

Growing up on the
Mountain

by: James Xiong



ຊີວິດເທິງພູຫຼວງ

ໂດຍ: ເຈມສ ຊິງ



ປຶ້ມຫົວນີ້ສາມາດພິມອອກໄດ້ ກໍ່ຍ້ອນການ
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ຊີວິດທີ່ໜ້າສົນໃຈຂອງເດັກຊາຍເຜົ່າມື້ງ

ຄຳນຳ

ປຶ້ມຫົວນີ້ ນຳສະເໜີເລື່ອງລາວການດຳລົງຊີວິດຂອງເດັກຊາຍຄົນໜຶ່ງ ທີ່ຫຼາຍຄົນເອີ້ນລາວວ່າ ເຈມສ ຊຶ່ງ. ເຈມສ ເກີດຢູ່ບ້ານພູຫຼວງໃຕ້ ເມືອງ ຈອມເພັດ ແຂວງຫຼວງພະບາງ. ຊີວິດຂອງ ເຈມສ ກໍ່ບໍ່ໄດ້ແຕກຕ່າງຈາກ ເດັກຊາຍຄົນອື່ນໆທີ່ອາໄສຢູ່ເຂດຊົນນະບົດທົ່ວໄປ. ປະຊາຊົນສ່ວນໃຫຍ່ ແມ່ນປະກອບອາຊີບເປັນຊາວໄຮ່, ຊາວນາ, ຊາວສວນ... ເພື່ອຫາລ້ຽງຊີບ, ເປັນການດຳລົງຊີວິດແບບລຽບງ່າຍ ແລະ ມີຄວາມສຸກຢູ່ກັບທຳມະຊາດ.

ໃນໂລກອັນກວ້າງໃຫຍ່, ແມ່ນອນ ການດຳລົງຊີວິດຕ້ອງມີຄວາມແຕກ ຕ່າງກັນ. ເຮົາຈະຮຽນຮູ້ສິ່ງຕ່າງໆໄດ້ງ່າຍ ແລະ ໜ້າສົນໃຈ ຖ້າເຮົາໄດ້ສຶກ ສາຮຽນຮູ້ເລື່ອງລາວທີ່ຄ້າຍກັບເຮົາ ຫຼື ແຕກຕ່າງຈາກເຮົາ. ສະນັ້ນ ປຶ້ມຫົວ ນີ້ ຈະເປັນປະໂຫຍດຢ່າງຍິ່ງຕໍ່ເດັກນັກຮຽນທີ່ກຳລັງຮຽນພາສາອັງກິດ ເພາະຄຳສັບສ່ວນຫຼາຍທີ່ໃຊ້ ແມ່ນຄຳສັບທີ່ເວົ້າເຖິງການດຳລົງຊີວິດປະຈຳ ວັນ; ເປັນຄຳສັບທີ່ທຸກຄົນຄວນຮູ້ ເພື່ອອະທິບາຍເລື່ອງລາວຕ່າງໆກ່ຽວກັບ ການດຳລົງຊີວິດຂອງຕົນ ແລະ ຄົນອື່ນໆ... ອີກຢ່າງໜຶ່ງ ປຶ້ມຫົວນີ້ ຈະເປັນ ປະໂຫຍດແກ່ຊາວຕ່າງຊາດທີ່ສົນໃຈ ແລະ ຢາກຮຽນຮູ້ເຖິງວິຖີການດຳລົງ ຊີວິດ, ຮີດຄອງປະເພນີ ແລະ ວັດທະນະທຳຂອງຊາດລາວ. ນີ້ຄືເຫດຜົນທີ່ ພວກເຮົາຂຽນເປັນພາສາອັງກິດ.

ຈາກ: ບ.ກ ອ້າຍໝູນ້ອຍ

Contents

Introduction	5
My family	7
Family stories	10
The Seasons	12
My village	17
How to build a wooden house	20
Village government	24
Village work	24
Village celebrations	26
Our animals	30
Playing and having fun	33
Getting into trouble	40
Ceremonies and beliefs	42
Weddings	42
Births and deaths	45
Ghosts and spirits	48
Starting school	50
Living away from home	53
Moving to Luang Prabang	58
Learning new things	60
My dreams and a new life	62
Afterword	63





Introduction

Hello, my name is “James”, as in “James Bond”, although that’s not the name I was given when I was born. My family name is Xiong. I’m about 17 years old, but I’m not sure because no one knows exactly when I was born.

I was born in my parent’s house in Phou Luang Tai village. For the first three days, my mother and I slept on a mat with grass under it. The grass kept us warmer, and protected me from evil spirits, because I had not yet been named.

After three days, I received my first Hmong name, Gia. Hmong babies do not get named until after 3 days. As a baby, I was very sick. The village shaman, a spirit doctor, said maybe it wasn’t a good name and my parents should change it. He suggested Theng. My parents agreed to change my name, and I got better. Many children get a new name this way.

As a teenager in high school in Luang Prabang, during English practice, someone nicknamed me “James.” As I had seen a James Bond movie, I liked that name and used it.

My mother rested with me at home for one month after I was born, which is customary when a new baby is born. Our culture says a baby must not leave the house in the first month of life, because it might encounter bad spirits or other things that could hurt it. That month also gives the mother a chance to get healthy again.

At the end of the month, our family had a ceremony. I was one

month old, so of course I do not remember this ceremony, but I have seen it many times for other children, and my parents have told me about it. My parents invited the shaman to come. Before the shaman arrived, my father brought a pig, a chicken, an incense stick, and an egg into our home. On one wall, we hung the spirit paper. This paper is about A4 size, like a sheet of writing paper, and has feathers and blood from a chicken pasted onto it. A new spirit paper is made every Hmong New Year, and it is put in the house to protect the people inside. My parents also prepared a shaman's table. It's a short, narrow table, almost like a bench. When the shaman arrived, my parents placed the shaman's table opposite the spirit paper.

My mother sat with me on the table. Next, the shaman tied a long rope to the neck of the pig. He walked around the table with the other end of the rope and tied the two ends together. As part of the ceremony, village people in our home killed the pig. The shaman dipped a buffalo horn into the pig's blood and used it to put three marks on my back.

After that, my mother and I got off the table. The shaman sat on it and spoke, in a sort of chant (Hmong and sometimes Chinese), for a long time. Finally, the shaman took the chicken and stood at the front door and spoke my name, to call my soul into the house. When the ceremony was completed, I was safe from bad spirits, and for the first time I could leave the house where I was born. Now, my parents could take me with them when they worked in the fields. Often an older brother or sister looked after me while my parents worked.

I was my parent's seventh child, although one of my brothers died when he was a little boy. Now I have two older brothers, three older sisters and one younger sister. Everyone is married already and has children, except for my younger sister and me.

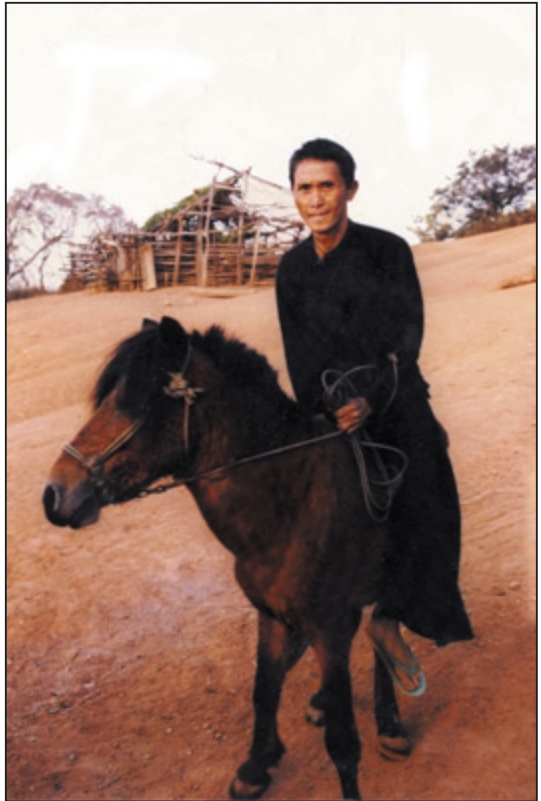


My family

My father's name is Chai Lu Xiong and my mother's name is Suae Yang. They were about 15 when they got married, which is the standard age to get married in the countryside. There was a school nearby, but they just went for a few weeks when they were children.

Their parents told them they had to work in the field or take care of their sisters and brothers, so they didn't have time for school.

My oldest brother is Suae Tong Xiong. He and his wife have only one son. When my brother was a boy he was quiet and shy, and he didn't like studying. He started primary school when he was about 12. My parents had to push him to go to school as he didn't want to go. When he was in grade four, he was 16 years old, and he told my parents that he would stop school and



My father, in our village. The pig stable is behind him.



Left: My mother and my nephew, in about 2010. Right: My brother Dua, at his wedding.

help them in the field. My parents told him many times to go to school but he didn't go. Soon after, he told my parents that he would like to get married, and then they knew that was why he wanted to stop school.

Now he's a farmer. He and his family live in a new village, about a 30-minute walk from our village. My brother and his wife and our grandparents were the first people in that village. They cut down trees and made a house. Then other people went to live there, too. Now it's a village with about 15 families, approximately 100 people.

My second brother is Doua Xiong, a tour guide in Luang Prabang. He is 7 years younger than my oldest brother. He is married and also has one son. When he was a boy he liked studying, and he started school much younger than Suae Tong. He finished grade three, which was the highest grade in our village school. Then he went to study at the Lao village to continue grade four and five. It was about a one-hour walk away,

so he left early every morning, and came back late each afternoon. After he finished primary school at the Lao village he wanted to go to high school. He moved to Chomphet district, and my father built a small hut next to the school for him to live in. Later, I slept in the same hut when I was in high school. He studied very hard, and his favorite subjects were Lao grammar and English. He went to high school for six years. After finishing studying English at the University in Vientiane, he returned to Luang Prabang to find a job as a tour guide.

I also have three older sisters. Yeng is married, with six children. Yeng did not go to school, she worked in the fields, helping my parents and also helping Mum in the house. She was 16 years old when she got married. She and her family still live in my village. Yeng now lives with her husband's family, which is the common way in Hmong culture. Yeng's husband is a farmer in our village and is also the headman of the village.

Dee, the second older sister, is also married, with five children. She did not go to school either, she helped the family in the fields and around the house. She also got married when she was about 16 years old. Dee's husband was from my village, but they moved to Udom Xai province, north of Luang Prabang to be farmers in an area where they have cousins.

Dao, my next older sister, is married, with two children. Like my other sisters, Dao did not go to school and got married when she was about 16. They live in the same new village as Suae Tong, my oldest brother. Dao's husband is a farmer in this village.

My youngest sister, Jai, is a student in high school, the same grade as me. I did not pass to second grade after my first year of school, so Jai and I are now in the same class. After grade three, we went to the Lao village together for grades 4 and 5, and then we went to Chomphet together to go to high school. She's very good in physics, better than I am. She would like to be a doctor one day.

Family stories

One night when I was a child, my mother was carried back from the field by many villagers. They put my mother on the bed. I didn't understand what was happening with my mother. When I asked my father, he said that my mother had a stomach ache. My sisters, brother, and I were standing around the bed, looking at my mother, helpless. My father got local medicine for my mother to take, but it did not help. The next morning, my father went to the shaman to tell what was happening with my mother. The shaman said that my mother's illness was caused when she went someplace by herself when she was on the farm. The spirits didn't like her going there and they caused her illness.

Someone else came with the shaman to tell the family what the shaman and ghosts said. People who came with the shaman killed the pig — this is very expensive for most families as most families only have 5 to 10 pigs, and some have even fewer. If the family is very poor and does not own a pig or cannot afford to buy a pig, they do not sacrifice an animal. The cousins also helped. Then they waited two or three days to see if my mother got better. If she had still been sick, they would have called another shaman, and if she still wasn't better, they would try to take her to the doctor in the village. But she got better after the first shaman came.

When I was sick, often I would have a headache and be tired. My mother called the doctor, or the medicine man. If they prescribed oral medicine, I took it. However, if I saw that they were going to give me a shot, I would suddenly tell them that I felt better, and go outside to play with my friends.

When I was young, if we got sick, the only treatment was by a shaman. Now there are people in our village who have trained in nursing and a bit of medicine. These days the village people usually try western medicine first but if that doesn't work, they visit the shaman to see if he

can cure them. Some families still prefer to visit the shaman first.

The first time I had a loose tooth, my mother pulled it out. It hurt a lot. After that, when I had a loose tooth, I didn't tell my parents. Sometimes, I wiggled the tooth myself until it came out, and other times I lost the tooth when I ate something tough, like meat. One of my baby front teeth never came out. So, when the adult tooth came in, there are now two teeth where there should have been one tooth.

Some of the drawings in the book were drawn by Gikong, a Hmong artist who has illustrated books for Big Brother Mouse. This picture is from his *Hmong Life Coloring Book*. It shows a shaman, standing on the bench as he chants. The man behind him is his assistant.





The Seasons

Because we are farmers, life in my village depends on the seasons.

December is the start of the cold season, and this lasts until February. January is especially cold on the mountain. We wear big coats and sleep under warm blankets. When the women wake up at four a.m. to begin chores, it is still dark. They start cooking breakfast by the light of a lantern. When they've finished cooking, they wake up the men to eat. The men and the women eat together. After breakfast, the men take a lamp or flashlight to go to the well and collect water and feed the animals. In the cold season, nobody wants to bathe in the morning, when the air and water are both very cold. We usually bath after we finish working in the fields, when the air is not so cold, and we're warm from working. The children, during the cold season, might go for many days without bathing.

As we leave for the fields at six o'clock, it is just starting to get light. If the field is far away it may take one hour to walk there. By the time the sun rises at seven or eight a.m., everybody is already working hard in the fields. We start cooking lunch at about 11:30 in a little hut in the field. We use vegetables from the field, or bring some from home. We eat lunch and relax for half an hour, then work again until 4:00. Then we collect food for the horses and pigs, and go back home.

When we get back home from the fields, we start cooking dinner. We eat together whenever it's ready, at six, seven or sometimes eight p.m. In winter it's too cold to play outside at night, so we stay inside and keep warm. If someone comes to visit, we sit around the fire and talk together



about our day. Otherwise, if no one comes to visit, we listen to the Hmong or Lao programs on the battery-powered radio or we go to bed. Because there's no electricity, we don't have TV.

In March it starts to get warmer and April is very hot. At this time the rice and corn fields that have been harvested are dry, so we can burn the stalks to clear the field for replanting. During this season the sky gets smoky and sometimes the sun looks red. In the summer, kids play outside until eight or nine o'clock. When it gets dark we use a lantern or flashlight. We sit together outside and tell stories about what we did during the day, and about funny things that happened to us in the fields or at home.

The rainy season begins in May and June. It's foggy in the morning, and we can only see a little way in front of us. We have to be careful going to the well to collect water because the path is slippery. In dry weather it takes about 10 minutes to walk down to the well and about 20-25 minutes to walk back uphill with the water. In wet, slippery weather it can take also take about 10 minutes but coming back is much more difficult, it can take up to 35-40 minutes.

We hoe the fields, pull out the weeds, and start planting corn and rice.

I like the planting time best, because planting rice is easy. The men use sticks to make the holes in the ground, and the women put about 4 or 5 seeds in each hole. We make a special mixture from a white powder you buy at the market, and water to put on the rice to stop the ants from eating it.

Most of our rice is the steamed rice type, but we also grow sticky rice. We plant cucumbers in the rice fields, and in the corn fields, we plant pumpkins. We also plant



three root vegetables (yams, taro, and sweet potato) at the same time, but in different fields. We don't usually sell these vegetables, our family eats them. Some families also plant sesame. During Lao New Year we pound the seeds and use them to cover candies, so the candies aren't too sticky.

The rainy season continues through July. We start planting vegetables in the gardens near our homes. First we clear the wood from the garden. Next, we hoe it before we sow the seeds. We plant many vegetables such as lettuce, cabbage, cucumber, spring onion, and coriander. We also grow papaya trees and chili peppers to eat during the September rice harvest. This is also the start of our school holiday. We usually get a 3-month holiday from June to August. Children who study in other towns come back to the village to help their parents in the field.

In September and October, the corn starts ripening to a deeper yellow, and the rice is about a meter high. We start harvesting the fields. We have two kinds of rice, “three-month rice” and “six-month rice.” The names tell how long it takes each type to ripen. We plant both types at the same time but usually plant more six-month rice than three-month rice. However, we grow more three-month rice if we are running out of food, and need to harvest more quickly. The problem with three-month rice is that because it ripens faster, all the birds and mice come to eat it first. If most villagers are growing six-month rice and just a few are growing three-month rice, the animals may eat a lot of the three-month rice before it can be harvested.

It takes from two to ten days to harvest each field, depending on how many villagers can help, and the size of the field. Everyone works together to make the task easier. We use machetes to cut the rice stalks, then we tie them into bunches to dry in the sun. When they’re dry, we beat the stalks onto a big cloth spread on the ground to collect the grains of rice. Then someone pounds the grains with a piece of wood to break the husks. Pounding is hard work. You get hot and tired very soon. When pounding the rice, pieces of rice and husk fly, so it’s uncomfortable and unpleasant. We then have to separate the rice from the husks. We fill a basket with rice, and climb a tall ladder. We pour out the rice onto a wide cloth below. The wind blows away the husks. If there’s not enough wind, we use a bamboo fan. We put the rice into bags, then the horses carry the bags back home and we put it into the rice granary.

When I was about ten, my father began letting me lead the horse as it carried rice from our field. We made three trips each day. It was a boring job, because we went along the same trail, again and again. When they’re old enough, both boys and girls help with the harvest until school re-opens for the new school year.

Usually my whole family went to the fields. By the time they are six, children start working in the fields with the rest of the family, though

usually their job is to look after the smaller children instead of doing the field work. Each person has a sickle to cut the rice. Some days, we might help another family that has a large crop ready for harvest. A few days later, they help us.

In November, when the harvest is finished, we prepare for the biggest event of the year: the Hmong New Year Festival. We go to other villages to buy chickens or pigs in preparation for a big village feast. Parents may go to Luang Prabang to get special clothes for their children. My mother and my sisters make new clothes for everyone in the family. Even small children get new clothes. We don't have much farm work at this time of year, so we can stay at home and do things around the house. It's our holiday and time to rest.





My village

Phou Luang Tai is high on a mountain about twenty kilometers from Luang Prabang, the main city in the region. Our village is Hmong, and Hmong villages are often at high elevations. Every family has a farm. A long time ago, families decided that they would make a village in one place and organize the land together. They didn't need to buy the land from anyone because it was unoccupied. They simply started farming. Now the government registers the land and there are records to show that you own your fields.

Everyone grows rice. Some families also grow corn, Chinese mustard, tomatoes, green beans, eggplants, chili peppers, squash, gourds, onions, and cilantro. Everyone has chickens, too. Most families keep their pigs in a pigpen near the house. Some also have a buffalo, which stays in the forest, and a horse, which stays in a small shed near the house.

When I was a boy, about fifty families lived in my village. Now there are only twenty-three. The others have moved to villages closer to roads, where life is easier. My family's house is the highest one in the village, at the top of the mountain. From my house you can see all the other houses. You can see people going to work or play. At night you can watch the people coming back from the fields.

On clear days, we can see Luang Prabang and the airport from our mountain. The buildings are very small in the distance. When I was a child, I asked my parents what the buildings were, and they told me they were houses made from stone. When we heard the sound of airplanes



I took this picture of my village from in front of my house.

flying past, we all ran to see them. But some children were scared of the planes, because the old people used to tell us that the airplanes would take us away if we played too far from home. It was a way to keep us close to home. Older people were also afraid of the planes, as they still remembered the war, and there were bomb craters in the area. There was unexploded ordinance (UXO) from the Indochina war in our village and field area but now it has been cleared.

My parents told me that Luang Prabang was a big town, but it was too far away for me to walk there. My legs were too small and I wouldn't be able to keep up with them, as they had to go there and back in one day. They would walk to Luang Prabang, carrying rice on their backs to sell. They bought dried noodles for soup. Sometimes, they would buy a shirt or clothing for me or my brothers and sisters, and they always brought back candy and presents.

The first time I went to Luang Prabang was with my older brother, when I was about eleven. We took a goat from the village to sell at the market there. We walked all day. We didn't arrive until evening, and slept with friends of my brother. We left again early in the morning, so I didn't really get to see the town at all.

Now, it's easier to go to Luang Prabang because we can ride in a tuk-tuk, which is like a small wagon attached to a motorcycle, for some of the way. We wake up in the morning about 4:00 a.m. to steam rice and prepare anything we want to sell. Next, we walk an hour down to the Lao village of Ban Som. The path is very steep so sometimes I slip coming down, especially in the rainy season. There we wait until a tuk-tuk comes. There is no schedule, but if we wait long enough, one will come. We pay 8000 kip (approximately US \$1) per person. We ride in it past the Khmu village Ban Houe Tanh, and the Lao villages Ban Na Sai and Ban Na Kham. At each village, the driver collects more passengers, and then we finally arrive in Chomphet District, which is across the Mekong from Luang Prabang. We sell our rice in Chomphet town. Then we cross the Mekong in a small boat to Luang Prabang, where we walk to the noodle soup shop for breakfast. Then we ride a tuk-tuk, or sometimes we walk, to the market to buy other things we need, before we begin the trip back home.

We return the same way. The tuk-tuk ride ends at Ban Som, then we walk up the mountain to our village. It takes one-and-a-half hours if we're walking fast, or two-and-a-half hours if we're walking slowly or have a lot to carry. There is no road to my village, only a path. Cars and motorbikes can't get up there, only people and horses. If we have something heavy to carry, like rice, we use our horses to carry it up and down the mountain.

How to build a wooden house

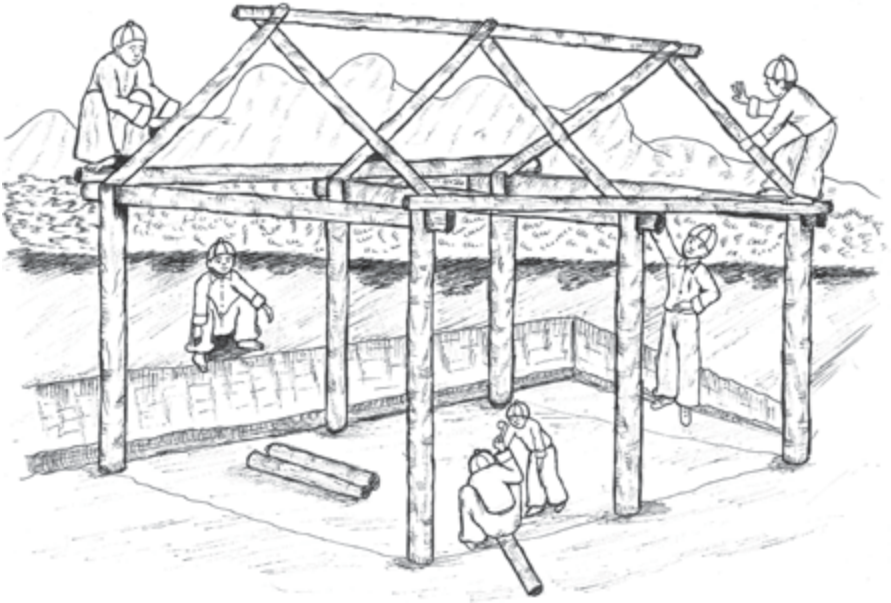
When I was born, my family's house was made of bamboo, but later my parents made a new house from wood. Wood is much stronger than bamboo. I was too young to help them, but I've helped other families make new homes. Every family in the village helps when a new house goes up.

To build a wooden house, first we prepare wood for the walls. We go into the forest and cut trees. Then everybody helps cut each log into long boards. This is a big job. Two people use a long saw to cut each log. First you cut off the top and bottom and each side, so it's a square shape. Then you start at one end, and saw to the other end, to make a long plank. It takes about one hour to cut each plank. Many people help, and we take turns when we get tired. You must be careful to saw in a straight line. Now, people draw lines on the board to help them cut straight, but when I did it, we didn't draw lines, you just had to use your eyesight.

One house takes about two or three hundred boards, approximately 2 large trees. It also needs some tree trunks that haven't been cut into boards, to use as columns. We also need long pieces of wood to make the frame for the roof. The roof is made from long grass, which is bent around a stick, then tied in place, to make large flat sheet. These sheets are laid on the roof frame, so they overlap, like tiles.

When we have all the wood and roof material, the village elders choose a good day to start building. One person from each family comes to help. In the morning, we measure out the area, then we dig and hoe the soil to make it level. After lunch, we start building the house. Usually we finish after 2 days.

A Hmong house has two doors. The family uses a door at one end. On one side is another door, for spirits and for ceremonies. Some houses, including ours, have a third door, in the back. Hmong homes don't have windows.



Usually we cook in the middle of the house. There's no chimney. The smoke just goes out through openings in the wood and ceiling. There's no bathroom, so people go into the woods. If the village has a stream, people go there to bathe. My village doesn't have a stream, so people go to the well to bathe.

Now, many people in Laos use cement columns for the first meter of their house. That keeps termites out. But we didn't have cement. If the termites ate the wood, after a few years, we got new wood and built a new house. None of the houses in our village use any cement.

Once, I helped another family in our village build their house. I had just gotten up from bed, filled the water buckets at the well, and dipped water in the bowl to wash my face. The family that needed the house sent people around the village to tell everyone that they would build their house that day. My mother asked if I wanted to help, and I said yes. After breakfast, one person from each family took a machete and went to where the family had gathered to build their home, to wait for everyone to come together.



Our village doesn't have a stream, so we bath at the well.

First, we dug the ground and moved dirt to make it flat. We used a rope to measure the distance between where we needed to dig the holes for the columns. Five or six of us dug the holes. After about thirty minutes, we got tired and someone else would change with us and continue digging. We dug nine holes for strong posts for the columns. Other villagers told me how deep to dig. Three holes were on each long side of the rectangle and three along the middle. Three tall posts went through the middle of the house, and three shorter posts went along each side. Each column had a notch at the top, to hold a beam that went across. In some villages people use nails to connect the wood for the roof. If they don't have nails, they use rope, vines, or strips of bamboo to tie the wood together. For this house, we had a few nails for the most important joints, and for everything else we tied the wood.

I liked it when they put the logs on the roof and then put the grass

over the top. I liked it best because I climbed up on the roof. Many people were on the roof. They made rope from bamboo, and we used it to tie the grass on the roof.

The floor of the house is just the earth. It gets very hard as we live there. The homes of some ethnic groups are raised off the ground but Hmong houses are not, and we have only one floor. Some of the other houses in Laos take a long time to build, if they are made with cement, or if they are big and fancy. You can build a Hmong house in just two days.

Our house has four rooms. There is a main living area where we cook, eat, talk, and live. My parents have a bedroom. My brother Suae and his family have a room, because the house was built before they moved to their new village, and my sister has a room. When I was younger I slept in my parent's room, but when I was about ten my parents made a little wooden platform where I could sleep in the main room. When we had visitors, I usually slept with one of my friends at his house.

We have no electricity in the village, so we use oil-burning lanterns for light. We make a fire on the floor in the house for cooking and to keep warm. Some days we just eat vegetables. If we have guests, then we kill a chicken for a special dinner. When we have guests, usually the men eat first with the guests, and the women serve the food. When the men and the guests are done eating, the women bring out other food to eat with the children.

Doua, my brother who is a tour guide, sometimes had foreigners who wanted to see our village. If they had enough time, he would bring them to visit. They usually stayed at our house. We put mats out on the floor for them to sleep on. I liked it when foreigners visited, as they would take photos and then show the photos to the children. Other children from the village came to my house to see the foreigners. Occasionally, they would give us candy, or dolls, or toys. Usually, two to six foreigners would come with my brother, or with other tour guides.

Village government

Every village has a headman. His job is to take care of the village, and protect each family, and to solve problems. Every three years we have a meeting. Everyone comes to help choose a headman. We want someone who has a good heart and who will be fair.

Village work

When I was a child, I got up early every morning to help my parents with the housework. In the morning, about 5:30 or 6:00, one of my sisters and I went down to the well to get water. Sometimes we saw our friends at the well. We asked how they were doing, and if they worked in the farm or stayed at home. We each carried two or three buckets of water on a bamboo stick which rested on one shoulder. Often, we got more water in the evening.

Other chores were to feed our pigs, dogs, chickens, and the horse. I had to watch our pigs while they were eating to make sure the other pigs in the village didn't eat their food. In the evening I rounded up our chickens and put them in the chicken coop to sleep.

Until I was about nine years old, I went to the fields with my parents every day. We planted corn and squash together because they help each other grow. We also grew chili peppers, ginger, and rice in other places on the mountain. Sometimes I went with my older brother and his wife to look after their baby while they picked the weeds out of the vegetable garden. In those gardens we grew lettuce, coriander, green vegetables, spring onion, and Chinese cabbage.

Our village has five sets of fields. The closest fields are about 10 minutes walk away and the furthest fields are a one-hour walk. Every year we change fields and every 5 years we rotate from the furthest to the closest fields. We cannot use the same fields every year because the soil is



not so good and needs four years to recover from the crops.

Sometimes we had enough chickens to eat one even if it was not a special day. A couple of times a month, when I came back from the field, my father said, “Theng, go to the chicken pen and catch a chicken for your mother to kill for dinner tonight.”

“Okay,” I answered. I don’t like killing animals. But I would quickly catch a big chicken. My father used a knife to cut the chicken’s neck, and caught the blood coming out in a bowl. Afterwards, my mother and sister put the chicken into a pot with hot water to make the feathers loose, so my sister could take the chicken outside to pull the feathers off. After she finished plucking the chicken, she cut it into many piece, and boiled it, adding the blood to the water. During that time, I usually played hide and seek with my young sister and brother. When dinner was cooked, we stopped playing, and I called my brother to eat. We were always happy on the evenings that we had chicken for dinner.

Village celebrations

Every year, I attend the Hmong New Year festival in our village. The festival takes place when the moon is very thin, but is beginning to get bigger. It is a celebration after all the rice has been harvested, separated from the stalks, and pounded. Usually, the New Year festival is in December, but sometimes we're too still too busy and don't celebrate until January. Hmong people don't have many festivals, so this time of year is special. Hmong children are allowed to leave school to visit their families over this time. If you are working in some of the companies in Luang Prabang or other cities, it can be difficult to get time off though and you are not able to go celebrate New Year with your family.

At this festival, our family welcomes in the New Year by having a ceremony. My father welcomes the souls of our ancestors into our home. We share a meal with them: usually chicken, and sometimes a pig, vegetables, and of course the new rice that we've harvested.

The village festival lasts a week, sometimes longer. It is fun for everybody. When I was a child, I especially liked to play spinning tops. You start with a good piece of wood, and carve it so He is calling the souls, to come celebrate the new year.





that it's perfectly round, with a point on the bottom. Everyone knows how to make these tops, but some people carve them better than others. The bad tops don't spin well, but many times you can fix a bad top by carving off a piece of wood from the right spot. Next, you wrap a string around the top, toss it ahead of you with one hand, and pull back quickly on the string with the other hand, to make it spin. If you do it well, the top will spin a long time. Everybody enjoys spinning tops. We make two teams, with about five people on each team. The first person on one team throws their top. Then the first person on the other team tries to knock over that top with their top.

Several years ago, I started playing another game that I like. We start playing this game when we are about 12 years old. The girls make a small cotton ball. They each bring one ball to the festival and give it to a boy. Then the boys and girls each make a line, facing each other, and throw the ball back and forth. Everyone sings back and forth to each other while playing.

Throwing cotton balls isn't just a game. It is an important custom of the Hmong people. We do it only once a year, when boys and girls



Spinning tops is a popular game. One boy, in the right, is ready to throw his top. If you look carefully you can see another top, above the dog's head.

come from everywhere to celebrate the New Year festival in their villages. Throwing the ball is a time that a boy can talk to a beautiful girl, and everyone hopes to find a good wife or husband. Most marriages occur during this time when a boy and a girl throw the ball to each other to show that they are interested in learning more about each other. Hmong courtship can happen at other times of the year but it is usual to find your husband or wife during the ball throwing games at the New Year celebrations. If a family does not approve of the choice made by their child, the marriage may not go ahead. But if the couple can show that they really love each other, then the parents usually give permission.

The first time I played this game, the first girl that gave me a ball was Mae. She was very beautiful. I liked her before that, but I didn't tell her because I thought that I was too young, and she is a little older. I am still a student and I would like to finish school before I have a girlfriend.

During the festival we wear our traditional Hmong clothes. However, if the weather is very hot, on some days, we wear Lao clothes, which are

cooler. My Hmong shirt is black cotton. My mother and older women in the village used thread with many colors — yellow, blue, red, white, purple — to make designs and patterns on it. I also wear a very wide belt with pockets, which is just as colorful. I add two strips of red cloth that cross my chest. There are old coins hanging from everything.

Villagers make rice treats for the festival. Two men use a big mortar and pestle to pound the rice until it is like sticky mush. This is fun to do, but you have to be strong, because it is tiring. I would pound until I got blisters on my hands. Then we put the rice mush into a bowl, and the women make it into balls. They wrap banana leaves around it to protect it.

During the Hmong New Year festival, since we do not have shops, we play games, talk together and then have lunch at home. We eat vegetables, pork, chicken, or beef. After we eat lunch, we return to our activities. During one New Year festival, my best friend met a girl and



These men are pounding rice, to make candy.

they fell in love. Now they are married and already have a son. I'm very happy for them.

Our animals

Our family owns a horse, about 10 goats, 20 pigs and 50 chickens. Some families have several horses and two hundred chickens. As a boy, I liked playing with the chickens, some of which lived outside our house in the chicken coop. Most chickens live in the fields, that's healthier than being close to the house, because the farm chickens can eat grasshoppers and other insects. The coop chickens only ate the corn and rice we gave them. It is safer to keep the chickens in the coop but keeping them close together means that they can get sick and all die. This is why we leave most of our chickens out at the fields.





My friends and I often took our roosters to fight other roosters around the village. We threw two roosters together and they fought until one ran away. I also enjoyed taking the chickens from the coop to my family's field, which had lots of grasshoppers for them to eat. We had to carry the chickens to make sure they didn't run away. The field was about an hour from my house on foot, or about thirty minutes by horse. While the chickens ate, we rode our horses in the field. We slept overnight in a hut to guard the chickens. Our family had food, such as pumpkin, growing in the field, so we cooked that for our dinner. The next morning we collected banana leaves and other food for the horses, and carried it back home to the village.

Often the animals got sick. There are no toilets in houses, so people go to the bathroom in the forest. There is no specific area in the forest for that, you can choose any spot. The pigs would smell the excrement and eat it, and then they'd get sick. The sick pigs would sleep with other

pigs, and the other pigs would also get sick. Some owners ate their pigs that died. Other owners carried them into the forest to get rid of them, if they died of sickness. Sometimes the owners buried their dead pigs, and sometimes they didn't bury them. Even buried, these pigs decayed and started smelling. Sometimes, the other pigs would smell the decayed pig, and go eat them.

Chickens lived around the pigs, so they might get sick if the pigs were sick, or if they pecked at the dead pigs. Sometimes we bought chickens from other villages, and didn't know they were sick, and then our chickens got sick. Since we had chickens in two places, if the chickens around the house died, we still had the chickens at the farm. When a chicken looked sick, we gave it a small dose of people medicine that we had bought at the village. Sometimes that medicine worked for chickens, too.

I loved riding our horse, but many times I fell off when it was afraid and jumped, or when I made it run too fast. When I was about six, my parents and I were coming back from the field. My father was leading the horse that I was riding. Someone nearby was cutting down a banana tree. When the tree fell, the horse heard the sound, got scared, and started running. I fell off, hurt my head, and cried. My father picked me up and put me back on the horse. He said, "Theng, stop crying, don't be afraid." My father led the horse, and he walked very near us. That way, he could control the horse, and I would not be afraid. I felt safe as I rode back home.

My friends and I liked to ride our horses to the field to harvest the horses' food, things such as banana leaves. Sometimes my friends would whip their horse with a rope to make it go faster. On the way back, the horses' food sometimes got so heavy that I would throw the food on the ground, to make the horse go faster. The horse knew that this was its food and it would stop and wait until I picked up the food.



Playing and having fun

Por and Vew were my best friends. Por always had a good sense of humor and liked playing games, such as jumping rope or hide-and-seek. He also had several fighting cocks, and liked to take them to fights. Por always had many good stories from his father. Often, when we were playing, he told those stories so his friends could enjoy hearing them.

Once, many friends came to play in my house. We sat around, quietly



listening to Por tell a story. Here is his story:

The Chicken and the Civet Cat

Long ago there was a rooster and a hen, who were a married couple. They lived in a big barn. One day the rooster went to live on the farm for many days, so the hen had to send food to her husband every day.

The trail from the barn to the farm forked, and became two trails: a high trail and a low trail. One day, as she walked back to the barn after taking food to her husband, the hen met a civet cat that was standing at the fork.

“Hello, where have you been?” the civet cat asked.

“Hello, I’m coming back from the farm,” the hen replied.

“Do you go to the farm every day? And which trail do you take?” asked the civet cat.

“Yes, I go every day. I usually take the upper trail.”

Then the civet cat knew the hen would come along that upper trail every morning, so he made a plan to kill the hen and eat it for breakfast.

The next morning, the civet cat went to the upper trail and waited for the hen to come past. But the hen knew that the civet cat wanted to kill her, so that day, she used the lower trail to take food to her husband.

The civet cat waited all day, but no hens came along the upper trail. The civet cat grew tired and was hungry all night long.

The next morning, the civet cat met the hen again at the fork on the trail.

“Oh! How are you? Did you get home safely from the farm?” the civet cat asked.

“Yes,” the hen replied.

“Which trail do you usually take, when you go to your farm?”

“The lower trail,” the hen said, and then she ran very fast to the farm.

The next morning the civet cat waited on the lower trail to kill the hen. The civet cat waited all day, but no hens came along the lower trail. The civet cat thought for a long time about how to kill the hen. Finally he had a new idea.

In the morning, the civet cat sat at the fork where the lower trail and upper trail met. When the hen came by, the civet cat jumped up, caught the hen, and ate her.

That day the rooster waited all day but his wife never brought food to him. Finally the rooster got so hungry that he started walking back home. When he arrived at the fork in the trails, he saw his wife's feathers and blood there. That made the rooster sad and very angry. He wanted to know who killed and ate his wife.

The rooster went to ask the old Hermit for advice. The Hermit told the rooster to return home and scoop up a big pile of cow dung and put it in front of the door, then collect one bucket of water and put it in the middle of the barn. Then, said the Hermit, catch one bee, cover it with a bowl and put it beside the bucket of water, and find one egg to bury in the fireplace. After that, open the door and fly up to the roof of the barn to sleep. Then when you crow, the civet cat will come to kill you, so then you will see who killed your wife.

The rooster ran back to barn and did exactly as the Hermit had told him. When the rooster crowed, the civet cat heard and was happy to think about getting another meal. So the civet cat went to the house. There it smelled the egg in the fireplace. That made the civet cat hungry, so it used one paw to dig up the egg. But the egg broke and splashed the civet cat in the eyes. The civet cat couldn't see anything so he ran to find a bucket of water, but instead he turned over the bowl that covered the bee. The bee stung the civet cat. Then the civet cat ran to the door, but it stepped the cow dung, which splashed onto its body.

That's why the civet cat has many colors in its fur today.

Por had many fun stories like this, and we always enjoyed listening to them.

* * *

As a child, I liked to go with my friends to catch the small rice birds in the fields. We made a bamboo cage and put rice in the cage. When the birds went inside to eat the rice, the door slammed shut and the bird was trapped. After one bird was inside, the other birds heard it calling and flew down to play with it. They went inside another cage to eat the rice, and got trapped as well. We would catch many birds, 10, 20, or 30, and keep them together in a cage. If we had a lot of birds we ate some, otherwise we just kept them as pets. We liked the ones that sang fast.

We also all enjoyed catching mice. Even when I was going to high school, and went back home for the harvest season, catching mice was fun. Mice often dug inside our rice to eat it. On Fridays, I arrived home from school about 4:30. I met my friends, Vew and Por, and we prepared to catch mice in the field. We used a mosquito net to catch them. We also each took a bow and a few arrows. We walked quickly from the village to the field. We were happy because we heard people in the village say there were many mice in the field. We felt very confident we would have a good hunt. As we walked, I said, “Vew and Por, I am sure we’ll catch many mice tonight, what do you think?”

“Yes! I think so!” Por agreed.

We arrived at the field about 6:30. The three of us waited at the field hut for about half an hour, preparing the arrows. Afterward, we went to the rice field. When we arrived, Vew and Por held a mosquito net in front of the rice, and I used a piece of wood to make a noise to scare the mice. “Vew and Por, hit them, hit them,” I called. “Toop tup! toop tup! toop tup!” were the sounds of Vew and Por hitting the mice. We got 10 big mice, and many small ones. Some of them were very big, as big as our fists, in English you might call them rats, but in Lao we use the same word for many sizes.

We kept catching mice until midnight, and by then we were sleepy. We ended with a full bag of mice. “Good night,” we said to each other, and we slept in a pile of straw in the field. Straw is very comfortable and warm. In the morning we barbecued some of the mice and ate them for breakfast. Mice taste good barbecued. After we ate, we divided the remaining mice. Each of us got about 20 mice to take back home.

Sometimes, when I played with my friends, they had toy cars their parents had bought for them in Luang Prabang. Once, when I was about ten years old and my nephew was about five, we were sitting on the ground in the front of our house with my friend Por. I said to Por, “Yesterday, when I went to play with my friend, he had a toy car. His



Sasha took this picture of some Hmong boys in 2003. You can see one mouse, and 3 mouse tails, if you look carefully. I was about this age in 2003, and he was close to my village, but this was not my village. I did not know Sasha then, but I did know the boy in front.

parents bought it in town. Let's see if we can make a toy car."

Por said, "Okay, but how will we make it?"

I had an idea.

First we found a plastic water bottle, then two sticks to use as axles and four round seeds for wheels. We cut off one side of the water bottle with a cooking knife and laid it down, with the cut side facing up. We made four small holes in the bottom and put the sticks through the holes. We made a small hole in the middle of each seed with a pointed tool. Then we attached the seeds to the axles. It worked! We made another toy car for my nephew. We tied a string around each bottle's neck, to pull the

car. We put stones and other things inside the cars to give them weight. Then we pulled the cars along the paths to show our friends and others in the village. My friends asked, “Who made those cars?”

“Por and me.”

“Really? Can we pull the cars with Por and you?” they asked. So some of my friends walked around the village and pulled the cars with us.

Another time I made a wooden tricycle with Vew and Por. We used a broad piece of wood for the seat. We attached a wheel to the front and two small wooden wheels in the back. We used a stick to steer, with another stick for handlebars. It was attached to the front wheel. When we finished, we took our tricycle up a hill. Other friends who had also made tricycles went with us.

When we got to the top I said, “Let me try first.” I sat down and held the horns (in English, I think you say ‘handlebars’), then pushed to start going downhill. After it was moving, I put my feet up on the wood in front. It ran very fast. We took turns racing down the hill. We mostly rode the tricycles during the dry season; in the rainy season, the hills are too muddy and the wheels don’t turn well. Once, one of my friends had almost reached the bottom of the hill when a back wheel fell off. His tricycle turned over and he rolled over with it. My other friends and I all laughed. He stood up fast and he laughed too. He brought his tricycle up the hill so we could help him fix it.

I liked playing jump rope with my sister and my nephew. We used rope, or vines from the trees. I also liked playing hide-and-seek, in our houses or in the forest, with my friends. In the forest we hid behind the trees, and in the house we hid under the bed or in dark corners. When one person was caught, they helped the seeker find everyone else. If the seeker couldn’t find everyone, they had to be seeker again for the next game.

Another time, on a Saturday about 4:00 p.m. while I was guarding the chickens, my mother asked me to go to our farm and collect banana

leaves for our horse. I asked Por to come with me. It took us over an hour to go from my village to our farm. Sometimes we ran, but mostly we walked. Sometimes, we walked slowly, so we could shoot at birds with our slingshots. We arrived at the farm about 5:30.

From about age 13 we could go to the farm for the night by ourselves. I told Por to start a fire and steam rice for our dinner. Meanwhile, I collected the ends of a pumpkin stalk to cook. This part of the plant is soft and tastes good. The pumpkins were not big enough yet to eat. After dinner, it was dark, and we took a flashlight and knife to catch fish at the nearby river. We caught many kinds of fish to eat in the morning. We also saw many snakes, frogs and insects. There was a small hut on the farm, and we returned there to sleep.

In the morning we ate breakfast, just a little rice and water. Por and I played, jumping in the rice straw piles. I wanted to show him that I could do a somersault, because I had seen a movie hero do that in a film. Unfortunately, my somersault didn't work and my head hit the ground



while my feet were still up in the sky. When I stood up, my neck hurt, and I couldn't turn my head at all. I could only look straight ahead. I was afraid my parents would punish me for getting hurt, but I did my chores and collected some banana leaf for the horse and returned home.

When we arrived home, my father asked me "What happened to

your neck?” I just told him that I fell down. My father didn’t say anything more to me. He got some leaves, and pounded them to put in a cloth wrap to go around my neck. I just stayed home, and did not go to school for a week. I was very sad because no one stayed with me to talk to me. I learned that it isn’t good to try somersaults in the air, and I did not do that any more.

Getting into trouble

Many times I got into trouble with my parents. One day when I was about three, I made my sister cry. She was just a baby at the time, she could crawl but she couldn’t walk. She was playing by herself, and I wanted to carry her. I tried to pick her up, but she didn’t like that and started crying. My father was angry and he punished me by hitting my bottom with a small piece of wood. I cried and said, “I won’t do it again.” Then my mother came and stopped my father from hitting me.

Punishment didn’t come only from adults. When I was about seven, I liked to play spinning top with my friends. Sometimes my nephew, who was a couple of years younger, played with us. Once I snatched the spinning top from him. He was angry, but he pretended not to be, so I thought he had forgotten. When I wasn’t looking, he hit my finger with a hammer, and broke it. I cried for a long time. My mother pounded up some leaves to make a medicine paste, and put it on my wound. Then, she wrapped my finger up in cloth. It hurt a lot and I couldn’t bend it for a few weeks. I still have the scar. We still use these healing methods in our village when children get hurt.

One of my jobs was to collect water from the village well. The well was at a big tree, where water came up from underground. We built a short wall with stones, so the water didn’t flow away as fast.

We used the water for cooking, drinking, and washing dishes. The pigs and chickens got some too. To wash clothes, or to bathe, we didn’t

carry the water up, but instead, we went down to the well. It was a difficult task, walking along a steep path from the village down to the well. It took about an hour every morning and another hour in the evening, because I had to make two or three trips each time. One morning, I went down to the well as usual to get the water. It had rained that morning so the path was slippery. I used my bowl to scoop water into the two black pails. I carried them back up the mountain, hanging them from a wooden pole balanced across my shoulders. I was about halfway back when I slipped and fell. One pail, and my bowl, both broke, so I only had one pail left. All the water had spilled on the ground, so I had to go back down to the well and get water again. This time, I borrowed my friend's bowl to scoop up the water and I carried it back in the unbroken pail. I was afraid my father would scold me, but he just reminded me to be more careful next time.





Ceremonies and beliefs

Ceremonies are an important part of Hmong culture. I've already told about the ceremony when I was a baby and I was sick, so they gave me a new name. Ceremonies are for people to celebrate something good, like a wedding or birth, or to feel better about things like a death. Ceremonies also are important to keep spirits satisfied.

Weddings

I was about four years old when my sister got married to a man from our village. I still remember it. Before the wedding, the groom's father chose two men to come to our house. They had to decide details: the month and day of the wedding, whether it was to be a big wedding or a small wedding, and whether they would kill a big pig or a small pig. They talked to my parents and reassured them that their daughter would be safe with her new husband. Usually in Hmong culture the groom's family sends a respected male elder to talk to the bride's family. Unfortunately, sometimes they would kidnap the girl from her village if she did not want to marry the groom.

For my sister's wedding, the elders decided on a small wedding party and ceremony at our house. We killed a big pig and chickens. Everyone sang and drank Lao rice whiskey. During the party, the boys from the other family gave alcohol to the boys in my family, and in exchange we gave them meat to show that we are now cousins and belong to the same

family.

At my sister's wedding we also had two mej koobs. They are important people at a Hmong wedding. One is a representative for the groom, and one for the bride. Mej koobs are also the men who have learned the wedding song, and can sing it at the ceremony. They communicate on behalf of, and between, both families. For example, if there are gifts exchanged between the families, such as clothes or money, the gifts are given to the mej koob, who gives it to the other mej koob, who then gives it to the family. All mej koobs get paid to perform their job but it is not a huge amount.

When a Hmong couple get married, the bride and groom stay at the groom's parents' house for three days before the wedding. They can't leave the house during that time. When they arrive at the house, the mej koob takes a closed umbrella and hangs it on the wall to protect the bride and the groom from bad luck. The groom's father calls to the spirit of the house to introduce the new bride and welcome her into her new home. Now she is part of the family, and the spirit will protect her from harm. Food and alcohol are prepared in the house, then the mej koob leads the party to the home of the bride's parents.

The bride and groom wear traditional Hmong



As part of my brother's wedding, there was a baci ceremony at the home of the bride.

clothes — colorful embroidered skirt or pants and a jacket, and a hat if they have one. If they don't have special Hmong clothes, they just wear new clothes. When the bride and groom arrive at the bride's parents' house, our custom is that they take off their shoes as they walk through the doorway. Once inside, they can put on their shoes again. That has been our custom from long ago. This is only on their wedding day, usually when you walk through the door of the house, you keep your shoes on.

When we have a traditional Hmong wedding at our mountain village, we don't have electricity for music or musicians, and only the mej koob sings the wedding song. He sings standing up and everyone sits and listens. We don't dance. However, now many Hmong people who have moved to the valleys have a Lao-style wedding with a big stereo, speakers, music, and dancing. One of my older brothers got married in the valley, so his wedding was a mixture of Lao and Hmong customs.

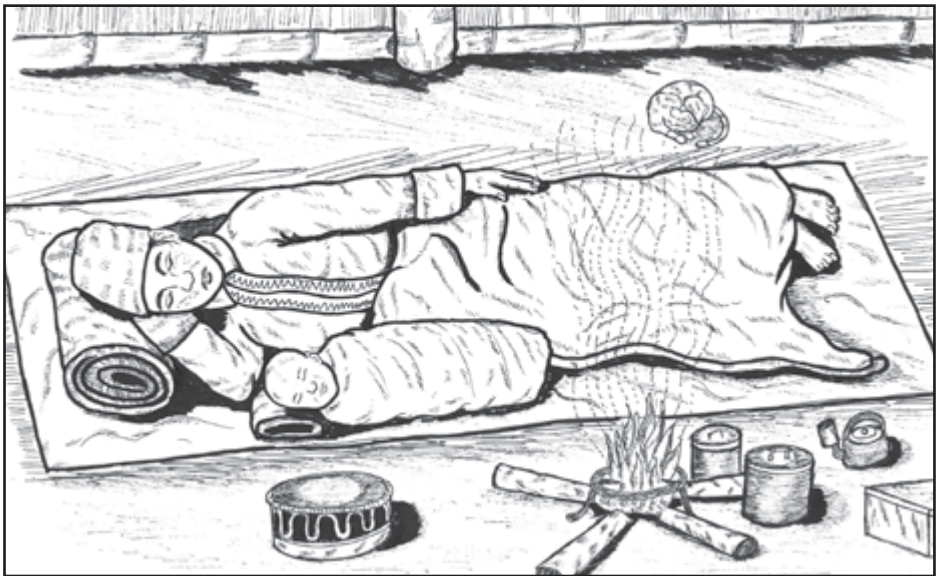


As the wedding party walks from the girl's home to the boy's home, they always stop halfway for a meal.

Births and deaths

Babies in our village, are usually born in the mother's house, because the hospital is far away and travel is difficult. Many babies die when they're born. The older women help the mother give birth in the house. The men cannot enter the house until after the birth. For three days after the birth, the mother and baby can't sleep in the bedroom because it's too cold. They sleep on the floor next to the fire to keep warm, and the new mother eats chicken for her strength and to make milk for the baby. When the babies are three days old, the parents have a basi ceremony to welcome their new baby, to name it, and to introduce it to the family's spirit.

For fifteen days the father cooks and does the housework to help the new mother. The mother has warm showers from water that is heated especially for her, and she drinks warm water. For one month the baby cannot go outside. Men can't wear shoes in the house at this time because we believe that the shoes take the baby's milk. Also, while a man's wife is pregnant, he can't go into another house which has a small baby. We



believe that his presence will take the milk from the little baby to give to the unborn baby.

Births are not registered officially in the village. Each family has a family book where they write the names and birthdates of their children. These dates are stamped by government officials when they come through. Many times the books are only updated when the officials are due, which is why most Hmong children do not know their exact birth date or even birth year — some visits can be up to 5 years apart.

My oldest brother is twenty years older than me, and he had two sons. The eldest was half a year younger than I am, and the youngest was three years younger than me. We used to play together a lot when we were young. Unfortunately, when the older son was five years old, he got a bad fever. We didn't have money to take him to the hospital, and he passed away. My brother cried very much for his son, as did everyone else. We had a little ceremony for him and we killed a chicken and a pig. A man played the khene, a musical instrument with six long bamboo tubes, to send him up to heaven to be reborn. I felt sad and very sorry.

My brother and his wife couldn't have any more children, so they adopted a baby girl from a Lao village. This baby girl's father had died before she was born. When I was about twelve years old, I helped look after her. When my brother was at work in the fields, and I didn't have school, I carried her on my back and fed her milk from a bottle. She was very lovely, but when she was just eight months old, she got a fever and she died. Now, my brother just has one son left.

When old people in our village die, we usually sacrifice two buffaloes or cows, and four or five pigs. For a little baby, we just kill two or three pigs and no buffalo or cows. The family kills one animal every day to cook for the funeral guests. If the funeral lasts for many days, they kill many animals. Two people cook, four people collect firewood, and four people collect water. We check the calendar to choose the day of the funeral, so that we can have it on a special day.

To decide where to bury the body, a village elder throws an egg in the forest cemetery. If the egg breaks when it lands, the site is a good place to bury the body. If the person is buried here, he or she will be reborn as the son or daughter of a dragon king. If a body is already buried there, they move the burial site a little to the side. We follow an old tradition of putting stones on top of the grave to stop the tigers from digging up the people and carrying them away. Some old people in my village say that if someone from my Hmong clan dies, they will be reincarnated as a bear. Others believe the person will become another animals, such as a tiger. This is the grave of my older brother's mother-in-law, near my village.



Ghosts and spirits

When I was young, I never traveled to other villages because they were far away and along either side of the path was a Hmong cemetery that I was afraid to pass. The old people didn't want children to play far from the village, so they told us there were ghosts in the cemetery. They told us that if we touch a ghost we will die, and we believed them. I was scared of ghosts, so I just played around the village and at home.

I was scared of ghosts because I remembered the faces I had seen of people who had died in my village. I still feel scared when I think of them. When a person passed away, the body was kept on a raised wooden platform in the parents' house until all the family from other villages had come to see the person and mourn them. A musician played the khene for a long time, until the body was taken to the forest to be buried. I didn't like to look at the dead person's face because after a few days it had turned different colors, like yellow, green and black, and it looked strange and ugly. I imagined these faces when I thought of ghosts.

Once I was walking with my friend in the forest and we heard a noise like a baby's cry. Then wood, stones, and dirt flew at us from the trees. We couldn't see anyone, and we were very afraid. We thought it might be a ghost trying to scare us away. We ran back home. The next day, early in the morning, my mother and our dog had gone to collect water from the well. Again wood, stones, and dirt flew at her from the trees as she walked down the path. Our dog ran to the trees to find who was throwing things, but it became afraid and ran back to my mother. We thought it must be a ghost, because a person wouldn't throw something at an old woman.

When I was about fifteen, I had an experience with a tsog, which is a spirit that makes people weak and unable to move. Nobody knows why a tsog picks a particular person. I was lying in bed, on my back, half asleep and I felt a big weight on my chest, like the weight of a man. I couldn't move, speak, or breathe. I wriggled a little, and after five minutes, I woke

up properly. The weight lifted as the spirit went away. This happened to me many times, and I became afraid to sleep on my back. I started sleeping on my side or sitting up. Many people in my village had had the same experience, and I heard from the old men what to do about it. I put a rope next to me when I went to bed. When I felt the weight on me again, I woke up and took the rope in my hand. I said “I will tie you up.” I used the rope to tie up the spirit. You can’t see a spirit, and you can’t touch it, but you can tie it. When I’d finished tying him up, I said, “I’ve tied up the spirit already,” then I took the rope outside and tied it to a tree. The spirit didn’t come back after that.





Starting school

Some children started school at age six or seven, but I didn't want to. I didn't go until I was about nine. My parents had to scold me, or beat me, to go to school. "Theng, will you go to school, or do you want me to hit you?" my father often said.

"Yes, I want to go, I will go now," I said. But my parents still had to scold me very often, because I didn't like going to school.

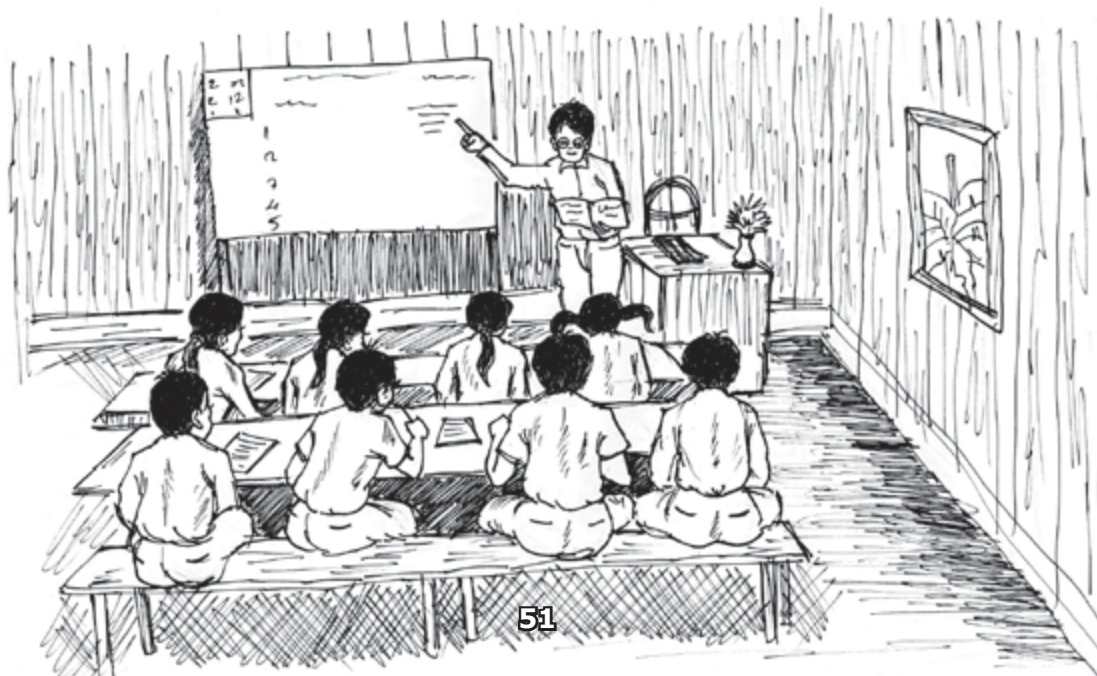
At that time I was very shy, and I didn't learn well at school. I preferred playing games and running around the village with my friends. I didn't like studying. Once the teacher wrote the Lao letter "ng" on the board for me to read, but I couldn't read it, so the teacher called another student. He was younger than me, but he could read it. The teacher told him, "Cho, go twist Theng's ear right now," so Cho twisted my ear as a punishment. I felt embarrassed, and cried a little. I didn't say anything, I ran home because everyone in the class was laughing at me.

After that, I began learning to read and write. I stopped being so shy, because my dad told me, "Theng, you shouldn't be shy. If you are too shy, you won't learn well. Can you be brave and volunteer in class, and answer the teacher's questions?" I said yes, and I was happy to receive this advice from my father. I studied hard after school every evening. I learned more and more. But I still liked playing games, such as spinning top and jump rope, and sometimes I pretended not to hear my father when he called me to come home to study.

My village school had two teachers. One was a young Hmong man

from another village, and the other was a Lao man from Chomphet district. The people in our village built a house for the Lao teacher and his wife and son, so they could live in our village. All the families brought rice and food for them to eat. He lived there for three years, and then another Lao teacher came to take his place. Both teachers, even the Hmong teacher, taught lessons only in Lao. We didn't learn to read or write Hmong language at school. I learned to read and write Hmong language from my older brothers and sisters.

There were sixty students in the school, and it had grades one, two and three. Some of the students came from another Hmong village close to ours. The school looked like a Hmong house, but it was longer and bigger, with just one room. It was made from wood, with a thatch roof and a dirt floor. There was no electricity, and no lights, but there were gaps between the wooden boards in the walls to let in light. If it rained a lot, sometimes water leaked through the holes in the thatch, and the floor could get quite muddy. Inside there were wooden desks, benches, and a blackboard. We copied from the blackboard in first grade, and after that we used textbooks.



My favorite subjects were Lao and sports. My least favorite were music and art, because I was shy and I couldn't sing well. If we were naughty, the teachers hit us on the head with a small wooden stick. Another punishment was that we had to stand in front of the class and stretch out our arms. Then we had to balance a stone on each hand while standing on one leg for about ten minutes. If we really misbehaved, we had to stand there for twenty or thirty minutes. Most of the time, we fell over or dropped the stones. If we couldn't read Lao, the teacher would hit the tips of our fingers with a piece of wood. I didn't like being punished because everybody watched and laughed at me.

When I completed grade three, our village hired a teacher from another village to teach grade four. He moved to our village for one year. (At that time, teachers in our village were always men. Now, there are women teachers, too.) All the students in the class donated rice and food for him. We made a small hut to use as the grade four classroom. Our teacher asked the students to choose a captain of the class. They chose me because I was brave and responsible and a good student, which made me feel proud. I rang the school bell in the morning and organized students into a line to sing the Lao national anthem before we entered the school. I also had to keep order in the classroom and make the other students behave if they were too noisy or naughty.

Sometimes when my sister and I came home from school, we threw our books on our beds and went out to play. Then our mother or father would take the books and put them someplace that was high and safe so our younger siblings couldn't tear the pages or ruin the books. The next morning, when we were ready for school, we couldn't find our books. So our mother or father had to get them for us.

Living away from home

Primary school in Laos ends with grade five, when most students are about 11 years old. We didn't have a teacher to teach grade five in my village, Phou Luang Tai, so six classmates and I moved to Chomphet, a village on the Mekong river across from Luang Prabang. Chomphet was about three hours away from my village by foot. (Now it takes less time, 30 minutes by tuk-tuk plus two hours on foot to go up or down the mountain.) It was too far to travel every day so my father rented a bamboo hut from a Lao family. He gave them three bags of rice to let us stay there for a year. I lived there with four friends while we finished our last year of primary school.

I was about ten or eleven years old when I moved to Chomphet. It was a difficult time for me because I had never left my parents before. At first, I thought of them all the time, but I was happier after I made

This is the secondary school (grades 6 to 8) that I went to in Chompet. The school has three buildings, this is one of them.



many friends at the school. There were many new things to learn and experience. For example, I felt strange when I saw them playing football and ratten ball because it was the first time I'd seen these games. After a while, I greatly enjoyed these games and played them many times. Once I was playing football, and I was having lots of fun until someone kicked the ball into my stomach. I fell down and cried. My stomach ached. After that, I was afraid of being hurt, and stopped playing it.

My friends and I stayed in Chomphet to study at secondary school, in grades 6 to 8. My father built a little bamboo hut next to the school for me and three of my friends to live in. It was one room, about two meters on each side. There was one big wooden platform about a meter off the ground where we all slept on rattan mats. It was crowded. The floor was packed dirt which we had to sweep every day. We didn't have windows, just a bamboo door. We had one gas lamp in the hut to study at night,

I stayed in a hut like this, with my friends, in Chomphet. Now, new students stay here.



and we used flashlights when we went outside in the dark. We had no water near the hut but we could use the water at the school for toilets. We bathed and did our laundry in the small river near the school.

We kept all our things — rice, books, school bags and flip-flops — together on the platform. When we went outside we locked the door so no one could come inside and take our things. Once, when all the students went back to their villages for a week of school holiday, a thief broke into some of the huts and stole things. We came back to our hut and found the padlock broken, and our shoes and rice missing. We had to go back to our village the next day and get more rice. After that, we sold our rice before we went back home for the holidays, and we always took our shoes back with us. We could leave our books in the hut; the robbers didn't want to steal them.

Our secondary school was bigger than the primary school in Chomphet, with about twenty teachers and one thousand students. Some students lived with their families in the village, but most came from other districts and lived in little huts like ours, beside the school. We created our own student village, with about 50 huts. All the girls' huts were together on one side, and all the boys' huts were together on the other side, but we could walk anywhere during the day and talk to the girls. At night, however, we weren't allowed to go to the girls' section, and some of the teacher chose students to be in charge of guarding the sections. If they saw a boy or girl in the wrong section, they wrote down their name to show to the teacher. Then that person was punished, by having to clean the toilets or fetch water.

There was no running water at the school, so we collected it from the river nearby. There were two toilets for the teachers, and two for all the students, one toilet for the girls and one toilet for the boys. However, because there were so many students, we usually just used the forest, which is what we were used to doing in our village.

Students from three ethnic groups lived together: Hmong, Lao, and

Khmu. At first it was difficult for me to talk with the Lao and Khmu because I didn't speak Lao very well. Even though I learned Lao at school, my best friends were Hmong so it was easier to talk with them. However, I spent a lot of time with Lao and Khmu students, both in class and outside, so I made friends with them too. My Lao improved quickly.

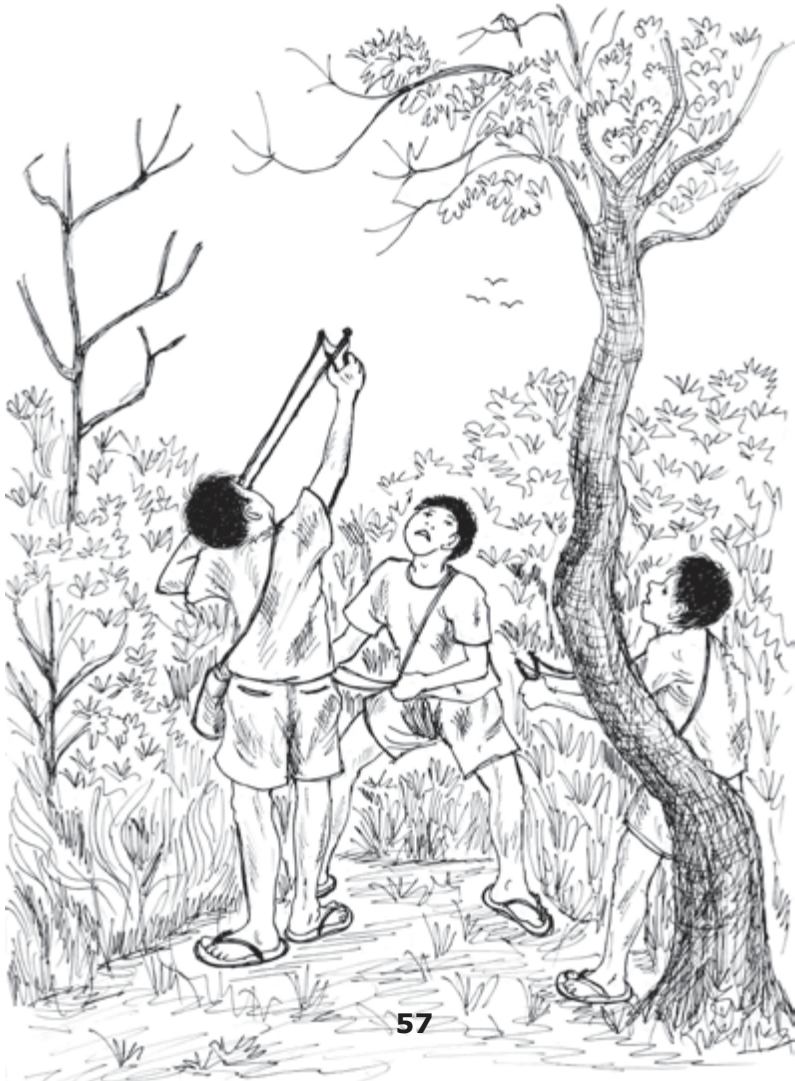
At school many things happened to me. Some were good, some were bad. Sometimes I was happy and smiling, other times I was homesick. I walked back home to visit my parents almost every weekend with my friends, and we carried rice and food from the village back to school. My parents didn't have much money, but they gave me ten thousand kip per week (around US \$1.00) to buy things that I needed. I only spent five thousand, and I saved the other five and gave it back to them. I bought things like kerosene for my light at night, books, pens, and some food. My parents also gave me rice and vegetables from our farm whenever I went back to visit them.

At Chomphet, my friends and I always cooked together in our hut. We cooked things like vegetables, meat (usually pork) and eggs. We brought the pork from our village, but we could buy eggs and grow vegetables at the school. Usually we boiled our food, but sometimes we fried it or made a soup. We always had steamed rice with our meal. We cooked the rice on a fire inside the hut on the dirt floor. I already knew how to cook a little because sometimes I helped my mother and older sisters cook at home. At Chomphet, there was no one to help us, so we cooked and did all the other household chores ourselves. We each mended our own clothes. My mother is very proud of me now, because I've learned to take care of myself. Also, I can help her when I go back home to my village.

If our firewood was finished, we couldn't go home for the weekend. Instead, we had to go gather more wood from a hill about ten kilometers away from our hut. We walked to the hill to collect the wood and we chopped it into small pieces. After that we tied them together in a bundle,

then we carried it home. If the wood was too wet we chopped it in half and dried it in the sun for about two weeks until we could use it.

Though we worked and studied hard at Chomphet, we still had a little free time to have fun. We went swimming in the Mekong River, went to the forest with our slingshots to shoot birds, or caught fish in small ponds. We also played sports, like soccer and rattan ball, or games like spinning top.





Moving to Luang Prabang

After two years, I left Chomphet lower secondary school and moved to Luang Prabang. I finished lower secondary school (grade 8) in Luang Prabang, then I studied at Santiphap high school. I was very happy, as I was able to live with my brother while in Luang Prabang. He bought a bicycle for me to get around town. I hadn't learned to ride a bicycle before, as we didn't have anything like this in our village. I didn't ride my bicycle to school because I liked walking and thought it was safer. As I had more free time, I studied English in the evenings in a little class at the teacher's house. I rode my bicycle to evening English class.

Life in Luang Prabang is different from life in Chomphet. In Chomphet there aren't many cars. I had many friends because everybody lived close together at the school, and everyone knew each other. Nobody felt sad or lonely. Now, I don't have as many friends because I'm new to Luang Prabang, and I don't know as many people. There are many cars and many new things for me to experience, like computers and story books. I can read and learn about new things. But sometimes, I feel lonely because I stay at home when my brother is out. If I'm feeling sad, on some Sundays I go visit my friends in Chomphet. They don't come to visit me in Luang Prabang because it's more expensive for them; when I visit them, I ride my bicycle and only have to pay for the boat, but if they visit me, they have to pay for the boat and also the tuk-tuk.

One day, I left school on a Friday afternoon about 3:30 to go back to my village to visit my parents. I crossed the Mekong River to Chomphet

on the other side, and from there I hoped to take a tuk-tuk to our village with my friends. When I arrived at the tuk-tuk station, the last tuk-tuk had already left and no one was there. I had to walk to our village. I jogged all the way to the Lao village at the bottom of the mountain. That took about two hours. I bought a lighter there because it was getting late and I thought it would be dark soon. Then I started to climb the mountain to my village. When it was almost dark, I picked some long grass and lit it to make a torch to light my way. I was scared because I would have to pass the cemetery. My heart was beating fast, but I made it home safe without seeing a ghost. It was 7:00 p.m. when I finally got back to my village. I was hungry and thirsty. The next day my legs were really sore.

Santiphap High School, in Luang Prabang.



Learning new things

My life changed again when I discovered Big Brother Mouse. This is a company that publishes Lao books for children. It's also a place where Lao students can go and practice English with foreign tourists, and it publishes books, like this, that help students learn English.



English practice at Big Brother Mouse, where my English got good enough to talk with a foreigner. You can see the back of my head, on the right, third from the front.

One day after school, a friend invited me to go with him to practice English at Big Brother Mouse the next morning. I liked learning English very much, so I was interested to try this. The first time I went, I couldn't

understand much of what the tourists said. I just listened to everyone talk. After that, I studied hard and practiced English by myself when I had free time. Someone told me that I was crazy, but I didn't worry because I thought practicing English alone was a good way to learn.

During school vacation, I went to Big Brother Mouse every Monday through Saturday morning for a month and a half, to practice English. I began to understand more. One day Sasha, who started the company, came downstairs and asked all students at English practice, "Who can write Hmong language?" I was the first person to volunteer. Sasha asked me to work at Big Brother Mouse for a few days, because they needed someone who could write in Hmong. I did some of the work on a computer and I really liked this work.

Now I work at Big Brother Mouse almost every night after I finish school. I am learning about story and page layout. Sasha is a good teacher and helps me learn about computers. Because I am working now, I can save some money, and buy some things for my parents. I have bought chicken and fish for them, which they don't eat very often. I give it to them when they come to visit me.



My dreams and a new life

My life today is very different from when I was a child. When I was young, I didn't have any dreams for my future. I never thought that I could be a tour guide or a teacher. I thought that when I grew up, I would have to be a farmer, find a good wife, and live on the mountain like my parents. Then I moved to study in Luang Prabang! I found life in Luang Prabang strange, very different, but exciting. There are good jobs, so people are able to buy very beautiful houses and cars. This made me decide to study hard and make my dreams come true.

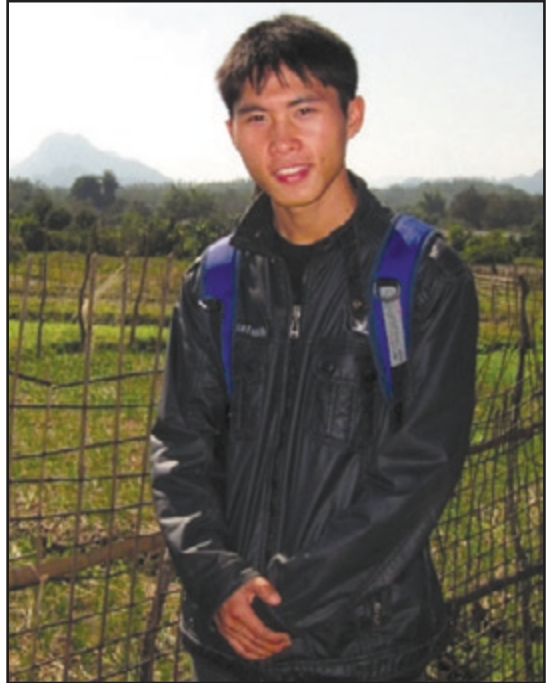
After I finish high school, I would like to continue studying English. I want to study at a university to become a mathematics teacher. I would like to be a good teacher for Hmong children in my village. I would also like to be a tour guide, because I love talking and learning about Laos, and I could travel everywhere.



Afterword

After writing this book, James continued working at Big Brother Mouse while he finished high school. He designed and did layout for many of our books, and he wrote out many of the traditional Hmong stories that he heard while growing up, so that future generations can read and enjoy them. He also compiled three books of puzzles: toothpick puzzles, sudoku, and tangrams, which are widely enjoyed.

While still in high school and working part-time, he and his brother Dua, in their spare time, built a house near Luang Prabang for their parents to live in. All of them now live together in that house. James graduated from high school. He is now a student at Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang, and in his spare time he studies Chinese at a private school. His younger sister is also a student at Souphanouvong.



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ຫວັງວ່າທ່ານຈະມ່ວນຊື່ນກັບການອ່ານປື້ມຟຣີຂອງອ້າຍໝູນ້ອຍ

ປື້ມຂອງອ້າຍໝູນ້ອຍທີ່ໄດ້ຜ່ານການຄັດເລືອກໃຫ້ມີໃນອິນເຕີເນັດ. ຂໍເຊີນຊວນພວກທ່ານປະຕິບັດດັ່ງນີ້:

- * ພົມປື້ມຫົວນີ້ໄວ້ອ່ານສ່ວນຕົວ;
- * ພົມອອກເປັນຫຼາຍສຳເນົາເພື່ອປະກອບການຮຽນໃນໂຮງຮຽນໃດໜຶ່ງ ຫຼື ໃນທ້ອງຖິ່ນ;
- * ສົ່ງເປັນເອກະສານ ແບບໜັງສື ຕໍ່ໃຫ້ຄົນອື່ນໆ;
- * ຕື່ມຫົວຂໍ້ໃຫ້ຄົນຕິດຕາມກ່ຽວກັບປື້ມເຫຼົ່ານີ້ລົງໃນ ເວັບໄຊ້ ຂອງທ່ານ. ບໍ່ຕ້ອງເຊື່ອມເຂົ້າຫາປື້ມໂດຍກົງ ເພາະທີ່ຢູ່ ເວັບໄຊ້ ຂອງປື້ມເຫຼົ່ານີ້ອາດຈະປ່ຽນແປງ. ກະລຸນາເຊື່ອມຕໍ່ເຂົ້າຫາໜ້າຫຼັກເວັບໄຊ້ ຂອງພວກເຮົາ ເຊິ່ງເປັນບ່ອນທີ່ສາມາດເບິ່ງລາຍການປື້ມທີ່ຈະດາວໂຫຼດໄດ້.

ທ່ານຈະບໍ່:

- * ຈັດພົມປື້ມນີ້ ແລ້ວຂາຍ ຫຼື ແຈກຈ່າຍຢ່າງກວ້າງຂວາງເກີນກວ່າທີ່ໄດ້ອະນຸຍາດໄວ້ຂ້າງເທິງ ຖ້າບໍ່ໄດ້ຮັບອະນຸຍາດຈາກອ້າຍໝູນ້ອຍ.
- * ເອົາປື້ມຂຶ້ນໜ້າ ເວັບໄຊ້. ກະລຸນາເຮັດພຽງສ້າງການເຊື່ອມຕໍ່ເຂົ້າຫາ ເວັບໄຊ້ຂອງພວກເຮົາດັ່ງທີ່ໄດ້ກ່າວໄວ້ຂ້າງເທິງນັ້ນ.

ຖ້າທ່ານເປັນຄົນມັກອ່ານ ລອງຄຳນຶງເຖິງຫຼາຍຄົນໃນປະເທດລາວ ຜູ້ທີ່ບໍ່ເຄີຍເຫັນປື້ມຈັກເທື່ອ. ດ້ວຍການຊ່ວຍເຫຼືອຂອງທ່ານ ພວກເຮົາສາມາດເຮັດປື້ມອ່ານໃຫ້ເຖິງເຂົາເຈົ້າເລົ່ານັ້ນ. ຂໍຈົ່ງພິຈາລະນາສະໜັບສະໜູນການພົມປື້ມ ຫຼື ຊ່ວຍໃນທາງອື່ນ. ເວັບໄຊ້ຂອງພວກເຮົາມີຂໍ້ມູນເພີ່ມເຕີມລະອຽດ. ຂໍຂອບໃຈ!

Meet **Boom- Boom**



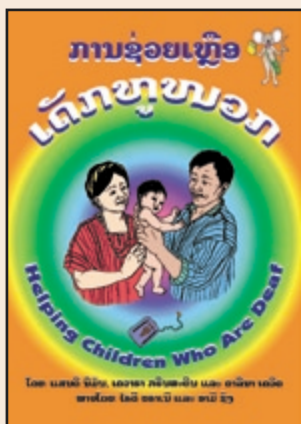
Boom-Boom the elephant helps Big Brother Mouse carry books to villages that we cannot reach by the road or river. We believe it's the only time in history when an elephant and a mouse have been such good friends.

There are still many children in Laos who have never seen a book. Will you help Boom-Boom and Big Brother Mouse take books to more children in more villages?

We want to reach them. But we can't do it without your help. Because Boom-Boom works for peanuts – but our printer won't.

www.BigBrotherMouse.com

ປຶ້ມຫົວອື່ນທີ່ໜ້າສົນໃຈ!



Everyone's life is different. Some of us are rich, some are poor. We live in different places. Some of us live in valleys, some on mountains. We may not know about how other people live, but if they write about it, then we can learn.

I grew up in a farm family, on top of a big mountain. We didn't have modern things. Then I came down to the city where I saw new things and learned about different ideas. I met people from the city, and people from abroad.

I am very happy to be able to record my experiences, what my life was like as a child on a mountain, so that everyone can read it and learn about how other people live. Thank you very much!

James

ປີ້ມຫົວນີ້ແມ່ນການບັນທຶກຊີວິດການເປັນຢູ່ຂອງ ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າເອງ ຈາກເມື່ອກ່ອນ
ຈົນເຖິງປະຈຸບັນ, ເຊິ່ງໄດ້ຂຽນເປັນພາສາອັງກິດ ເພາະວ່າ ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າມັກຮຽນ
ພາສາອັງກິດຫຼາຍກວ່າໝູ່. ຖ້າວ່າເຈົ້າມັກຮຽນພາສາອັງກິດ ແລະ ຢາກຮູ້ວ່າ
ຊີວິດການເປັນຢູ່ຂອງຂ້ອຍຕ່າງກັນແນວໃດ? ກະລຸນາ ອ່ານແຕ່ຕົ້ນຈົນຈົບ.

ເຈມສ ຊິ່ງ

ອ້າຍໝູ່ນ້ອຍ ຈັດພິມປີ້ມ ແລະ ແຈກຢາຍປີ້ມອ່ານສູ່ໝູ່ບ້ານຕ່າງໆ
ບ່ອນທີ່ບໍ່ເຄີຍມີປີ້ມອ່ານມາກ່ອນ. ທ່ານສາມາດຊອກຫາມາອ່ານໄດ້.

Big Brother Mouse gets books into Lao villages that never had books before.

You can help! Our website tells more.

www.BigBrotherMouse.com

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