



Community

Location:
Northern
California
(San Francisco
Bay Area)



Iu Mien Overarching Community Goal:



Create a sense of shared community
and cultural identity

Byproducts of Overarching Goal:



Cultural center
and temple
created



Information is
shared directly
between leaders
and families



Peer-to-peer
social networks
created



Education for
youth is more
emphasized

Peer-Driven Change in the San Francisco Bay Area's Iu Mien Community

How refugees from Laos, isolated and struggling to adapt to their new homeland, rekindled their traditions and rebuilt a sense of community in California.

Community Context

The Iu Mien people, originally from the southern part of China, migrated into northern Laos and Thailand from the 19th to the 20th centuries, where their livelihoods depended on farming.¹ During the Vietnam War, the United States contracted with Iu Mien villagers to provide the US military with surveillance and armed manpower in Laos. When the war ended in 1975 and the Pathet Lao communist forces were victorious, entire Iu Mien villages packed up overnight and fled to US-funded refugee camps in Thailand.

“We had nine boats to cross the [Mekong] river, each held about 40 people,” recalled Kao Chiem Saechao, who was 17 years old at the time. “About 40 people couldn’t make it to the boats. Many were killed.”

¹ *Moving Mountains*, documentary film by Elaine Velaquez, 1989.

Between 1976 and 1995, 40,000 Lu Mien refugees resettled in the United States, with 5,000 settling in the San Francisco Bay Area and others moving into such Northern California cities as Sacramento. As with many refugee communities, integration was difficult, especially at first. Adults typically had limited English proficiency and struggled to find jobs. In 1987, an estimated 71 percent of the Lu Mien population in Sacramento was on some form of public assistance.²

In Laos, Lu Mien had been accustomed to living in clans of 20 or so related families that supported each other. But as they grappled with building new lives in the United States, their social ties began to unravel. “Many of [the elders] thought that because they didn’t speak English, they have no life, no value in society,” recalled Kouichoy Saechao, who was among the first Lu Mien refugees to arrive in the Bay Area.

Previously, parents had been the undisputed heads of their households; they navigated tough living conditions and bravely led their families out of Laos. But once in the United States, their children integrated more quickly, which flipped the power dynamic in many families. Some young people dismissed the older generation for not understanding “how things work” in America. They lost touch with the Lu Mien part of their identity. Many young men, seeking a sense of belonging, joined violent street gangs.

Peer-Driven Change: Origins & Evolution

The Lu Mien’s connective social structure eroded when they arrived in the United States, but they sustained a strong sense of leadership. Many of the village leaders—or their children—retained a high degree of trust within the Lu Mien refugee community. For example, elders asked Kao Chiem, who was only in his early twenties at that point, to take on a leadership role. Because his father had been a respected leader in Laos, people trusted Kao Chiem. The foundation of trust, combined with an ability to understand the community’s needs, enabled Kao Chiem, Kouichoy, and other informal leaders to step up and begin to bring the community together.

Additionally, because these informal leaders were positive role models in the community—both Kao Chiem and Kouichoy had obtained full-time jobs—others saw that it was possible to attain similar outcomes for their families.

Kao Chiem, Kouichoy, and others began to help the community re-weave its social fabric by identifying Lu Mien families in the Bay Area, connecting with them personally, and organizing transportation for families to meet. The meetings’ purpose was to discuss the community’s challenges—at the time, addressing gang violence was an especially urgent topic. But they were also searching for something deeper—a sense of shared community, which they had left behind in Laos. “We lost everything, not only our country, we lost our souls, too,” said Kouichoy.

The most valuable outcome from these conversations: the relationships that were formed. As more Lu Mien families began to connect, they felt less isolated and better prepared to support

² Jeffrey L. MacDonald, *Transnational Aspects of Lu-Mien Refugee Identity (Studies in Asian Americans Series)*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1997).

one another. In this way, mutuality—one of peer-driven change’s key features—began to reassert itself among the lu Mien.

Building from the structures that supported lu Mien clans in Laos and Thailand, leaders helped create a mutual support system consisting of eight Bay Area “districts” of 50 to 80 families. In each district, which included families in Bay Area communities such as East Oakland and Richmond, a few leaders were nominated to a Board of Directors, to represent all of the Bay Area’s lu Mien. The Board served as a communication hub for people to share information, advice, and other supports that benefitted lu Mien families. The overriding goal was to collectively advance life-enhancement efforts of the people’s own choosing. In this way, another of peer-driven change’s features—initiative and self-determination—came into play.

Believing that a revitalized culture might connect their fractured community and give young people the confidence to pursue their dreams, lu Mien peers determined that they would build a cultural center and temple, where scattered families could gather and rekindle their



To revitalize their culture and instill a sense of pride among their young people, lu Mien families identified a shared goal—to build a cultural center and temple in East Oakland—and collectively raised \$500,000 to bring the center and temple to life. (Photo Credit: Bill Breen)

traditions. “We wanted people to feel like the [cultural center] belongs to them,” Kao Chiem recalled. “We wanted everyone to value themselves.” In 1982, they established the Lao Lu Mien Culture Association (LIMCA), a 501c3 nonprofit, and set about raising money to bring the Lu Mien Culture Center and King Pan Temple to life.

Lu Mien peers then harnessed the third feature of peer-driven change, financial capital. They obtained some philanthropic seed funding—grants that ranged up to the low five figures—from sources including the San Francisco Foundation, the California Endowment, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The cost of purchasing the land and building the cultural center and temple totaled \$1.4 million; \$500,000 came from the Lu Mien community, often from families with scant resources.

Peer-Driven Change’s Inner Workings

Although the twin challenges of high unemployment and escalating gang violence spurred Lu Mien leaders to help families connect, their goal was not to bring people together to directly address those two problems. Rather, they aimed to build mutuality and a shared sense of cultural identity, believing that positive social benefits would follow.

The Lu Mien’s all-volunteer Board of Directors, along with the eight Bay Area districts of 50 to 80 families, essentially comprised a lattice-like social network of peer-to-peer connections. Unlike the top down, ladder-like hierarchies that typify many social impact efforts, the Lu Mien’s latticed network allowed information to flow in all directions—across families, districts, and the Board itself. In this way, leaders and families could directly share information—ranging from parenting advice to plans for building the cultural center—throughout the wider community, unfiltered by an outside intermediary.³

People also used the network to share job opportunities with their peers. For example, women who obtained jobs as nannies for families in the East Bay passed on referrals and advice to women who were out of work. A number of Lu Mien women were able to find and sustain employment through this mutual support system.

These peer-to-peer social networks gave young people access to positive deviants—role models who were finding ways to break through the barriers that held others back. For example, although most women were expected to marry in their teens and focus on raising a family, Muang Choy Saephan succeeded in obtaining a college education, earning a master’s degree, and becoming a medical social worker. In this way, she helped pioneer a pathway for other Lu Mien women to follow.

Young men also benefitted from role models who found ways to succeed, even as others continued to struggle. When he was a boy, Sheng Saechao discovered a role model who showed him there were pathways to a more promising life—his youth baseball coach, who held a professional job. “He was the first [Lu Mien] I knew who spoke English proficiently,” recalled Sheng, who today works in the tech sector. “That was empowering.”

³ This description of the Lu Mien’s social network is drawn from Bridgespan interviews and a report by Hanmin Liu, “[Making Visible the Invisible Power of Community](#),” Wildflowers Institute, December 2009.

Their social networks also helped the Lu Mien maintain a high degree of autonomy over their biggest collective effort: building their cultural center and temple. They rejected grants that would have necessitated a shift in their priorities and they accepted only unrestricted funding. This was by design: by only allowing for no-strings-attached grants and by raising most of the funding from their community, Lu Mien leaders retained control over the decision making. Thus, the community was in a far better position to lead their own change, which was crucial for realizing their overall goal of rebuilding a sense of pride in the community. “If you get money from the outside, [the center] doesn’t really belong to the community,” Kao Chiem reasoned.

Nevertheless, especially in the years following the Lu Mien’s arrival in California, both the government and civic organizations provided critical supports. Both Sheng’s and Muang’s families received welfare benefits and food stamps during their first few years in the United States. There were also programs that provided English-language instruction and vocational training for adults, such as Santa Clara County’s [Tribal Lao Training Project](#). Additionally, [EBAYC](#) provided programs for at-risk youth, such as a baseball league, which gave young men an opportunity to connect with coaches who could be role models. These supports helped provide an important bridge for families, as they sought to adjust to life in the United States.

Progress & Results

With much of the funding coming from the community, the Lu Mien built the cultural center and King Pan Temple in East Oakland, one of only three Lu Mien temples in the world. They also reestablished traditions, such as the annual King Pan festival, which attracts Lu Mien from all over the country. Families also pitched in to establish a scholarship fund for high school seniors. The \$1,000 scholarships are modest, given the overall cost of college tuition, but they signal to young Lu Mien that higher education is within their reach and that the broader community supports them.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Lu Mien youth had the second-highest incarceration rate of any ethnic group in California, according to a [report by the Wildflowers Institute](#), a San Francisco nonprofit. However, interventions by Lu Mien leaders and extended family members persuaded some young men to leave their gangs—another example of peers coming together and supporting each other. Younger Lu Mien parents were also able to intercede and prevent their children from joining gangs. Those who remained in gangs eventually aged out of them and today, gangs are far less prominent in the Lu Mien community.



Inside the courtyard of the Lu Mien Cultural Center.
(Photo Credit: Bill Breen)

By seeing the opportunities that came to people who attained a higher education, such as Muang and Sheng, elders began to emphasize education for the community's youth. Today, college is more of an expectation for Lu Mien youth, rather than an exception for a lucky few. "The first generation didn't grow up in an academic world and so they really didn't understand the concept of school," said Muang. "Now with this younger generation, there is a pretty good number of young men and women going off to college."

The community still faces challenges—the lack of English proficiency among older Lu Mien still inhibits their employment prospects; some among the wider community struggle with addictions (gambling as well as alcohol and drugs) and health issues including diabetes and hypertension. However, as college attendance has risen, so has the number of Lu Mien who are building durable pathways to professional careers.

Key Insights

Role models matter.

The Lu Mien's positive deviants—people who found solutions to common challenges and set tangible, doable examples for their peers—proved it was possible for other Lu Mien to pioneer new livelihoods in their adopted homeland, despite the daunting obstacles. Kao Chiem and Kouichoy modeled pathways to build careers; Muang demonstrated to other young women that even though they came from a patriarchal culture, higher education and rewarding work were attainable.

As cousins and friends followed the role models' footsteps, they knit together networks where peers exchanged techniques and tips for getting ahead. When peers act as role models for what is possible, other peers can follow their lead—and their efforts compound.

Seed capital is vital, but not at the cost of peers relinquishing control.

The modest grants that LIMCA received from the California Endowment and other funders helped catalyze the campaign to build the cultural center and temple. However, LIMCA's leaders understood that if peers could direct the effort and lead their own change, they would likely get a better outcome.

Raising much of the funding from the Lu Mien community, which didn't have a lot to give, was enormously challenging. But it gave people the opportunity to opt into something of their own choosing—something that was a little larger than themselves. The result—a restored sense of pride in Lu Mien culture—underlines the power of one peer-driven change's key features, initiative and self-determination. Peers owned their solutions.

Mutuality exists in all communities, even if it is sometimes latent.

Although many Lu Mien experienced deep dislocation and isolation when they first arrived in the Bay Area, the possibility that families would pull together and support each other bubbled just beneath the surface. The social structure that had sustained them in Laos—the village clans of twenty-something families, with a shaman and a chief as leaders—could be replicated across Lu Mien communities in Richmond, Oakland, and elsewhere.

Additionally, there were Lu Mien leaders who still retained a high degree of trust, the glue that binds mutually supportive peer groups. These two factors—trust and a cohesive, preexisting social structure—might well have helped mutuality reemerge and peer-driven change begin to grow. Moreover, social cohesion seemed to lead to improved outcomes. The power of people connecting and sharing good ideas helped the Lu Mien at least make some progress against the challenges they encountered, as they worked to build new lives far from their homeland.

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