

We eat what we are

Food Use Patterns of Hmong and Mien in Sacramento, California

Laura M. Leonelli

California State University Sacramento, Calif.: 1987

DEDICATION

p. v

To See Vue and Chao Her for their helpfulness, generosity, and friendship

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

p. vi

My research would have been impossible without the help and cooperation of many other people. I wish to express my gratitude to all of you, especially to Mrs. Elaine Dickson, of the Dept. of Home Economics, who graciously accepted a student outside her department and whose advice, encouragement and support never failed. I am also grateful to Dr. Melford Weiss for his guidance and expert advice, and for assuming the leadership of my committee. Many thanks to Dr. Valerie Wheeler, for her thorough editing and constructive suggestions. I am indebted to the entire staff of the CSUS Apple Computer Lab, for their expertise and their patience with a novice operator. My thanks also to Ms. Margaret Strode, the nutritionist at the downtown WIC office, for her interest and cooperation in my project. I am very grateful to Cynthia Arnott-White, whose scholarship is a continual inspiration and whose friendship is a steady source of moral and emotional support.

Lastly, for emphasis, many thanks to the Mien and Hmong women who took me into their homes, fed me wonderful meals, answered innumerable questions, and patiently repeated names of foods and plants. Their friendship made this study very enjoyable.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

p. vii

LIST OF TABLES:

p. viii

p. 1

INTRODUCTION

Food has fascinated humans since the beginnings of our history, first as an object of daily pursuit, then as a subject of study and research. As a fundamental requirement for life, the procurement, preparation, and consumption of food involve activities in which all human beings participate. The common goals of physical nourishment, psychological satisfaction, and emotional security can sometimes be obscured by the many variable methods of achieving them. Food has the unique capability of fulfilling all of these needs, when used according to specific cultural formulas (DeGariné 1972).

Food studies combine cultural as well as biological considerations. The physical environment presents edible resources, and the cultural patterns determine which of these are acceptable to use (Grivetti 1978). When a cultural group is exposed to a new environment, as in this case through migration, physical adjustments are made which are culturally mediated. The resulting behaviors comprise a group's adaptation to new circumstances, entailing culture change (Steward 1955).

p. 2 This food study concerns the Hmong and the Mien, tribal people who were displaced from their homes in Laos by war in the 1960's-70's. After a transition period in refugee camps, many were relocated to the United States in the early 1980's. Ultimately, most of these people have moved to the San Joaquin Valley of central California, contrary to federal resettlement policies. Sacramento, a prominent city in the Central Valley, contains a sizable population of both Hmong and Mien, providing an appropriate setting for my field research.¹

The information presented here is a description of food-use activities practiced by the Hmong and Mien people as an adaptive response to the new environment in Sacramento. Since their form of adaptation involves the use of new resources in a culturally acceptable way, I have used the theoretical approach of cultural ecology as outlined by Julian Steward (1955). Cultural ecology refers to the process by which a community of people adapts to its physical environment. Within this context, the community is unified and directed by its culture, an integrated system of shared beliefs and behaviors. Hmong and Mien people had developed specific cultural patterns related to the natural environment of the Southeast Asian mountains where they lived. A change to a new and entirely different

p. 3 environment could have, theoretically, drastically altered these cultural patterns. On the contrary, though many aspects of Hmong and Mien cultures have certainly changed, there is evidence that many cultural elements are surviving. One of these, as I have observed, is a traditional diet. Their efforts to maintain familiar food ways is one method by which the Mien and Hmong endeavor to preserve their cultural heritage while adapting to a new society. Food,

¹ In 1984, the Lao Family Community Center estimated that there were 304 Hmong families living in Sacramento, with a total of 1,986 persons, while there were 85 Mien families totalling 511 persons. As of September, 1986, there are 2,902 Hmong and 1,779 Mien living in Sacramento, according to figures obtained from the Sacramento County Department of Social Services. These totals, estimating a 50 per cent increase in the Hmong population in two years, and a 300 per cent increase in the Mien population, are derived from the number of people receiving public assistance in Sacramento County. No one is certain of the actual size of the Hmong/Mien population— it is constantly changing.

in this role, is an appropriate example of the concept of cultural ecology, as it is an element of culture which is dependent on the physical environment.

Several other researchers have investigated the dietary habits of Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S. Of these, Tong (1981, 1986) has related changes in food use to cultural factors in her studies of Vietnamese immigrants in Washington, D.C. The focus of the first refugee food studies has been the nutritional adequacy of post-migration diets. Kohn (1981) analyzed the diets of five Southeast Asian groups, including the Hmong, and rated the various diets in terms of the American standard four food groups. Some general cultural background was mentioned, mainly in order to compare "Indochinese" with American food customs. Another general study was published in Minnesota, by the Ramsey County Nutrition Program (August, 1982), to

Inform nutrition educators about Southeast Asian food consumption patterns. The overall emphases on dietary deficiencies, with suggestions for improvement, seem to override any consideration of food practices as preserving cultural elements. An exception is the work of Hurlich, who gives more credit to cultural influences. His 1981 study of a Hmong community in Washington State included information on their former food use patterns in Laos and the overall quality of their diet in the transition period before relocation to the U.S. Hurlich supplements his research with growth charts of Hmong children, designed to relate their nutritional status to normal growth patterns as established by U.S. and Asian standards.

p. 4

Although their secondary migration to California has been recognized for several years, as yet there has been no study of Hmong or Mien diet patterns based on populations within this state. This is a significant topic to address, not only in terms of nutritional factors, which are important, but also in terms of cultural dynamics. Throughout their history, Hmong and Mien have been food producers. Farming and animal husbandry have been integral elements of their cultural traditions. Food, therefore, has a significance for them which some Americans, inured by years of processed and fast foods, find hard to understand. Recently,

however, Mien and Hmong people have been uprooted after centuries of an agricultural life, and have been transplanted into an urban, industrial environment in which they feel totally alien. By now, most have adopted the latest technological innovations, such as cars, TVs, stereos, watches, and refrigerators. Yet they cling to their traditional foods, and many wish to retain at least some ties to the land. Food resources seem to have been one of the motivations for the first Hmong and Mien families to migrate to the San Joaquin Valley. Here exists a favorable environment in which they are able to garden, to hunt, fish, gather, and shop in Asian markets, all of which are familiar techniques for obtaining traditional foods. Since the San Joaquin Valley provides access to these and other resources that are compatible with the established use patterns of the Mien and Hmong cultures, it has become the favored location for their resettlement within the United States.

p. 5

Once the first refugee families decided to relocate here, many of their relatives followed in what Finck (1986: 185) refers to as "the snowball effect of family reunification." In an era when many American families are fragmented, with members scattered around the country, the efforts of refugee families to live closer together must seem unusual. Hmong and Mien

p. 6 people are accustomed to a social structure based on family ties, reciprocity and mutual support. The establishment of communities, located near a reliable resource base, is an important method by which they endeavor to adapt to a larger, unfamiliar society.

My thesis, therefore, consists of the premise that food resources are of significant importance in the cultural heritage of the Hmong and the Mien, and that both the availability of these resources in the San Joaquin Valley, and a desire to preserve as much of their traditional culture as possible, has motivated them to migrate and establish communities here. By re-creating a familiar environment, they are facilitating their adaptation to a new and very different one. I will demonstrate this in the following chapters, using data I have collected through several methods. The first chapter presents the cultural backgrounds of the Hmong and Mien people, with discussion of their physical environment, their economic systems and their social structures. In the second chapter I describe the experiences and observations of my field research with individual Hmong and Mien families. The third chapter consists of a diet survey I conducted with data from a sample population. The fourth chapter illustrates the symbolic significance of food in a social context.

p. 7 Finally, I will summarize my findings in the concluding chapter.

p. 8 **BACKGROUND AND HISTORY**

For a more complete understanding, food habits must be perceived within a context that includes environment and cultural behavior. The physical environment, consisting of location, climate, and accessible resources, determines which food items are available. Patterned behavior, based on shared values, influences the selection of foods and gives meaning to their use. The Hmong and Mien are distinct cultural groups which rarely mingled while in Southeast Asia. They shared a similar environment, however, and used the same technology to utilize its resources. Both tribes used the same kinds of foods and prepared them in similar ways, though each group, and each family, had its particular recipes. Hmong and Mien food patterns today are a combination of influences from their past and present environments, which will be described in this section. I will introduce the Mien and Hmong people through their background and history, and will discuss those cultural behaviors which affect their food choices. Since the scope of my study is limited to food, I am omitting much cultural information which may be obtained from more complete ethnographies. The Hmong, also known as Meo by the Chinese and Miao by the French, were noted in early

p. 9 Chinese historical literature and were studied by the French during their occupation of Indochina. Less has been written about the Mien, or Lu Mien; they are called Yao by Chinese and French historians. It is my hope that this brief overview will encourage readers to examine Hmong and Mien cultures in greater detail.

The Southeast Asian Environment

Until recently, the Southeast Asian peninsula was unknown territory for most Americans. Almost overnight, many young U.S. soldiers were getting a first-hand look at a part of the world

they had probably never heard of before. And yet, the television audience who followed the war in Vietnam during the 1960's saw only the hot, humid jungles and small farming villages of the coastal lowland plains—a small and not very representative segment of this complex area. Actually, mainland Southeast Asia crowds a large variety of environments, both social and physical, into a relatively small space. Geographically, it is fragmented by several large rivers flowing north-south, separated by rugged mountain chains, that provide a setting characterized by contrasts. Although the area is accessible by sea or river, it is almost impassable overland. Crowded alluvial plains are interspersed with sparsely

populated highlands. Large, fairly modern cities are located along the major waterways, but most of the population lives in small, rural villages (De Koninck 1980). The tropical monsoon climate encourages abundant plant growth, yet despite the constant incursion of wild jungle and rain forests, domestic cultivation has existed here for thousands of years. Some even believe that horticulture may have originated here (Provencher 1975). The Hoabinhian complex of ground stone tools, pottery, and deliberate horticulture may have appeared as early as 10,000 B.C. (Keyes 1977:15). Plant cultivation began as a supplement to hunting small game, gathering wild foods, and trapping fish—traditional subsistence patterns which gradually shifted to a more permanent base (Provencher, 1975).

p. 10

Early domesticated crops included native tubers such as sago and yams which could be grown from cuttings; this form of vegetative propagation preceded the cultivation of plants from seeds. The cuttings were placed in the wet ground to root, a method which is still in use today, and which set the pattern for raising seed crops in irrigated fields (Herklots 1972). Apparently, rice cultivation began in Southeast Asia and diffused north (Keyes 1977:15). Originally, rice was grown in dry fields with other crops: gourds,

beans, peas and millet, which was the staple grain for several thousand years. The familiar wet or irrigated method of rice cultivation was well-developed in Southern China about 2000 BC, and possibly earlier in Southeast Asia (Keyes 1977). It proved to be ideally suited to the tropical lowland river valleys where irrigation systems enable the fields to remain flooded during the planting season.

p. 11

Rice produces more food per acre than any other grain, and it can be grown for years in the same place with little or no extra fertilizer. Fish farming is common in the irrigated rice fields, providing a stable and successful diet complex. About 75% of the Southeast Asian population works in agriculture, and although only a small proportion of the total land mass is arable, every scrap of it is presently being used (De Koninck 1980).

More recently, this highly efficient system has come into conflict with a more ancient and starkly different cultivation pattern. As population pressures increase in the lowlands, the paddy rice fields edge towards the slopes of the mountains where several very diverse tribal groups have lived independently: Hmong, Mien, Akha, Khmu. These tribes lived originally in China, but over time were forced south by similar population pressures there. In defense, they moved up

p. 12 to the mountains where they practice swidden agriculture, a system uniquely adapted to the tropical highland environment. This method is as dependent on fire as the lowland method is on water. Also called “slash and burn” (Keyes 1977:26), it involves clearing a patch of forest (usually but not always secondary growth) and setting fire to the trees and brush. The ashes serve as fertilizer for the thin mountain soil (Barney 1967; Garrett 1974; Cooper 1984). Usually 2 or 3 crops can be grown per year. Rice is the staple here as well, but it is planted by the ‘dry’ method: a few grains dropped into holes punched in the ground with a stick. A variety of other crops are also grown, for highland people produce their entire food supply. Maize is the second most important grain, but millet, barley, buckwheat, and sorghum have also been cultivated (Provencher 1975; Barney 1967; Kuey 1960). Vegetables including beans, potatoes, squash, cabbages and chilis, as well as fruits such as oranges and papayas, round out the diet (Thomas and Embree 1950; Kuey 1960).

When maize was introduced to China in the 1600's, it had the effect of supplementing a diet based on rice. Populations, which now had an extra grain to fall back on in lean years, experienced growth and required a corresponding increase in land resources

p. 13 (Cooper 1984). Intermittent conflict continued between the Han Chinese and the minority groups on the fringes of their territory. Though the minority tribes were forced further away from their original homes, their cultural patterns retained basic Chinese elements. These included, for example, the high-collared jackets worn by men, and the baggy trousers for both sexes, the diet based on steamed rice and boiled vegetables, and the male-dominant social structure (Lewis and Lewis 1986). The Mien people adopted certain practices of the Chinese Taoist religion, which coexisted with their traditional animist beliefs. Mien also read Chinese script. All tribes retained some contact with Yunnan Chinese traders, who represented a link to the outside cultural and economic world. However, each tribe developed its own distinctive costume and customs and its own language. Each remained autonomous in the relative isolation of the mountain highlands (Barney 1967, Kandre 1967).

Because mere subsistence is never enough for most peoples' material needs, many highland tribes also cultivated opium for sale. It has been described as the ideal cash crop, well suited to the lime-rich mountain soils and easily transported long distances over mountain trails (Garrett 1974). Opium brought a price in silver, or it could be traded for goods or

p. 14 labor. For most households, it provided the only access to a limited cash economy. Unfortunately, the income from opium trade proved a mixed blessing. Tribal farmers actually received only a small fraction of the total value, since the trade was usually controlled by outside authorities. For example, opium brought in one-fourth the total income that France collected from her colonies. As the new Laotian state emerged, its officials took over as middlemen, even though opium was declared an illegal commodity in 1959 (Garrett 1974:85).

Originally, the main traders in opium were the Chinese, since their early empires had the first access. The British later colonized Burma, part of the Golden Triangle where most of the best opium was produced. England had developed world-wide markets and sought to monopolize the opium trade, for which purpose it fought a protracted war with China. On the brink of

bankruptcy, the Manchu Dynasty pursued a quick economic recovery through increased opium production (Garrett 1974). Competition for land to grow opium, and the rights to the profits derived from its trade, was a cause of increasing conflict between the Chinese and one tribal group, the Hmong. A series of rebellions between 1830- 1850 pushed the Hmong further south into the northern borders of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand.

For many years the Chinese had tried to subdue the Hmong, but their love of freedom and independence impelled them further into the mountains rather than submit. Both Hmong and Mien tribes have been noted in Southeast Asia since about 1850 (Barney 1967; Kandre 1967).

p. 15

Cultural Patterns

Frequent migration is a necessary consequence of an economy based on swidden agriculture, and it is typical of the Hmong, the Mien and other tribal groups still residing in Southeast Asia. The heavy monsoon rains leach the thin soil, and when this is exhausted, new land for cultivation is required. Hmong and Mien villages are moved every 10–15 years, after the land around them has been depleted (Cooper 1984). This experience has taught many basic adaptive strategies, which have become part of their traditions. In a sense, highland tribal people have been “refugees” for much of their history (Eldred 1985:5). Their cultural patterns have endured, however, so that they have retained a sense of identity even in ever-changing surroundings (Kandre 1967).

Both Hmong and Mien share a patrilineal clan system of social organization (Kandre 1967; Barney 1967). Clan names are derived from mythical ancestors,

and clan membership is for life. A common name becomes a link between strangers: it confers a family relationship. Consequently, no one marries within their clan. Women marry into their husband's clan, but do not become a part of it, though their children do (Barney 1967). Each clan has its own distinctive customs, and many of the households of a village belong to the same clan. A household is composed of a set of parents, unmarried children, and the married sons with their wives and children. An average household includes about 8–10 people. The steady growth of a household continues until an older son and his family moves out and establishes a new one (Lewis and Lewis 1986).

p. 16

The oldest male of a household is the family leader, and all decisions are finalized by him. The village headman is usually the head of the most prominent household. Within the family, the father-son link is highly significant since the lines of descent are continued through the males (Barney 1967). Continuity between generations is based on respect for elders and reverence for ancestors. The Mien have institutionalized this concept through an elaborate scheme of rituals. They contract reciprocal obligations, through ceremonies, with ancestors and other spirits who will ensure prosperity in this world

and merit in the afterlife (Kandre 1967). Hmong and Mien families are bound together by more than tradition, however. Membership in a clan provides economic support and enables group

p. 17

decisions and organization. Clan leadership represents an authority which relies not only on members' input but also on their loyalty and respect (Thao 1982).

Among these tribal people, families have had to pull together as a means of livelihood. Each household is a unit of production in their economic system. All land and other properties are held in common, and plots for rice and opium belong to whichever family has cleared and worked them (Barney 1967; Sahlins 1968). All family members are employed in the fields, and they all share the benefits of their work. Men clear the heavy brush and trees, build houses, tend horses, and conduct business. Women tend gardens, raise pigs and chickens, and are responsible for all household maintenance chores (Lewis and Lewis 1986). Women are also instrumental in the cultivation and harvest of opium, contributing to the family's income, although the men market it and control the profits (Barney 1967). Both men and women participate in child care, though older children also share this task (Cooper 1984).

p. 18 The independence of life in the mountains is based on the ability to produce all the materials necessary to sustain an adequate standard of living. Besides producing their own crops and meat, tribal people are adept at making tools to process basic raw materials. In what Sahlins (1968: 45) describes as a "democracy of technology", implements are simple and easy for anyone to use. Technical skills such as housebuilding, spinning, sewing, threshing grains or harvesting opium are common knowledge and easily learned. Women employ an ingenious device for pounding rice, operated by a foot treadle; another for grinding corn is made of two rounded stones connected to a lever pushed by hand (Lewis and Lewis 1986). Each village is served by persons with specialized skills, such as a shaman or blacksmith, but these must also maintain their own farms (Barney 1967). This control over all means of production gives tribal people the self-sufficiency to be able to survive in a difficult environment. Scarce commodities may be redistributed within the village through bartering for other goods or for labor. However, through cash transactions people have the option of buying extra rice and manufactured goods from market towns or travelling traders (Lewis and Lewis 1986).

p. 19 Prosperity, in the highlands, is counted in livestock and silver (Barney 1967; Kandre 1967). Both Hmong and Mien are skilled in animal husbandry. They have fine ponies, which the men prize and use for transport and travel. Pigs are especially valuable and well cared for. In addition to the main stove, each house has a separate stove where pig food is cooked: boiled corn and cobs, banana stalks, rice hulls and squash (Garrett 1974; Lewis and Lewis 1986). Chickens are raised as an important food source, and some families also have cattle or buffalo. These are occasionally sold for income (Kandre 1967).

Silver is acquired through the opium trade, and among the Mien its accumulation through trade is their lifetime goal. One gains prestige and status both in this world and in the afterlife in proportion to the amount of silver one controls (Kandre 1967). Both Hmong and Mien are expert at working silver, and their jewelry shows outstanding craftsmanship. Women proudly display their family's wealth by wearing it (Lewis and Lewis 1986). Traditionally, New Year celebrations are occasions to don all the finery and silver possible, to exhibit the family assets— a consideration when choosing marriage partners. Whole villages get together for the New Year's festivities when families visit, assess the past year's productivity, and hope

for more good fortune to come. Young people get a chance to meet, and courtship is encouraged (Lewis and Lewis 1986).

p. 20

Upheaval and Change

It has been argued that this essentially peaceful existence was being threatened, even before the turmoil resulting from war in the 1970's (Cooper 1986). There is a saying that swidden agriculture tends to support as many workers as it needs, and needs all the workers that it can support (Provencher 1975:20). Apparently, by the early 70's the hill tribe population had exceeded the limits the land could support. The Hmong and Mien had become a part of mainstream society in Laos, travelling in groups to Lao towns to trade for goods, and vending highland produce in the markets (Smalley 1986). They were becoming stable and prosperous, sending their children to Lao schools, and some even participating in local government (Barney 1967). Later, displacement due to the war disrupted the entire social and economic structure; but it has been suggested that a large scale migration may have been necessary in any case, since there was no more good land available, and nowhere else to move (Cooper 1984, 1986). Tribal people were living side by side with lowland people, and were beginning to compete for

land, timber, and water resources. It was being increasingly argued by local officials that swidden cultivation was wasteful and destructive, ruining the forests and leaving the soil unfit for further use (Garrett 1974:97).

p. 21

The escalation of the war in Vietnam and Laos intervened at this point, however. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was situated directly across the Xieng Khouang province of Laos, a central area of Hmong and Mien settlements. Early in the war the Hmong, who long had a reputation for being tough fighters, were recruited by the CIA for its covert operation in Laos. Being experts in guerrilla tactics, some were flown to the U.S. for advanced military training (Wurfel 1980). Hmong troops were used to disrupt Viet Cong supply lines along the Trail, to rescue downed U.S. fliers, and some 250,000 fought as the U.S. secret army in Laos (Garrett 1974:83). At the same time, the Pathet Lao had raised support among some Hmong factions and about 100,000 fought with the North Vietnamese. Loyalties to either side were divided along clan lines. In all, the Hmong lost about 30,000 casualties (Garrett 1974:83).

As the war intensified, normal economic and agricultural activity became impossible. An estimated 25 million bombs were dropped by the U.S. in Vietnam alone; an undetermined but apparently greater number

fell in Laos (Wurfel 1980:100). People were driven from their homes and fields were abandoned. Large areas of the mountains were defoliated and burned. Groups of families were resettled into conglomerate villages that were usually associated with military bases (Smalley 1986). Several different ethnic groups mingled for the first time in the same town: Hmong, Mien, Lao, Europeans and Americans. New social structures evolved in this setting, and the community leaders were usually military personnel. American planes were airlifting rice and other supplies to these conglomerates at first, and with this economic aid a few of them began to produce enough food and goods to eventually become self-sufficient (Smalley 1986; Garrett

p. 22

1984). Tribal people were making contact with the Western world: learning new skills, becoming aware of new technology in weapons, agriculture and transportation. Some were even learning English from U.S. soldiers, and most were adapting to a Laotian lifestyle. Traditional exchange systems for goods and ` labor were shifting in favor of a modified cash economy, with more dependence on earned income from wage labor and commercial enterprises (Smalley 1986). Hopeful optimism was expressed by one Hmong leader, Dr. Yang Dao:

- p. 23 “We have made more progress in 14 years of war than we could have in fifty years of peace. Our economy has been destroyed, but the trouble has taught us what we can do.” [Garrett 1974: 86]

This may have become a progressive stage in national development, but it was arrested in 1975 by the fall of Saigon. The departure of U.S. troops from Vietnam precipitated the collapse of the Lao government. Pathet Lao, backed by Vietnamese troops, began an effort to eliminate any resistance, represented by the Hmong who had backed the U.S. and Royal Lao armies (Wurfel 1980; Garrett 1974). The civilian-military towns, as well as many mountain villages, were abandoned in the mass migration across the border to refugee camps in Thailand. During this difficult and perilous journey, many more lives were lost to enemy fire and the Mekong River. There was some relief from the stress of war once people arrived in the camps, but otherwise their experience there was an extension of life in the conglomerate villages (Smalley 1986). People learned to deal with new national authorities and international relief agencies, and in some ways became dependent on these, as their own economic possibilities were restricted. Soon, however, distinct social structures emerged that

- p. 24 reflected traditional customs and preferences. Members of each tribe managed to locate each other and establish leadership hierarchies. In one camp, a shortage of traditional leaders was filled by young people educated in Lao schools, who could mediate the transition between cultures (Smalley 1986).

Camps were chronically overcrowded; food was rationed, housing, health care and sanitation were limited and of marginal quality. But some elementary education was available, people could share their new skills or knowledge of English, and many refugees prepared themselves for a final migration to a new life in various host countries (Smalley 1986). Thousands of Hmong and Mien have been relocated to the United States. Federal policy for admission of refugees was based on the strategy of settling them in urban centers having social services already in place; refugees were dispersed evenly throughout the country so as not to overload the services in any one area. However, this plan did not remain effective. Since 1980, many Hmong ` and Mien have resettled in the Central Valley of California (Reed 1984).

The Sacramento Environment

The Sacramento County area is located in the northern end of the San Joaquin valley of central

- p. 25 California. Sacramento is the state capital, with a population of 784,000. Of this, Southeast Asians make up 2 per cent, or approximately 15,000 (1980 Census, Sacramento County). The city is situated at the confluence of two rivers: the Lower American River, which flows east-

west, and empties into the Sacramento River, which drains the valley and flows north-south into San Francisco Bay. Agriculture is a major industry in the Central Valley; its suitability for wet-rice cultivation has encouraged the production of short-grain rice as a leading cash crop. Approximately 50 miles to the east are the Sierra foothills, where cool-weather crops such as grapes, apples, cherries and plums are grown. To the south extends the Sacramento Delta, where farmers cultivate vegetables and pear orchards.

The warm climate of California and the availability of agricultural resources has proved a magnet for Hmong and Mien refugees. Unable to tolerate the cold Midwestern winters, many have relocated here ` from states such as Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas. These people comprise a low-profile, almost hidden, element in the overall county environment. For the most part, they live in large apartment complexes which house almost exclusively Asian residents. This fact, coupled with the location in low-rent areas of the

city, gives an isolated aspect to the refugee community. The adults' lack of English language skills prevents them from communicating with many Americans. Their lack of job skills keeps them away from mainstream employment centers. Their generally low income precludes shopping in many American stores. Consequently, they lack much contact with the dominant American culture and society.

p. 26

Nothing in their past experience could have prepared these traditional, rural people for life in a modern, industrial city. Automobiles, banks, indoor plumbing and electric stoves are among the many confusing and unfamiliar elements of a new world that had to be confronted and adjusted to. One woman related her first experience shopping in a grocery store: she could neither read prices nor knew the value of currency, so she would select one item, pay for it, then, if she received change, she figured she could go back and buy something more. In this way she would make innumerable trips to the checkout counter until ` all her money was gone. Eventually, with the help of church-based resettlement agencies and private sponsors, Hmong and Mien families obtained housing and acquired some furniture and household items. They learned their way around stores, hospitals, and city streets. Presently, every family has one or more

members attending school. Grade schools in local districts have expanded programs to accomodate non-English speaking students, and adult English classes are well attended (Reed 1984).

p. 27

An important social resource in Sacramento is the Lao Family Community Center, similar to the Chinese Family Associations. The staff at the Lao Family center is concerned primarily with job training and placement of refugees, although they also serve as community leaders. The center receives public funding and provides its services for refugees in transition, with an understanding of their cultural backgrounds and specific needs. Frustration is common among refugee people whose traditions are founded in independence and self-sufficiency. They have no choice but to work within a new system which requires money for all the basic necessities of life such as food, housing, heat, clothing– things which tribal people took pride in producing themselves. They know they need jobs, but most refugees are unable to find formal

employment ` until they learn more English and/or job skills. They are supported by Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a public assistance program which determines the amount of benefits according to the size of the family. For example, a family of seven persons (not uncommon) receives \$1,032 per month (Sacramento County

- p. 28 Dept. of Social Services, 1987). In addition, families are entitled to Medi-Cal benefits and Food Stamps. Most grocery stores accept the stamps, which enable people to purchase only food items. Many families assert that the amount of food stamps they receive is inadequate, only enough for about one half of their food needs. They must make up the difference with the rest of their income, or supplement their food supply in other ways.

Many Hmong and Mien women have participated in the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program, which provides extra food to pregnant women and young children who meet low-income eligibility criteria. The federally-funded program distributes \$36.00 worth of vouchers to each participant every month. The vouchers specifically list the foods for which they may be redeemed: milk, cheese, eggs, cereal, juice, beans, peanut butter, and infant formula (WIC, California Dept. of Health Services, 1987). The WIC program also provides a nutrition class for participants, an attempt to teach the value of certain foods and to actively promote their use. School age children also receive a midday meal each day that they attend. Federally subsidized hot lunches are available at little or no cost from the school cafeteria, which serves a regular, American-style menu. It appears that the above two

- p. 29 programs are an important influence in the introduction of new foods to the Southeast Asian refugee diet.

An important resource for the entire Asian community is the availability of imported foods in Oriental markets. This tradition began in the 1850's when Chinese laborers first arrived in Northern California (Chinn 1969). The same ships which brought the Chinese passengers carried imported foods such as dried fish, tea, bamboo, dried bean curd and duck, and sweet rice. The early Chinese mine and railroad workers credited their good health to their maintenance of a traditional diet, and each camp had its own Chinese cook. Later on, as the restrictive immigration laws were passed, it became advantageous to own a store since merchants were allowed freer access to this country (Chinn 1969). Taking advantage of the existing trade links, and the increasing demand for Chinese food products, Oriental markets became firmly established. Today, many of the local Asian stores in the Sacramento area are still owned and run by Chinese.

Farmers' markets are popular in this city, operating weekly in several locations. Families who are unable to grow their own produce may obtain it here more cheaply than in the stores, and, since it is grown locally, the quality and freshness are superior. For truck farmers in the area it is an important

- p. 30 opportunity for earning income, and many of the vendors are Hmong and Vietnamese. The open markets provide exposure to such exotic Asian vegetables as yard long beans, bitter melon, and luffa gourds for the many Western patrons as well.

The areas of highest refugee concentration are the downtown and south sections of Sacramento, and Rancho Cordova, a suburb. In these areas one may find home gardens planted around rented houses and apartment buildings, and community gardens which fill available vacant lots. Sometimes land for communal gardens is located near apartment complexes; other land may be donated by a church or private property owner. Gardening is pursued with energy and dedication. Some apartment gardens are watered with buckets drawn from the kitchen sink, and larger enterprises are cultivated with great skill, learned from generations of practical experience. As in their traditional way, each plot is “owned” by the family who works it. Usually seeds are obtained from relatives in Thai refugee camps. Hmong and Mien prefer their own Asian variants of chili peppers, squash, onions and eggplant. Other plants are exclusively Southeast Asian, such as the many medicinal and culinary herbs. There are no American substitutes for vegetables such as gourds, sugar cane, amaranth, and Chinese kale. Refugees often claim the superior

flavor and nutritional value of Oriental greens and vegetables, believing that this type of food makes them strong and healthy. p. 31

Central to this entire array of food resources is the extended family network, an essential element in the traditional Southeast Asian cultures. Each household has an impressive list of phone numbers, connections with all the relatives and friends in the city. Mien and Hmong have been used to living close together in small villages, and now have adapted the telephone to maintain this contact. They will pass along information about the availability of agricultural and food resources, and often go in family groups to obtain them. Of course, any new family with the same last name are considered “cousins” in the clan sense and included in the growing familial network. Survival and success is considered a group endeavor, and whatever benefit an individual achieves accrues to the whole family. Through this interdependence the Hmong and Mien are preserving their cultural identities, providing mutual support systems, and are slowly adapting to a larger society through reliance on a traditional family-based social structure.

Refugees in Sacramento are pursuing a separate cultural pattern from most other residents, and are using many distinctive resources. Through my

acquaintance with several families, developed during field research, I became aware of this process and why it is important to them. This will be more fully discussed in the following chapter. p. 32

Field Observations p. 33

My field work actually began in 1983, when I answered an advertisement in the newspaper which asked for a volunteer to teach Vietnamese women how to cook American food. The number I called was that of the Catholic Social Service in Sacramento, and they referred me to a woman who was acquainted with many refugee families. She introduced me to a group of Vietnamese women who lived in a large apartment complex in Rancho Cordova. Each week for about two months we cooked something new, but it seemed that their perception of American food consisted of white bread, birthday cake, and chocolate chip cookies. These were chosen

mainly because their children asked for such items, which were expensive to buy. From this experience. I became curious about the kinds of new foods refugee people might be integrating into their diet as a result of their exposure to American food items.

My next assignment for the Catholic Social Service, about a year later, involved teaching English at another apartment building closer to my downtown home. I visited one apartment and worked with a group

p. 34 of women. Mien this time, who were unable to attend school for lack of child care. Later, I encountered two of these women in the community garden where I tend a plot every year. Gardens provide an easy topic for questions and conversation, and as they showed me their plot they asked me the English names of the plants. I was embarrassed to admit I didn't know them, having never seen plants like theirs before. At this point. I wanted to learn more about Southeast Asian plants and foods. It appeared that, in addition to incorporating new American foods into their diet. Southeast Asian people were also introducing some of their native foods into California.

I began with the gardens as a focal point. I had noticed many carefully tended plots all around my part of the city, but it was difficult for me to approach people and just start talking or asking questions. The language and cultural barriers were a real problem. To overcome this, and to gain their trust. I asked for formal introductions to families who spoke at least some English. In the summer of 1986 I contacted the woman from the CSS again, and found that she had given a large portion of her yard to a communal garden. She was able to direct me to one Hmong family, the Vangs. who were very friendly and willing to show me whatever I wanted to know. Through the CSS I also reestablished

p. 35 contact with my Mien acquaintances. Although these two households provided most of my information through informal interviews, I was also in contact with two other households, one Hmong and one Mien, whom I visited less frequently.

I gathered information by explaining that I was very interested in their gardens, and that I would like to learn how to cook Hmong/Mien food. Although there were many Lao and Vietnamese refugees who also tended large gardens, I restricted my study to Hmong and Mien because they came from the same ecological background. Unlike the lowland Lao and Vietnamese, Mien and Hmong were originally mountain tribes who farmed for a living using swidden agricultural methods. I reasoned that their experiences relative to a new lifestyle in the U.S. would be similar, resulting in similar adaptational responses.

At first I made arrangements. American-style, by phoning a family a couple of days in advance. I soon found that their lives change from day to day, with little notice. I would arrive at the appointed time, only to find that something else had come up and that they had made other plans. I learned to plan for the moment, as they do, and phoned them the day of the intended visit. I usually prepared a few questions about food and their methods of purchase or

p. 36

preparation. More often, we discussed many topics which I hadn't thought to ask questions about. I brought a notebook along to write down recipes or plant names or food terms. Other than that I refrained from taking notes, so that no one would feel self-conscious. As soon as I got home, however, I wrote a detailed account of the day's conversations and activities. During the months between July 1986, and April 1987, I tried to visit a different refugee household about every two weeks. On fifteen occasions I visited Hmong families and also made nine visits to Mien families. Visits would last anywhere from two to eight hours, usually averaging four to five hours. One evening I observed a Mien wedding ceremony, complete with music and elaborate costumes. Another time I spent the whole day at a Hmong ceremonial dinner. I also contacted the staff at the Lao Family Community Center, who were gracious and willing to answer my questions. All the Hmong and Mien families were cordial and cooperative, but I still felt that they were doing me a favor by giving me information, not to mention the many times they shared their meals with me. I wanted to reciprocate in some way, either by contributing something to the dinner or by doing a service such as taking someone to the doctor or helping with homework. This give-and-take is characteristic of Hmong and Mien

social relations, and enabled me to be more a "participant" than an "observer" in their lives.

p. 37

In-depth informal interviews were usually with the adult women of the household and often included information about their personal and family lives. I also took photographs (35 mm slides) of the gardens at their homes. Sometimes people posed for me, too. One technique I had learned from teaching English was the use of picture books. I brought a large volume on Southeast Asian plants, *Vegetables of Southeast Asia* (Herklots 1972) which included excellent line drawings. Hmong and Mien families looked through it and identified plants in their own languages. Another book, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle* (Lewis and Lewis 1986), contained photographs of tribal life in Laos and Thailand. This provided a great stimulus for discussion of their former ways of life. I also clipped articles from the newspaper regarding Hmong/Mien refugees, though often this news had already circulated through their own communication network.

On two occasions I was taken shopping in two different Asain markets. At first this was a bewildering experience and I was happy to have a friend along to tell me what everything was. Most of the food was dried or canned, imported from Thailand. Taiwan, or the People's Republic of China. One whole aisle

contained innumerable types of dried noodles—wheat, buckwheat, and rice. Another was filled with bamboo shoots, prepared every conceivable way. Much of the food was pickled, such as vegetables, fish, shrimp, and eggplant. There were amazing varieties of condiments as well: dried and powdered herbs, curries, peppers, coconut, quail eggs; also many types of candied fruits, cookies, and other sweets. Fresh pork and fish were sold at a meat counter, including tripe and pigs' feet. Fresh produce, noodles and tofu were also available. Several stores sold prepared foods as well: a convenience for some cooks and a job opportunity for others. As I became more familiar with the foods and cooking, I was able to shop by myself.

p. 38

Another shopping trip involved the downtown farmers' market. This is quite popular with the Asian residents of Sacramento, since it is located near their neighborhoods. Hmong and Vietnamese were among the local growers who were selling Asian herbs and vegetables. The Mien women who accompanied me recommended some vegetables to try, and instructed me in their preparation. They also knew of an "unofficial" market across the street, where Asian people were lined along the sidewalk selling fish, produce, and live poultry for lower prices than in the formal market.

- p. 39 Eldred's paper, "The Changing Roles of Refugee Women: Their Impact on Dietary Behavior" (1985), makes many good observations which I have confirmed on my home visits. Households are usually composed of two nuclear families: either two related men and their wives and children, or one nuclear family plus the husband's parents. Besides being economical, this arrangement has other advantages for women. There is help for housework and child care, and a mother-in-law will frequently babysit so that the younger woman can work or attend school. Hmong and Mien people enjoy companionship, and shopping and other household chores are often done together. Often, families who are related or who know each other from "camp" will try to live in the same apartment complex, giving it the look and feel of a village back home.

One fact became clear early on: Hmong and Mien prefer their own style of food and prepare it almost exclusively. There could be several reasons for this: lack of knowledge about American food, inability to afford the more expensive, packaged foods, or dislike of new foods encountered here. Refugee people are actually quite well-informed about the availability of new and different foods. Families, especially the children, watch television frequently and are subjected to a barrage of commercials about every type of cereal.

- p. 40 snack food, and fast food. Children sing the jingles and ask their mothers to buy various new foods. Children, understandably, are often the ones to introduce innovations to the family diet. Their hot lunches at school and their interaction with American peers constantly expose them to new food items, which are almost always sweets: candy and soft drinks from the local store, ice cream, popsicles, donuts and cookies. Mothers complain that their children never used to cry for candy or sweets in Laos but they frequently beg for them here. One family told me they requested that the ice-cream truck not frequent their apartment complex because they couldn't always afford to buy the children treats. A diet high in sweets seems to have already made a physical impact, in that many children under six years old have capped teeth resulting from tooth decay. This is in marked contrast to most adults, who seem to have strong and healthy teeth which they retain into old age.

Rozin (1976) claims that a sugar preference exists in humans from birth, a holdover from a primate diet which included many fruits. Also, bitter or alkaline tastes have often been associated with poisons. Since a sweets craving seems to be a common human dietary response, the only reason for the increase in recent

- p. 41 consumption within this population seems to be an increase in availability experienced here in the U.S.

As much as children may like to experiment with new foods such as hamburgers, french fries, or pizza, I have never observed these foods actually cooked at home. They are mainly novelty items, bought when the family can afford them. While cost is certainly a factor in food selection, it is uncertain whether an increase in income would bring a corresponding increase in the use of expensive new foods. Eldred (1985) reports that among the Hmong community in Wisconsin, more income enables an increase in the amount of food purchased and consumed, but not an increase in variety. Most women, even the younger mothers, did not seem to know how to prepare American-style meals, but no one seemed interested in learning, either. Only once did anyone ask me about cooking something new. A woman said she might use cheese more if she knew how to “cook” it- no one liked it “raw.””

Traditionally, milk and cheese are not consumed by Hmong and Mien people, or for that matter, by most Asians. This is widely believed to be due to a lactase deficiency in Asian adults (Anderson and Anderson 1974). Eldred (1985) estimates this condition exists in 85% of adult refugees. Yet most young mothers I have surveyed report drinking milk and enjoying it

throughout their pregnancies. I have noticed many infants and toddlers drinking milk from bottles, and young children use milk on dry cereal, American style. Although I did not take anthropometric measurements, I noticed an increase in the size of young children. compared to their parents and older siblings. Hmong and Mien are strong, sturdy people but typically very short in stature. The women average 4'9” to 5'0” in height, while the men are usually 5'2” to 5'6” tall. Older children, those born in Laos, seem shorter and slighter than their American peers. However, the youngsters born in the United States seem nearly the same size as American toddlers, due in large part, I believe, to their regular consumption of milk. Many Mien and Hmong mothers also attribute their children's size and health to the better diet available in the United States, including an improved prenatal diet.

p. 42

Peanuts are grown and used in Southeast Asia, so peanut butter is fairly well liked here. Fruit juices are relatively new items, encountered for the first time in the U.S. Preferred flavors include pineapple and guava. Tropical fruits are difficult to find and are fairly expensive, so refugees have learned to substitute apples, strawberries and grapes.

Women have been obliged to try these foods as participants in the WIC program. Of all of the new

items available, however, Hmong and Mien seem very selective about which ones they will accept and use. Hurlich (1981) provides a fairly complete list of foods which were newly encountered by refugees in the U.S. Of these, I have observed a few which have become incorporated into the regular Hmong/Mien diet: milk, dry cereal, salad dressing, juices, and miscellaneous sweets.

p. 43

Food preparation techniques seem to parallel food use in terms of innovation. Hmong and Mien families are able to use gas or electric stoves, as opposed to wood-burning ones, and they have water piped into their homes instead of hauling it by hand. Otherwise, many of their techniques remain the same. They use baskets and pots purchased at Chinese stores for steaming rice and

boiling other foods. Each household possesses a good collection of large, extremely sharp Chinese-style cutlery. Women can chop or shave any vegetable into fine pieces. Meat is almost always processed by hand. I have seen a side of pork being cut up at home for the freezer, and women grinding meat by chopping it finely on wooden blocks made from tree stumps. None of the cooking equipment has been brought from Laos or Thailand. People are able to find and purchase familiar tools here in the Asian stores.

- p. 44 Meat and vegetables are often fried in “pork oil” which is saved for that purpose. I have never seen any traditional foods baked inside an oven. Sometimes foods are steamed inside bamboo leaves. Occasionally meat is cooked by repeatedly pouring boiling water over finely chopped pieces. Whenever a whole pig or cow has been purchased, its organs and intestines are processed immediately. The families feast on boiled organ meat and fresh sausage. All the animal parts are used: head, feet, blood, even bone marrow.²

A new and very welcome change is the availability of food storage. Families rely heavily on their refrigerators, and many households have an extra freezer. They were never able to freeze food before, and now they do so whenever possible. A family is now able to purchase and store a whole pig or a side of beef, and can save fresh deer or fish from a recent catch. Apparently, in Laos a family killed a pig only once every several months, and had to eat it all fairly quickly. The fat, rendered into oil, would serve as flavoring for vegetable dishes in the following months. Other than that, a family might have consumed about one chicken per week. This is reflected in their cooking methods, which require meat to be chopped into small pieces and always cooked in combination with other ingredients, enabling one small amount to be served to

- p. 45 many. Meat is also dried by traditional methods; hung in strips from the ceiling or placed on a rack above a stove. Fish is cut up and layered with salt for storage. It appears that the technological advance of refrigeration has promoted greater meat consumption. Since their arrival in the United States, most families eat meat several times a day. Meat is a highly valued food for both Hmong and Mien.

What seemed most ingenious, however, were some of the ways in which Hmong and Mien refugees obtained their food. I have previously mentioned the gardens which every family maintains if possible. People are used to growing as much produce as needed for their households, and gardens provide a steady, inexpensive supply of the vegetables and herbs which they enjoy. Seeds are saved and dried for use in the next planting season. One wild plant which is gathered by both Hmong and Mien, to the consternation of many Americans, is the common nightshade (*Solanum aulcamara*). The berries are known to be poisonous, but only the tender stems and leaves are cooked for consumption. Stems and leaves of several cultivated plants, such as peas, squash and soybeans, are also boiled as vegetables. Usually only the tender tips of the vines are used. (Also see Sawyer 1985)

² Very little food, besides fruit, cucumbers, and sugar cane, is consumed raw. Once I was served a salad, made of lettuce, green herbs, bean sprouts and onions, but these were placed on top of noodles and broth was poured over the whole combination. Otherwise, salad greens are served with a lot of salad dressing, for a soupy effect.

People have discovered other agricultural resources which also exist in the Sacramento area. Information is shared, and word spreads quickly as whole families travel to Stockton to gather crayfish from a rice farm just recently drained, or journey to Lodi to pick grapes after the harvest season, when late produce is free to whoever picks it. Another time I might visit and find all the families in the apartment building eating honeydew melons or cucumbers, also picked overripe after the harvest. Rice farms abound in this area, and even the straw is gleaned from the fields; it is burned and the ashes used in a special Mien rice dish. An average family eats about 100 pounds of rice per month, preferably bought in bulk, sometimes directly from a farm outlet. p. 46

Other activities provide familiar foods to supplement the diet. Some families raise special chickens, a Southeast Asian variety. Bass, trout, and catfish are obtained from the nearby rivers on a seasonal basis. River snails are gathered occasionally, the direct descendants of an Asian variety (*Viviparus*) brought here by Chinese laborers 100 years ago (Chace 1987:69). Many of the older Hmong and Mien men still like to hunt, and families enjoy game meats such as deer, pigeon and Squirrel. This entails a trip to the mountains, which are not too distant, by a group

of men who are proud to return with a catch that contributes extra food for the household. p. 47

Of course, learning about Hmong and Mien foods, and how to prepare them, involved eating them, too. I have shared many delicious meals and collected recipes for various dishes. A basic meal pattern consists of a staple food- rice, sometimes noodles- and several combination dishes composed of a variety of seasonal vegetables, boiled or fried with meat. This is typical of all meals throughout the day. I have observed that Hmong and Mien people cook about three times per day: a breakfast meal, a noon meal, and a main meal at night when most family members are home for the day. Since many Hmong and Mien mothers now work or attend school in the mornings, there is less time for cooking. Reheated leftovers from the previous evening's meal may be served, or children may fix their own breakfast. This may consist of cold cereal with milk, scrambled eggs with rice, or pancakes.

Despite the extremely hot, spicy condiments accompanying a meal, the preferred drink is usually the broth from the boiled vegetables and meats. In the Southeast Asian highlands, as well as in Southern China, drinking boiled water may well have been a preventive health measure (Anderson and Anderson 1974). In the United States, canned soft drinks or beer may be

served at a large gathering. Food is arranged in serving bowls on the table. Each person takes a portion of rice on his own plate, and all other foods are shared from the common bowls. Within the household, meals are informal, and family members help themselves as they wish. In a large group, however, such as a wedding or other feast, the men are seated and served first, children are fed on demand, and women eat afterwards (and while cooking!). p. 48

These observations have also been documented in studies by Marx (1980), Van Esterik (1980) and Tong (1981). I have obtained diet studies of Hmong refugees that were conducted in other states: by Hurlich (1981) in Washington; by Kohn. In Nebraska: and by Eldred (1985) in Madison, Wisconsin. Also available is a Hmong cookbook, published by a gardening cooperative in

Minnesota, No diet research has been conducted, to date, with Mien refugees. The Hmong studies, which seem well constructed and documented, contain lists of foods used and diet analyses based on 24-hour recalls. However, the Hmong food use pattern is invariably described as “bland,” “monotonous.” and usually deficient in one or more nutritional elements. I found myself wondering whether the researchers were discussing the same group of people that I know, I have rarely been served the same dish twice, in many

p. 49 visits to several households. I consider some of the condiments extremely spicy. And I thought I had discovered what Rozin (1976:297) refers to as “flavor principles”: the basic spice combination which characterizes a certain ethnic style of food. For Hmong recipes, this has to be the coriander/ green onion/ lemon grass mixture which flavors so many of their pork dishes that it has become, for me, a distinctive marker of their cuisine.

I believe that this contradiction between my observations and the other diet studies can be resolved by a consideration of the different environments involved. Midwestern states are also primarily agricultural, but their principal crop is corn—a low status food among Asians. The colder climate and shorter growing season prevents the cultivation of many tropical vegetables necessary for traditional recipes. The preference for familiar foods so evident among Hmong and Mien, probably enhanced by the stress of adapting to a new environment, discourages the adoption of new foods that are more available in the United States. Consequently, in these localities they have fewer food choices. Sacramento, however, with its warm climate, proximity to several types of agricultural resources, and its large Asian community, provides access to a much wider variety of acceptable foods. and

p. 50 therefore to a more complete, representative and interesting diet.

Although I have observed and recorded food patterns of Hmong and Mien households in Sacramento, I wanted to obtain more objective and quantifiable evidence. I questioned the results obtained by other researchers with lists of 24-hour food intake, but I realized that I could document my findings through the use of a similar diet recall. The following chapter includes an itemized description of the foods used by Hmong and Mien in Sacramento, based on 24-hour recalls.

p. 51 **Diet Survey**

One of the methods I used for this study was the observation and description of the kinds of foods comprising the diet of specific Hmong and Mien families since their relocation from Laos to the greater Sacramento area. Relevant information included types of food and cooking which have been retained from their old diet patterns; what “American” foods they use and like; and whether new ingredients have been incorporated as substitutes for foods unobtainable here. Another tool I used for this study was a survey of twenty-four hour diet recalls.

I have followed the methodology of N. W. Jerome as outlined in the 1966 study, “Diet and Acculturation” (Jerome, Kandel and Pelto 1980), because the research design seemed best for my purposes. Jerome effectively demonstrates that diet, through changes in food use and

preparation habits, is an index of acculturation by a particular group to a new environment. Differences in the kinds and amounts of foods available, and new ways of food preservation and preparation, necessitate adjustments by an immigrant group that must be compatible with their cultural beliefs about food. To

ascertain the basic patterns of food behavior and what, if any, changes have affected the refugees' diet, I employed several methods which are standard to nutritional anthropology: participant observation, in-depth informal interviews, photographs and botanical drawings for plant identification, and 24-hour diet recalls to determine frequency of food use (Fitzgerald 1977: Wilson 1977). The first three methods have been more fully described in the section on fieldwork. The food frequency analysis has been borrowed directly from Jerome and will be included in this discussion.

p. 52

Rather than restricting the study to the limited number of households from which I was obtaining in-depth information, I decided to expand my sample base to gain more representative data. I had already tried to make (friendly) contact with people in community gardens, but for the most part the Hmong and Mien I encountered were shy and seemed not to understand English—nor did I have much knowledge of their languages. I also wondered whether they considered my behavior in approaching them to be appropriate! But the language barrier did prove to be a major obstacle in obtaining further information. During the Spring semester of 1987 I tried to submit a questionnaire to several English classes at the local adult school, presuming a certain level of language

competency. This proved to be difficult, as there are many restrictions imposed by the public education administration on doing research within that system. I next tried the office of the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program located in downtown Sacramento, because this location serves a large Southeast Asian refugee population. This proved to be the best choice.

p. 53

The WIC program requires all participants to fill out several questionnaires regarding health history for both mother and children. More valuable for this study, however, are the three 24-hour food intake lists recorded during pregnancy. Rather than relying on recall, WIC sends the form home with the participant who records all foods as they are eaten. The WIC personnel allowed me access to their 1985 files, and I was able to select as many of these as I needed. I decided on a sample size of 52: 26 Mien and 26 Hmong. Since the sample was restricted to women of reproductive age, specialized information on the diets of men, older adults, or children would not be available. However, since these women were the most likely to prepare meals for their families. I reasoned that they probably did not consume this food in isolation, but usually shared it with other family members.

Twenty-four hour recall data has been used in several other studies, including two on the Hmong by Eldred (1985) and Kohn (1981). While it may be inappropriate to generalize about an entire diet from one day's consumption pattern, it is possible to extract some useful information from such a record. I decided to adapt the food frequency model used by Jerome (1966) and Hurlich (1981) who used the concept of consumption over time: how many times per week that a particular food was used. Since the food recalls I used covered only one day each, I

p. 54

did not have that kind of information. I changed the format slightly to measure frequency per population: how many times a food was mentioned in the various diet records of the entire group. In this way, I could obtain a composite picture of the overall diet of the sample population.

I was able to arrange a day mutually acceptable to myself and the WIC staff, when I could work alone and undisturbed. First I searched through their 1985 files for names which I knew to be Hmong: Her, Thao, Vang, Vue. Most of the files included cards identifying the participant's ethnic group and language, providing a cross check. Mien names chosen included Saechao, Saelee, Saeteurn, and Sayyang. These clan names corresponded to those of families with whom I was

p. 55 acquainted, and one file was that of a woman whom I actually knew.

Depending on when the participant entered the program, the file would contain one, two, or three diet recalls, corresponding to the first (intake) visit, a second visit during pregnancy, and a third (post partum) checkup. I looked particularly for files containing at least 2 food recall lists. I treated these as one composite diet recall per respondent. In other words, I would look through each 24-hour list of foods in one file and write down every food on each list once. Very frequently, I would find the same foods such as rice, meat, or milk marked on each of the 24-hour lists from a single respondent. In these cases I would make note of how many times a particular food was mentioned, but I tried to record a complete inventory of all the foods listed on every diet recall for that particular respondent. Therefore, I counted all the 24-hour recalls from one file as elements of a single diet for that person, thinking that this would give more complete and detailed information than using just one list per person. Some of the respondents had limited English ability, and often would just write "meat" or "vegetables" or "juice", without naming the specific type of each. On the first (intake) recall a WIC staff person would be able to question the

p. 56 participant and write in these details, in order to make a nutritional status assessment. Otherwise, many of the lists were similarly vague, and the multiple recalls provided supplementary information. About one third of the respondents were quite literate and wrote very complete dietary records.

I specifically chose files with food lists that would include all the available foods for the whole year. Half of the Hmong sample, thirteen files, were dated between October and March, representing a winter diet. The other half, also thirteen files, were dated between April and September, representing a summer diet. The Mien sample was divided into fourteen files dated during the winter months (October- March), and twelve files taken from the summer months (April-September).

The ages of the respondents (WIC participants) ranged from 16 years to 42 years for Hmong women, with an average age of 26-28 years. The Mien sample was a bit younger, with ages ranging from 16 years to 38 years, and an average age of 23-24. Other demographic data, such

as size of household, was unavailable from these files. All respondents were assumed to be low-income. since this is a condition for WIC eligibility.

I must emphasize that the diets reported by these women have been heavily influenced by participation in the WIC program, and foods such as milk, cheese, and fruit juice are promoted by the WIC program through the use of the voucher system. Unlike food stamps, which are redeemable for any food items, WIC vouchers list specific nutritional foods, and redemption is limited to these items. Nutrition classes held by WIC staff also promote the use of these foods. One file, which was not included in the sample, mentioned 'milk' and 'cheese' for almost every meal; an effort, I suspect, to impress or please the WIC intake worker. There may be an element of this kind of "inflation" in many of the diet recalls; however, accurate or not, the inclusion of these foods in the daily diets represents definite changes in food use attributable to this program.

p. 57

With these cautions in mind, I compiled a list of food items included in the diet recalls. (See table I) To demonstrate the overall diet pattern of both populations, Hmong and Mien, I arranged the foods on a frequency scale, representing the frequency of consumption by each group. Frequency was measured by the number of times a food was listed divided by the total number of respondents in the sample. Because several foods were listed more than once per day on all

the diet recalls, I gave these items more "weight". that is, a number greater than one. The most obvious example of this is rice. In every file and on every diet recall, rice was listed at least twice per day. Therefore, rice was given a weight factor of 2. The frequency rating of rice, 1.00 for 100 percent of the sample, was multiplied by the weight factor and is represented by 2 on the frequency scale. Since milk was also mentioned in every diet at least twice per day, I followed the same procedure, giving milk a weight factor of 2. (I will repeat here, this is the direct result of using a skewed population, pregnant women participating in a nutrition program, and is not representative of the general Hmong/Mien diet pattern.) Meat comprises a large proportion of every diet in the sample. Chicken or pork, especially, were listed twice a day by approximately one half of each sample and once a day by the rest of the sample. These two items have been weighted by a factor of 0.5. The total percentage of each was multiplied by 0.5. and the resulting amount was added to the total, to give the weighted percentage.

p. 58

I wished to avoid any distortion in consumption patterns due to the seasonal availability of particular fruits and vegetables. Rather than treating each seasonal variety as an occasional item in the diet. I

arranged fruits and vegetables into several groups: all fruits, legumes, dark green and yellow vegetables, and vitamin-C vegetables. These groupings represent sound nutritional classifications, though the total percentages obtained by this method are often greater than 100. After careful survey of many diet recalls. I am confident that the derived frequencies are truly representative of the amounts of vegetables and fruits consumed by this population.

p. 59

In the 1966 study, Jerome introduces the classification system of core, secondary, and peripheral foods . “Core” food items are defined as staples, essentials to the diet, eaten several times per day or per week. On the food frequency scale this would correspond to a frequency rating of 1.00 or more. “Secondary” foods are those which consistently appear in the diets but less often than the core items. Secondary foods may be consumed for balance and variety in the overall diet. These are represented by a frequency rating of 0.50 to 1.00 on the scale. “Peripheral” foods are the least frequently consumed items, because of their relative expense or lack of availability. These are represented by a frequency rating of less than 0.50 on the food scale.

I did not attempt to evaluate this sampling of diets on the basis of their nutritional content or

p. 60 adequacy. I am merely recording the foods used by the Hmong/Mien sample population as an overall dietary pattern. The core and secondary foods represented on the frequency scale, from .50 to 2.00, are rice, pork, chicken, fruits, and several types of vegetables. These appear to be similar to, and based upon, the traditional diet of Southeast Asia, as previously described. (See Chapter One.) The differences between the older diet pattern and the pattern established after relocation seem to be that of quantity rather than quality. More meat, more rice and vegetables are consumed in the U.S., due to the innovations in food storage and the lack of seasonal variation in food supply. The major dietary change, as demonstrated by this data, is the inclusion of milk and dairy products and several new, processed American foods.

The results of this study generally concur with Eldred as far as the primary foods used and the basic Hmong meal pattern (1985: 8-9). Eldred. however, based her diet analysis on a day's consumption which included only one kind of meat (pork) and one vegetable (turnip greens). Both my diet survey and my personal observations indicated that more than one meat and a wide variety of vegetables was consumed in one day by a majority of the sample population.

p. 61 **Notes:**

34567

p. 62 **Notes:**

89101112

³ Vegetables: Vitamin C- includes tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, potatoes, and green peppers

⁴ Vegetables: Dark green and yellow- includes carrots, lettuce, broccoli, spinach, “greens”, bok choy, corn, and yellow squash (a Southeast Asian variety)

⁵ Vegetables: Legumes- includes peas and beans

⁶ Fruits: all fruits included in diet recalls- oranges, apples, water- and honeydew melons, bananas, grapes, pears, peaches, and plums

⁷ Juices: Orange, apple (high Vitamin-C brands authorized by WIC) , pineapple, guava

⁸ Vegetables: Vitamin C- includes tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, potatoes, and green peppers

⁹ Vegetables: Dark green and yellow- includes carrots, lettuce, broccoli, spinach, “greens”, bok choy, corn, and yellow squash (a Southeast Asian variety)

¹⁰ Vegetables: Legumes- includes peas and beans

The information pamphlet published by the Ramsey County, Minnesota, nutritionists (August 1982) also describes typical Southeast Asian meal patterns which are similar to those I have observed, although it lists only one dish per meal. The families I visited usually served two or three different dishes at the main meal. The pamphlet provides a comprehensive list of foods used by several Southeast Asian groups, excluding the Hmong, which corresponds fairly closely to the list I have compiled. The Hmong food preferences are given separately in the pamphlet, however, and include only a few fruits and vegetables besides meat and rice. reinforcing the general impression of a bland and monotonous diet. p. 63

Kohn's food scores approximate the results in this study, in that the amounts of rice, vegetables and meat consumed per day appear to be similar (Kohn 1981). However, her list of "most frequently eaten foods" grouped all fruits and all vegetables as single items, omitting a large amount of detail in the description of a typical Southeast Asian refugee diet. "Soups" and "salads" were also listed as composite items. which might be confusing and not very informative (Kohn 1981: 143). Kohn also included a list of "American types of foods" in her study (1981:144). These items, and the

amounts consumed per day, correspond fairly closely to the results I have obtained. p. 64

Although Hurlich's food frequencies were based on consumption per week, his list of typical foods most closely resembles the one in this study (Hurlich 1981:23). However, the category of "cooked vegetables" comprises only five items, and "raw vegetables" are not itemized. His population was divided into males/females, ages 15-20, 21-39, and over 40. Children, the sources of much dietary innovation, were omitted. Hurlich includes a list of new foods and the location where each was introduced to the Hmong refugees: Laos, camps in Thailand, or the United States. This is fairly useful for an historical perspective (Hurlich 1981:25).

Each of the above studies concludes that the Southeast Asian refugees' diet pattern is basically adequate, except for a calcium deficiency due to a low intake of dairy products. The need for calcium may now be even greater since protein consumption has increased (Eldred 1985: Hurlich 1981; Kohn 1981). While my research indicates a high amount of milk consumption among pregnant women and young children who participate in the WIC program, it is impossible to conclude that this is typical of the Hmong/Mien population in general. Rather, I suggest that calcium and other

trace minerals may well be obtained from the large variety of green leafy herbs and vegetables which are a large part of a traditional Southeast Asian diet, one that is being continued in California. I am including a list of vegetables, and their Hmong and Mien names, that are most p. 65

¹¹ Fruits: All fruits included in the diet recalls- oranges, apples, water- and honeydew melons, bananas, grapes, pears, peaches, and plums

¹² Juices: Orange, apple (high Vitamin-C brands authorized by WIC), pineapple, guava

commonly grown in Sacramento home gardens. Further research on the nutritional components of these vegetables will be welcome.

The Hmong and Mien are a distinct minority in the Sacramento community, but apparently they do not feel the need to conform to the majority diet pattern. They have been exposed to many new “American” foods which must seem exotic to them. Some of these foods have been tried, of these some are accepted and liked. Even if these new foods are well-liked, such as hamburgers, french fries, ice cream, candy and other sweets, as shown by the food frequency scale they are supplemental items in the diet, never a substitute for the basic core foods. Jerome (1966) suggests that acceptance of dietary change depends on both the availability of traditional food items and the relative costs of new items. Hmong and Mien demonstrate a preference for the former, which are regularly available in this area. As time goes on and a new generation matures, it may be predicted that more “modern” and “American” foods and customs may appear regularly in the Mien and Hmong meal

p. 66 patterns. At this point, however, there is evidence of both stability and change: both the predominance of traditional foods and the exposure to new items.

Food patterns involve more than mere lists of foods. It is important to understand why these particular foods are selected. In the next section, some of the underlying cultural influences such as food symbolism and beliefs about food will be explored in their relation to Mien and Hmong food choices.

p. 67 **Food in Symbolism and Ritual**

It remains to demonstrate the meaning of Hmong and Mien traditional foods and their place among cherished cultural values and practices. It has often been observed that food ways are typically one of the last culture traits to change in a new setting (Kalcik 1984). Like language, food is a distinctive marker of ethnic identity. In fact, food itself is communication, as expressed by Igor De Garine:

“A cuisine is like a language, conveying symbols which go far beyond itself.” [1971: 48]

Food communicates in the way it is prepared, the types and amounts served, in the setting of its consumption, and the group with which it is shared (Kalcik 1984; Douglas 1972). I have experienced this in varying ways with the people I have encountered in a 'foods' context. One family considers me a teacher and treats me with respect as an honored guest. The table is immediately cleared and snack food such as fruit or cookies and tea is invariably served when I visit. I must always accept these offerings or risk insulting them by refusing. Another family almost never serves

p. 68 food, except when it has been recently prepared and the family themselves are ready to eat. With these people I feel more like an intruder into their private lives. I am treated cordially, but until I have proved myself by some service to them I am not readily accepted. Still another family invites me to share a meal with them, insisting that I stay, and treating me as one of their

own. They let me help prepare food and clean up afterwards. I include these anecdotes as examples of what Douglas and Kalcik refer to as “social distance” (Douglas 1972; Kalcik 1984).

Food in this role defines the boundaries of social categories. For example, drinks and snacks are served to strangers or acquaintances, in such situations as cocktail parties, teas or informal socials. A meal where all sit down and share food which requires time and expense to prepare, is reserved for close friends and family (Douglas 1972). Social distance, as defined by Douglas (1972) and Firth (1973) refers to the closeness or casualness of personal relationships. These are expressed in food sharing, an ancient and especially human activity. The necessity of food to sustain life makes it a valuable and meaningful gift. If food resources were unlimited, it would be unnecessary to share them. But, historically, much time and effort has been expended by every culture to

obtain food supplies, endowing the end result with more value. The general undersupply of food precludes sharing it indiscriminately. Besides, non-selectivity in food sharing reduces its significance. Therefore, a valuable commodity like food is shared only with those whose relationship is considered equally as valuable (De Garine 1971; Kalcik 1984). p. 69

There are many instances where food establishes and defines social relationships. Marriage ceremonies provide a good example. Among the Hmong and Mien the marriage extends beyond the couple immediately involved to include the extended families of both husband and wife. The marriage bond creates an alliance between these groups, and in honor of the creation of the new relation to each other, food is offered as a gift, sealing the agreement (Lewis and Lewis 1986). The ceremony itself includes the sharing of food among the families and guests. This is a common feature shared by many other cultures as well: the wedding feast which celebrates a community, membership in a group, and a sense of belonging together (De Garine 1972; Kalcik 1984). Food serves as the symbol of this unity. A Hmong friend once told me that the best food, when eaten alone, is not as enjoyable as plain food when eaten with friends.

However, food can also express the opposite extreme: social rejection. People typically fear or distrust new and unfamiliar foods, and the people associated with them. A common example is the story that Indochinese refugees regularly eat dogs and cats. Some Americans will express their hostility and suspicion towards these unfamiliar strangers by attributing to them these disgusting food habits. Aversion to food thus creates social barriers; acceptance of an ethnic style of food by eating it assumes a corresponding acceptance of that culture (Kalcik 1984). p. 70

Death is also an occasion which is observed, by many cultures, with a feast. The Hmong and Mien believe that the corpse and its spirit must be offered food or it will be displeased and retaliate by bringing misfortune to the living (Lewis and Lewis 1986). Offerings of food are regularly made to dead ancestors to appease their spirits and ensure their blessings (Barney 1967; Kandre 1967). The living relatives will feast on foods in their memory; the amount and quality of food prepared is considered a measure of one's respect, for both the dead and the living. The feast giver, in turn, is accorded prestige in proportion to the size of the meal and the number of people “who know him” through participation.

p. 71 In Hmong and Mien societies, all relationships with both the living and the dead are, ideally, reciprocal. Sahlins (1968) relates reciprocity to social distance. For example, sharing within the family group is conducted with no immediate expectation of return; this is termed “generalized” reciprocity. Outside the immediate family, but within the tribal community, transactions are equal, one-to-one, “balanced.” Strangers with whom one shares no social ties, and therefore no obligations, tend to incur “negative” reciprocity: attempts to gain as much as possible for as small an offering as allowed (Sahlins 1968). Translated into food terms, I refer again to my own experience as previously discussed. Each family demonstrates a different form of reciprocal behavior towards me: the first is balanced (exchange of food for skills); the second, negative; the third, generalized.

Food behavior is guided by beliefs about food which are culturally determined (Anderson and Anderson 1974). Hmong and Mien beliefs about the efficacy and importance of food show the influence of their history in China. Traditional Chinese diet is considered both preventive medicine and therapy for illness (Anderson and Anderson 1974). Mien and Hmong share the concept that a good diet is the most effective and available means of staying healthy, and food is thought to give

p. 72 strength. They will not hesitate to bring their own 'healthy' foods to the hospital when a relative is sick or is having a baby. Food in itself is considered 'medicine'. Hmong women have shown me three herbs which, when cooked with chicken, comprise a specific recipe for health. (I am unable to identify the herbal plants.) The balance of elements in the diet, and in each meal, promotes well-being. Foods are chosen which complement each other: 'hot' meat with 'cool' vegetables, plus a staple, 'neutral' component such as rice or noodles (Anderson and Anderson 1974). I am reminded of the classic dichotomy between 'raw' and 'cooked', in that raw food is usually included in offerings to the spirits, while cooking renders food fit for human consumption (Rozin 1976). The type of cooking is significant as well: frying or roasting makes a food more 'hot' and harder to digest, while steaming or boiling is a 'cooler' method (Anderson and Anderson 1974).

Both Hmong and Mien women related dietary restrictions that they still observe in the one month following the birth of a child. New mothers can only eat boiled chicken and rice, warm foods to give them strength. It is believed that cold foods such as vegetables would cause illness in both mother and baby. (Even bathing in cold water is forbidden.) Foods that

p. 73 are too hot, such as beef, pork, and chilis must also be avoided or the baby will become sick. Besides the immediate dangers to health, the wrong foods eaten at this particular time could affect one's condition in old age. For example, eating fish will cause a never-ending chill, and eating squash or cucumbers will cause swelling of the ankles later in life. Duck eggs and potatoes are also dangerous. In one household I observed a bowl of gizzards, extracted from pigeons, which had been set aside. A young girl told me that Hmong women don't ever eat them because they would make the placenta too large and tough when giving birth. Her mother confirmed this. I was impressed with the sincerity and tenacity of these beliefs, which persist despite nutrition education in this country.

In the light of the spiritual aspect of Hmong and Mien cultures, however, this phenomenon becomes understandable. Their animistic view of the world populates it with spirits, within all living things and manifested in the elements and forces of nature (Thomas and Embree 1950; Lewis and Lewis 1986). Food is extracted from nature, with the blessing of the spirits, and therefore contains power in itself (De Garine 1971). The recognition of this spiritual power is expressed through sacrifices of food at every ritual and ceremony. Food, which the spirits helped to

obtain, is returned to them in gratitude, and in the hope that its supply will continue (Barney 1967). Once I witnessed a Hmong ceremony which involved the ritual slaughter of a pig and two chickens. The shaman, a ritual specialist, was “calling the spirits” for the head of the household. I was told that spirits are only attracted by live animals. The life which is first dedicated to them, is then given to them as the animal is killed. At all such ceremonies the meat is cooked and distributed to the participants and their families. It is an act of both physical and spiritual communion. An offering of raw rice and eggs was also made, followed by one of cooked rice, boiled pork, and whiskey. These observations have been confirmed in several ethnographies: Lewis and Lewis, 1986; Barney, 1967; Kandre, 1967. Garrett (1974) estimated that 80 percent of the pigs raised by the Hmong in Laos were used for ritual purposes; Anderson and Anderson (1974) theorized that pork consumed at ceremonies provided a necessary addition of meat to a diet normally low in animal protein. Whatever the practical reason. Hmong and Mien still feel it necessary to procure live animals for every ritual occasion. These are easily obtained from the small farms located just outside the Sacramento area. p. 74

Though the refugees have settled into a new way of life in many respects, they have *retained* deep emotional, psychological, and physical attachments to traditional food. Far from being ‘just something to eat’, food fills important cultural functions: reinforcement of group identity and solidarity, symbolic representation in rituals, and maintenance of health and strength in the community (Leininger 1970). These functions are typical of what Steward (1955) defines as “core” culture traits: those having to do with subsistence activities. This term is not restricted to economic patterns alone, but it refers to all activities that connect a community with its physical, social, and spiritual world (Steward 1955). Food serves as a material link between other basic elements such as social structure and religion, and as part of the “core” of a culture it is one of its most enduring components. It is not surprising, therefore, that patterns of food use should remain stable in a new environment. People consciously endeavor to preserve them. p. 75

In contrast, “secondary” cultural features are more open to variation, borrowing, and innovation. It is these outer physical expressions such as dress, housing, and technology, that seem to indicate cultural change (Steward 1955). I found this a striking

parallel to the core, secondary and peripheral foods classification of Jerome (1966) and De Garine (1972). The concepts are similar: the most significant elements are at the deepest and most basic levels of the cultural structures, while the most commonly consumed foods are essential to the basic diet pattern. p. 76

The outer, physical environment in which the Hmong and Mien live today is dramatically different in many respects from their former tropical homeland. Yet, their diet has changed only slightly from one locality to the other. The importance of food to their core cultural patterns, and their desire to preserve as much of their traditional cultures as possible, motivates them to seek out familiar foods in a changed environment. They have employed a remarkable “resourcefulness” in seeking, sharing, and exploiting various food sources in Sacramento in order to reproduce as closely as possible their traditional diet.

It would seem easier, in terms of time and effort, to accept the changes imposed by a new environment and culture. Indeed, new immigrant groups are almost expected to assimilate, passively, into the dominant American society. Historically, this has almost never been the case. Each immigrant cultural group has retained elements of its traditions that are considered

p. 77 basic to its heritage (Kalcik 1984). The values and customs of some ethnic groups are more congruent with the normative pattern of American society, enabling a more thorough integration. However, the process of acculturation is never the mere replacement of traditional behaviors by the traits of the dominant culture. Each minority group selects which innovations are most compatible with its own cultural pattern, in an active process of adaptation (Herskovits 1938; Steward 1955). Hmong and Mien people manifest this process by simultaneously adopting secondary features of American culture (dress, technology, housing) while preserving the core elements of their own respective cultures: language, religious customs, a clan-based social structure, and traditional foods. Since arriving in the United States they have consciously selected a diet pattern which includes new foods that appeal to them, but which is composed mostly of foods that have meaning for them.

p. 78 **CONCLUSION**

Hmong and Mien people have brought to California a long history of rich traditions of which they are understandably proud. Their arrival in the United States marked the end of a painful and traumatic journey away from their homeland and familiar ways of life. But their resettlement was also the beginning of a prolonged new journey into an unknown future. As traditional tribal people, with little or no formal education, their only guide to the challenges of a new social and physical environment were the lessons of the past.

Traditional Mien and Hmong patterns of resource use excelled as an adaptive strategy. They skillfully tended farms which provided their livelihood, and produced most of the items necessary for daily life. Since the tropical highlands were not well suited to intensive cultivation, the Hmong and Mien became adept at locating new resource areas and moving their communities frequently. Within the social environment, “the concept of tribal culture emphasizes shared behavior” (Steward 1955:45). Sharing and reciprocity

p. 79 facilitated social and economic organization for both the Hmong and Mien tribes.

These qualities have proved useful in the confusing and difficult process of acculturation to American society. In order to cope with rapid change, Mien and Hmong have applied their

familiar adaptive strategies to a new and very different environment. Their efforts appear to be most successful in a particular area, the San Joaquin valley of central California. The many benefits of this location have attracted large numbers of Hmong and Mien people, in a continuation of their tradition of “moving for betterment” (Thao 1982:106).

The state of California provides liberal social services and an accessible education system, both of which are valuable and necessary for the refugees' resettlement. In addition, there is a large, established Asian community which includes ethnic organizations, specialty stores and restaurants. However, within California, the Central (San Joaquin) Valley contains prime farmland and a variety of agricultural resources, as well as a warm, temperate climate. The combination of all these elements produces a resource base that is most conducive to the adaptive strategy the Hmong and Mien have chosen to pursue.

Acculturation has brought about many changes due to advanced technology, education, transportation, and participation in a cash economy. The Mien and Hmong, however, seem determined to retain the basic core elements of their own cultures, such as their languages, social structures based on clan organization, religious and New Year's rituals, and a traditional diet. The adherence of both groups to familiar food patterns has been discussed in this study. Food is defined as a core culture item because of its physical, social, economic, and spiritual significance. Food has been shown to reinforce group identity, to serve as a symbolic medium in rituals, and to maintain a level of health and well-being in the community.

p. 80

However, though food in general serves these purposes in many cultures, specific foods characterize a particular cultural food pattern.

A description of the food items preferred by a sample of Hmong and Mien refugees was prepared through the use of a diet survey. Though limited in scope, the survey provided a general overview of the basic, core elements of typical Hmong and Mien diets, as well as secondary and peripheral foods used. Populations in California are able to obtain a high-quality, varied diet which includes a large number of vegetables and

fruits, several kinds of meat, and the traditional staple, rice. Most of the vegetables are tropical varieties which adapt well to the California climate, and many Hmong and Mien households continue the custom of growing their own produce. Other important traditional foods are available through Asian grocery stores.

p. 81

Changes in food use patterns have occurred through contact with new food items and customs. Women are encouraged to use unfamiliar foods such as milk and cheese while participating in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) federal food subsidy program. Children are curious about novelty food items which they learn about through advertising or from American peers. School lunches provide exposure to a variety of American foods. “Fast foods” are enjoyed by many refugees for their flavor, convenience, and low cost relative to other prepared products. In these various ways Mien and Hmong people have been introduced to new foods, but in general they seem to prefer familiar ingredients and flavor combinations. Traditional foods are also believed to be more wholesome.

Meal formats have changed slightly due to the time constraints of an American lifestyle. Children eat hot lunches at school, or prepare a quick breakfast at home

p. 82 while mothers are busy. Families still share the evening meal together.

There seem to be some overall trends in the dietary changes of Hmong and Mien since relocation to the United States. Consumption of meat has increased due to greater availability through improved storage and lower costs. More pregnant women and young children are now drinking milk and using other dairy products. This is directly attributable to American influence, and results in the increased size and weight of refugee toddlers. A wide variety of sweets in the form of candy, baked goods and soft drinks have been added to the diets of most refugee people, leading to accelerated tooth decay in young children. Vegetables and rice continue to be the staple items of the Hmong and Mien daily regimen. Fruits remain a large dietary component, but temperate-climate varieties have been substituted for expensive or unavailable tropical fruits. Neither the diet survey nor direct observations indicate that “junk foods” have significantly altered the Mien and Hmong diet structure.

Dietary changes represent an example of the deliberate selection by the Hmong and the Mien of innovations which are acceptable to their cultural standards. Food choices are only one part of an

p. 83 adaptive strategy that includes the efficient use of familiar resources, relocation to areas of maximum benefit, and the establishment of communities based on clan affiliations. In their adjustment to American society, Mien and Hmong are forming refugee associations and are attending schools and job-training programs. Their acculturation is an active process in which they are combining familiar skills with new knowledge and techniques, in order to regain their original independence and self-sufficiency.

p. 84 APPENDIX

Most Common Garden Vegetables

p. 85 REFERENCES

Anderson, E.N. and Marja L. Anderson 1974 Folk Dietetics in Two Chinese Communities. In: A. Kleinman, P. Kunstadter, E.R. Alexander, and J.L. Gale, eds. *Medicine in Chinese Cultures*, pp 143-176. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Public Health Service.

Barney, G. Linwood 1967 The Meo of Xieng Khouang Province. In: P. Kunstadter, ed. *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations Vol. I*, pp 271-294. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Bossen, Laurel 1981 The Household as Economic Agent. *Urban Anthropology* 10 (3): 287-303.

Chace, Paul G. 1987 *Viviparus, The Chinese Field Snail, A Historic Archaeological Enigma*. Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly 23(2): 69-79. Chinn, Thomas W. 1969 *A History of the Chinese in California*. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America.

Cooper, Robert 1984 *Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response*. Kent Ridge, Singapore: Singapore University Press. 1986 *The Hmong of Laos: Economic Factors in Refugee Exodus and Return*. In: G. Hendricks, B. Downing, and A. Dienard, eds. *The Hmong in Transition*, pp 23-40. Center For Migration Studies of New York, Inc.

De Garine, Igor 1971 *Food is Not Just Something to Eat*. *Ceres* 4: 46-51. 1972 *The Socio-Cultural Aspects of Nutrition*. *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 1:143-163.

De Koninck, Rodolphe 1980 *The Tropical, Agricultural Corner of Asia: An*

Introduction to Southeast Asia. In: E. Tepper, ed. *Southeast Asian Exodus: From Tradition to Resettlement*, pp 83-96. Ottawa: The Canadian Asian Studies Association. p. 86

Douglas, Mary 1972 *Deciphering A Meal*. *Daedalus* 101: 61-81.

Embree, John F. and William F. Thomas 1950 *Ethnic Groups of Northern Southeast Asia*, Yale University Southeast Asian Studies. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eldred, Patricia 1985 *Changing Roles of Refugee Women: The Impact on Dietary Beliefs and Behavior*. Presented to the American Anthropological Association, 84th Annual Meeting, Dec. 7, 1985.

Fieldhouse, Paul 1986 *Food and Nutrition: Customs and Culture*. Dover, New Hampshire: Croom Helm.

Finck, John 1986 *Secondary Migration to California's Central Valley*. In: G. Hendricks, B. Downing, A. Dienard, eds. *The Hmong In Transition*, pp 184-186. Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc.

Firth, Raymond 1973 *Food Symbolism in a Pre-Industrial Society*. In: *Symbols, Public and Private*, pp 243-261. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Fitzgerald, Thomas K. 1977 *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Food Habits: Some Methodological Issues*. In: T. Fitzgerald, ed. *Nutrition and Anthropology In Action*, pp 69-78. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum. Assen.

Garrett, W.E. 1974 *No Place to Run: The Hmong of Laos*. *National Geographic* 145(1): 78-111.

Grivetti, Lewis 1978 *Culture, Diet, and Nutrition*. *Bioscience* 28(3) 171-177.

Herklots, G.A.C. 1972 *Vegetables of Southeast Asia*. London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd. p. 87

Herskovits, Melville J. 1938 *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact*. New York: J.J. Augustin Publishers.

Hurlich, Marshall 1982 Rural Hmong Populations in Western Washington State: The Consequences for Nutritional Status and Growth. In: B.T. Downing and D.P. Olney, eds. *The Hmong in the West: Papers of the 1981 Hmong Research Conference*, pp 320-352. Minneapolis: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota.

Hurlich, Marshall and R. Munger 1981 Preliminary Nutritional and Demographic Assessment of Hmong Refugees in the Area of Puget Sound, Washington. In: W.H. Meredith, B.J. Tweten, eds. *Compiled Proceedings of the Helping Indochinese Families in Transition Conference*, May, 1981. pp 12-29. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska.

Jerome, Norge W. 1967 Diet and Acculturation: The Case of Black-American In-Migrants. In: N.W. Jerome, R.F. Kandel, and G.H. Pelt, eds. *Nutritional Anthropology: Contemporary Approaches to Diet and Culture*, pp 275-326. Pleasantville, N.Y.: Redgrave Press. 1975 On Determining Food Patterns of Urban Dwellers in Contemporary U.S. Society. In: M. Arnott, ed. *Gastronomy: The Anthropology of Food and Food Habits*, pp 91-112. The Hague: Mouton Press.

Kalcik, Susan 1984 Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity. In: L.K. Brown and K. Mussell, eds. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in The United States*, pp 37-65. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Kandre, Peter 1967 *Autonomy and Integration of Social Systems: The Lu Mien Mountain Population and Their*

p. 88 Neighbors. In: P. Kunstadter, ed. *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations Vol. 2*, pp 583-638. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Keyes, Charles F. 1977 *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*. New York: Mac Millan Publishing Co., Inc.

Kohn, Harriet H. 1981 Nebraska Indochinese Refugee Nutrition Assessment. In: Meredith and Tweten, eds. *Compiled Proceedings of the Helping Indochinese Families in Transition Conference*, May, 1981. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska.

Kuey, Yih-Fu 1960 The Magpie Miao of Southern Szechuan. In: G.P. Murdock, ed. *Social Structure in Southeast Asia*, pp 143-156. New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc.

Le Bar, Frank and Adrienne Suddard 1960 *Laos: Its People, Society and Culture*. New Haven, Conn.: HRAF Press.

Leininger, Madeleine 1970 Some Cross-Cultural Universal and Non-Universal Functions, Beliefs, and Practices of Food. In: J. Dupont, ed. *Dimensions of Nutrition: Proceedings of the*

Colorado Dietetic Association Conference, pp 153-173. Fort Collins, Colo.: Associated University Press.

Lewis, Paul and Elaine Lewis 1984 Peoples of the Golden Triangle. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd.

Logan, Kathleen 1981 Getting By With Less: Economic Strategies of Lower Income Households in Guadalajara. *Urban Anthropology* 10(3): 231-246.

Marx, Rani 1980 Oakland's Iu Mien: A Study of Three Indo-Chinese Refugee Households. U.C. Berkeley: Senior Honors Thesis, Department of Anthropology.

Provencher, Ronald 1975 Mainland Southeast Asia: An Anthropological Perspective. Pacific Palisades, Ca.: Goodyear Publishing Co., Inc. p. 89

Reed, Ann Indochinese Refugee Flood Drying Up. *The Sacramento Bee*, February 12, 1984.

Rozin, Paul 1976 Psychological and Cultural Determinants of Food Choice. In: T. Silverstone, ed. *Appetite and Food Intake*,. pp 285-312. Berlin: Dahlem Konferenzen.

Sahlins, Marshall 1968 Tribal Economics. In: *Tribesmen* pp 74-95. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Sawyer, Sharon 1985 A New Way With Squash. *Organic Gardening* 32(8): 31-33. 1986 Hmong Gardens: New Addition to Minnesota's Urban Horticulture. *Minnesota Horticulturist*, October/November.

Smalley, William A. 1986 Stages of Hmong Cultural Adaptation. In: G. Hendricks, B.T. Downing, and A. Dienard, eds. *The Hmong in Transition*,. pp 7-22. Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc.

Steward, Julian 1955 *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

St. Paul/RamseyCounty Nutrition Program 1982 Southeast Asian Foodways: Nutrition Update for Health Professionals.

Thao, Cheu 1982 Hmong Migration and Leadership in Laos and in the United States. In: Downing and Olney, eds. *The Hmong in the West*. pp. 99-123. Minneapolis: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project University of Minnesota.

Tong, Amy 1981 Dietary Habits and Nutritional Needs of Southeast Asian Families in the United States. In:

p. 90

Meredith and Tweten, eds. Compiled Proceedings of the Helping Indochinese Families in Transition Conference. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska. 1986 Food Habits of Vietnamese Immigrants. *Family Economics Review* 2: 2-6.

Van Esterik, Penny 1980 Cultural Factors Affecting the Adjustment of Southeast Asian Refugees. In: E. Tepper, ed. *Southeast Asian Exodus: From Tradition to Resettlement*. pp 151-172. Ottawa: The Canadian Asian Studies Association.

Wurfel, David 1980 Indochina: The Historical and Political Background. In: E. Tepper, ed. *Southeast Asian Exodus: From Tradition to Resettlement*. pp 97-114. Ottawa: The Canadian Asian Studies Association.

Wilson, Christine 1977 Research Methods in Nutritional Anthropology: Approaches and Techniques. In: T. Fitzgerald, ed. *Nutrition and Anthropology in Action*. pp 62-68. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, Assen.