think I'd be better off dead."

"Remember that incident with those two Hmong kids who stole that care and they ended up dead, killed by a policeman? With my clan it's like that, too. Sometimes I come home real late. And they think that, since I'm out, I'm doing something bad. I need support from my clan, but they don't give me that support."

"In my whole clan, I'm the only kid that's in college right now. Why not make it through and see what they think of you? Because right now they think of me as being a real bad, good-for-nothing kid. And I want to succeed and see what they think of me when I finish college, see if they give me any respect."

"Hmong elders think you should be just like them. And it's nice to be like them, too, but this is a changing world and you have to change along with it. I think I'm more modern. The only thing they know is, we go and we farm, we get all our stuff and we eat. We repeat the whole process every single year. But here, you don't have an education, you don't get a job. You still get a job, but you don't get a good job. It's not going to be enough to support you and you're not going to make it. It's really hard."

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Xoua finds himself in an extremely precarious and ambivalent situation in his clan. "I know a little about Hmong customs and that's about it. I know how to respect those who are older than I am. I know how to participate in a gathering so that I'm there and they can look up to me, ask me things, just simple questions about America that they don't know. If I'm there, then they'll ask me."

Tsa managed to win a scholarship to a private prep school. The work there was quite advanced, and Tsa was in over his depth. Besides, he had eight younger brothers and sisters, and he was expected to take a major part in caring for them and rearing them, as well as doing cooking and house chores. And there were traditional Hmong clan activities to attend to. His parents didn't seem to appreciate how difficult it was for him to keep up both with his studies and his family responsibilities. Sometimes he couldn't get a ride to school so he had to miss a day. He was so far behind that he had to drop out. He enrolled in a public school but he couldn't catch on there either and so he started skipping school. He still wants to get a good education and maybe he can start over from scratch next year. But right now he is doing nothing.

Tsa says, "It's hard for kids born in Laos and growing up here. Because you have to face two cultures, yours and the one around you. And it gets harder as you grow up because you have to make a decision what your goals are, or what you want. My dad, he wants me to know all this cultural stuff, but I have to go to school and learn all those things to survive in the other society. And therefore I'm not sure which is best for me, so I'm just caught in the middle."

Yee says, "A lot of my friends are depressed because they can't get along with their father. I always end up talking to them about my father because losing your father is the worst thing that can happen. But these guys have fathers. So I end up talking to them about how I would have related to my father if he was still alive. It's sort of wishful thinking, I guess. And they start realizing what their own problems are, why they're not getting along with their fathers. They just don't want to deal with their father because he tells them to do so many things. But the kid wants to do what he wants. He wants to play soccer, go to this school instead of that one. He wants to go out with his friends. But he can't

"I don't tell him anything, I just tell him what I would do. I would have to adjust my schedule, put family first, because that meant more to my father. You'd better listen to your dad. If you don't he'll get mad at you and then you'll have problems. So the kid starts to realize the situation, what he can do and can't do. There's too much pressure everywhere. So he ends up not doing anything. He can't really go in one direction or the other. I think about that a lot. I think of how, no matter what, you've got to have some way, somehow. There's no good in failing. The hole just gets deeper, I guess, if you just sit and don't do anything. And it'll be harder to get out."

Yee Chang is a freshman in college. He enjoys learning and experiencing new things. He likes to write and he gets particular satisfaction out of his art classes. As for a career, he would like to be a newspaper reporter, or perhaps a counselor and advocate for Hmong people. But he is well aware that his educational and career options may be severely limited. He is part of the first generation of his clan to receive higher education. What will he do with his education? Whatever he does, it will not just be whatever pleases him. Clan members will say to him, "You went to college for four years with our encouragement and support: now what do you have to show for it?" His career will have to carry income and prestige. He will be expected to pull his family out of poverty. He is being counted on as a role model for the youth of the entire clan. Engineering and medicine would be acceptable options, but Yee has no taste for them. Law would seem more in his line. But journalism or social work may not be high enough on the scale of prestige or income.

Yee says, "It's hard to be a Hmong kid in America because you live in the American culture and you're the first generation of Hmong and you have to deal with both cultures at the same time. The hardest thing about adapting to America was going to college and being away from the family. In the Hmong family everybody stays together and it's hard for a member to be separated. It's easier now. My mom is beginning to understand. She realizes the purpose of education.

"It's good for me personally to go away to college because I have a lot of friends at home and being away from my friends I can concentrate more. I like living at college. I like the college life. You live in a dormitory. There are always a lot of activities and you make new friends.

"If I'm still in Laos, I'm probably a farmer working in the fields. Maybe I'd have a family by now. I think I'm glad I'm here."

Yee Chang is what I call an American-Hmong. In my experience, there are three kinds of Hmong young people. I call them the American-Hmong, the Hmong-Americans, and the Rebels. The American-Hmong have resolved to make it in America in the American way, with the American definition of success. But still they are resolved to be good Hmong and to turn any success they may achieve to the support of their families. They are oriented toward education and career. They are willing to move out of the home and to another city to pursue their education. They may adopt an American lifestyle outside the home. They may have to give up some traditional Hmong activities for lack of time or energy. But always the intention is to come back and to return any benefits earned to their elders and their families. They consider themselves to be Hmong first and American second.

Of the three types, the American-Hmong certainly feels the most pressure. His elders look to him for future support. They call on him to interpret for them the American culture and to be the intermediary with American neighbors, school personnel, health-care officials, police. He

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looks over the mail and explains what of it is junk and what is important. His role is fraught with ambivalence. Sometimes he is treated as a boy who needs to be told how to behave, especially when Hmong cultural mores are the subject. But at other times, his advice is sought out, because he best knows the American culture, with all of its incomprehensible demands. The elders want him to sacrifice and to study hard and to learn to do things the American way, but at the same time they want him to be a good Hmong, to show deference to his elders, to take family responsibilities seriously. They do not always understand that as a student he may not be fully able to make an economic contribution, or to give time to help with child-rearing or participation in family activities or rituals. The American-Hmong's peer group may become extremely important to him, because only they can understand the pressure on him. He may feel obligated toward his younger brothers and sisters. Since his parents may have no understanding of the educational system, he may become the supervisor of his siblings' education. He sees that they do their homework and that they hold to the directions put out by the school. He knows when the younger brothers and sisters are trying to get away with something, and so he becomes in many ways their unofficial guardian.

If the American-Hmong youth is under great pressure from many directions, he also has many support systems, because each group that places a demand on him is also giving him its support. This tends to give him a tremendous sense of security and confidence.

The Hmong-Americans, in contrast to the American-Hmong, have decided to make it in America in the traditional Hmong way. This may mean marrying early and having children. It may mean participating fully in Hmong traditions, ceremonies and activities. It may mean dropping out of school to get a job or to take care of elders or younger siblings. It probably means postponing indefinitely one's educational dreams.

With many children, and with an education which may be inadequate to provide him with significant income-earning employment, the Hmong-American finds it very difficult to hang onto even the minimum essentials required for the security and well-being of his family. He may have to hold down two jobs, and work six or even seven days a week. His wife and children are cooped up in a tiny inner-city apartment, afraid to open the door to strangers. And yet these frustrations may be more than compensated for by the satisfaction and joys of having his own home, a loving wife and children. And there is always the support of the larger family and clan to lean on when things get really tough.

The third type of Hmong young person is the Rebel. He has given up on the American dream of success as well as the Hmong standard of being a good son or daughter. He has turned his back on his culture as well as on his elders and their aspirations for him. Instead he has

grasped onto a caricature of American culture which is attractive to him. He has fallen in love with popular culture—the heavy metal music, the fast cars, the flashy, outrageous dress, the easy moral standards. In some cases he is starting to find himself in trouble with the police. He has cut himself off from all support systems, except perhaps the company of other Rebels. He has gone bad, in Hmong terms, and no one in the Hmong community knows what to do with him.

Every Hmong youth is a mix of all three of these types, and whichever type predominates in any one individual may be due at least partly to luck or circumstance.

Yee Chang says, “The biggest problem I have right now is music.”

Yee is fascinated by the popular culture. I once said to him, “Yee, you’re more American than I am,” at which he laughed and responded, “You’re not American, Dave.”

Yee is drawn by the siren-song of popular music. He says, “When I listen to it, I don’t want to do anything else. I just want to do what the music tells me to do.”

Yee Chang had been away at college for about two and a half months when I called him on the telephone. It was always good to hear his voice.

“I know a way you can earn a thousand dollars without doing anything,” I said. “Are you interested?”

“Sure, tell me about it.”

“OK. You just enter the Hmong Teenager of the Year contest at the Hmong New Year party and win.”

Yee laughed. “You mean that beauty-contest thing? No way! I don’t have any talent, Dave. I can’t sing, I can’t dance. And I’m already shaking just thinking about it.”

“That means you’ve decided to do it, am I right, Yee?”

He laughed. “No, not really.”

But deep down, he wanted to do it. It was the idea of going out and trying.

“I can help you write the speech,” I said, “But you’ll have to give it in Hmong, so if I help you’ll have to translate it into Hmong.”

But first Yee would have to talk to his family and see how they felt. He would have to get their permission.

His oldest brother Sia said no, don’t do it. It was never the Hmong way to compete and find out who’s better than whom. What was the need? Hmong are too gossipy. They will tear someone down if he tries to stand out. The whole family will lose face.

But Yee’s second-oldest brother Pao was enthusiastic from the start. He urged Yee to go ahead. It would be a fantastic experience for him. For his talent act, he could learn a Hmong song from his mother. Anyway, it was the tradition for young men to sing lullabies at New

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Year's, but hardly anyone was doing it any more and this could be a way for Yee to get back in touch with his culture.

Yee's mother was supportive. Whatever Yee wanted to do, that's what she wanted for him. She had already made him a beautiful Hmong costume to wear. Now she could teach him a Hmong lullaby.

Yee's two younger brothers and his sister Koua were, of course, enthusiastic, and so Sia was at last won over. Or at least he was willing to stay neutral.

So Yee called me and told me he would enter the contest. He only had two weeks to write and memorize a speech and learn a lullaby. He had never made a speech in Hmong. He had never sung before an audience, let alone in a highly stylized language with which he was not very familiar. But after attending a meeting with the other contestants, he called me again and said, "I think I have a chance."

I mailed in a check for fifty dollars and a registration form listing Boy Scout Troop 100 as his sponsor. Then I drove over to his house to help him with the speech. He sat at his computer and typed it out in English. I mostly watched and gave encouragement. His theme was "Being Hmong." In it he talked about a time half a year before when he and I travelled to Thailand to visit the refugee camps where he had lived for a time as a little boy. He walked into the camp unannounced and met his buddies from ten years before. He was free, growing, learning, thriving. But for them, time had stopped. For ten years they had been waiting, hanging around the camp, living in limbo. But they welcomed him like a brother and treated him like a king. They asked him about life in America. And Yee realized that in spite of all the differences, he was one of them, a Hmong kid who had been a little more fortunate than they, but deep down no different at all. He resolved to make good use of his opportunity and turn it to the benefit of all his clan and people. That was how Yee's speech went. His brother Sia helped him translate it, and Pao worked with him until he had it memorized. According to Yee, "Pao suffered as much as I did. He was just exhausted. He wanted it just right."

Later, one evening, I took Yee over to Westminster Church with its large sanctuary. He stood at the pulpit, while I went way up into the far balcony to listen. He sang the song his mother was teaching him. I listened transfixed as his strong young voice rose and filled the empty room. It was a demanding tune, requiring an enormous voice range. But he sang it with confidence and I marveled at its bizarre cadences and rhythms, utterly strange and foreign to me., especially in this place I looked around the empty sanctuary, with its orderly, wooden pews and its Christian symbols everywhere visible. Surely nothing like this has ever been heard in this place before, I thought. How fortunate I am to be sitting here, a part of this.

When the contest came, Yee was ready for it. Need I say that he swept every event with style and confidence? I was there, in the front row, to cheer him on. So were his friends and family.

A few days after his triumph, his family held a ceremony of blessing for him. He asked me to come. When I got there, the small livingroom was already crowded with Chang elders and friends. Sia had put two large hand-lettered signs on the wall. One of them said, "Happy New Year" in the Hmong language. The other said "*Yim Tsaab tub zoo nraug 1989-1990*" ("Yee Chang, our handsome young man, 1989-1990"). I found that I was to be a special guest. A place had been made for me at the elders' table and just before the meal, Yee appeared and made a little speech. It was addressed to me. He thanked me for helping him on the New Year and on other occasions. Then he said that from now on, I should consider myself to be a part of the Chang clan.

Overwhelmed, I stood up to reply. Yee's cousin, True Chang, stood next to me to translate my words. I hardly knew what to say, but I must have thanked him for sharing so much with me, told him I admired his drive and ambition, his willingness to strive hard at a time when everyone else was just having fun. I ended by saying something like, "If I ever have a son of my own, I want him to be just like you. You know I look up to you." Then I sat down and True Chang translated my words into Hmong.

Is there anything that individual Americans can do for Hmong teenagers? Yes, of course, and it's simple: every Hmong kid needs an American friend. Or, think of it the other way around: every American needs a Hmong friend. I once heard it said that if a Hmong person is your friend he will die for you. I believe it.

A few weeks after the funeral of Yee Chang's father, I telephoned him. "Yee, I want to talk to you," I said. "Can I come over to your place and talk?"

"What about?" he said.

"Oh, just about how you're doing. If everything's OK and so on. I think about you and worry about you. It's more for me than you, I guess, that I want to see you."

"OK, but I have a lot of homework, Dave. I missed so many days."

"Bring it along. I'll look at it. Maybe I can help with some of it."

I picked him up and took him to a little restaurant where we sat and talked. I had worked out in my mind some open-ended questions to ask him just to get the conversation going. I can only remember one of the questions. It was, "When you have children of your own, how will you raise them differently from the way you were raised?"

He answered, "I won't let them wander so much."

Yee talked about his dad, what an important factor he had been in his life. His father had stood between him and all the destructive forces that had been zeroing in on the family ever since Yee could remember. His dad had protected him from the Communists in Laos, had gotten him safely across the Mekong River into Thailand, and when Yee had almost died of disease in a refugee camp, his dad was there with

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him in the crowded camp hospital to see him back to health again. Then he had stood as Yee's protection against the menacing, unknown factor of America. And he had stood between Yee and the rest of the clan. Now he was gone. Yee felt the outside world closing in on him, the clan making claims on him.

As Yee spoke, he didn't look at me. He had a faraway look in his eyes. I could see he was not happy, that his sparkle was gone. He must have talked for an hour or more. At the end of it, I thanked him for talking to me and apologized for taking so much of his time and for dragging all these unhappy thoughts out of him. He just said, "No, I was glad to get it off my chest." I took him home and we worked on his homework. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him. He shook his head. "Just be there," he said. "Just be around."

Sometimes, when I'm in a difficult predicament where there's no obvious way out, I think, "Now how would Yee handle this?" At times I used to feel sorry for myself because I had no younger brother or son of my own. But now I do.