

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People Man balks at letting his two wives leave

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Lue Yang has a luminous smile, but it's not out tonight.

She closes up her sewing shop, then trudges home in the twilight, her face as hard as the nearby limestone hills.

"Eighteen years I've been married to him, sewing pa ndao, pushing water up the hill in a cart, while he always wanders around, drinking, doing nothing to help the family," she says. "The only word he says is 'no.' "

Yang is talking about her husband, Sou Thao. All 50 members of his extended family desperately want to go to America - including his parents, his nine children and his two wives - but Thao refuses.

It's not that he yearns to return to Laos, like other holdouts in the squatters camp. Thao considers Thailand his home and he has one other issue: he's married to two women. "I would like to keep both wives," said Thao, 38. "According to Hmong traditional marriage, no matter how many wives I have, they have to do what I say."

That frees Thao to do as he pleases, often carousing late into the night, while his wives pay his bills and follow his orders.

Yang, 32, became Thao's second wife when she was 14. She and his first wife, Nou Xiong, 37, are more than business partners and co-mothers of nine kids - they're co-conspirators scheming to get out of this dismal squatters camp, with or without their husband's permission.

"This life is nothing but suffering," wails Xiong, perched on a bamboo stool at the entrance to their hut, her face blotched from crying. "The most important thing is taking my children to America for a better education."

Every day, Xiong calls her sister in Sacramento and her brother in Wisconsin. "The only thing on my mind is going."

"We'd like to be in the same place, helping each other - we're like sisters," adds Yang as she rocks Xiong's 6-month-old granddaughter on her lap.

Roughly 1,000 men in the temple camp have two or more wives, a legacy of the Vietnam War era, when 30,000 Hmong men died. Hmong leaders took second and third wives, including the widows of their slain brothers.

The State Department says the Hmong can take only one wife to America; other wives can apply to go on their own.

That restriction doesn't sit well with Hmong men such as Wa Lor Vang, who lost an eye in the secret war.

"When the U.S. recruited us to fight, they didn't ask how many wives we had," he grumbles.

His first wife will be his official traveling companion, he says, "but my second wife and my six sons will come, too."

Thao doesn't intend to give up either wife - or the supremacy he enjoys over his family.

"They're all under my control," he says.

In America, he believes he'd be under their control, based on rumors he's heard about laws forcing men to support their families.

Thao's parents have tried to change his mind, to no avail.

"I told him, 'Take your family to America - if you don't like it, come back,' but he doesn't listen to anybody," says his mom.

Relatives in California, Wisconsin and Minnesota have tried to get Thao to listen to reason. Thao's cousin in St. Paul, Minn., Pang Mang Thao, has begged him to at least let his wives and kids come.

"I told him, 'Your kids have to grow up and have an education,' " said Pang Mang Thao. "I sent him two cassettes telling him a lot of good things about America. He called me and said he's not going to listen to them."

Nothing seems to help.

"Sometimes my family calls me a dummy who's run out of brains," Sou Thao says. "I know they will be happy there; they will have a much better life." But, he says, "Everything is up to me."

One night, Xiong threatens to kill herself if she isn't allowed to go, then runs to her clan leaders and begs them to intercede. They defer to her husband's clan leader, Soua Leng Thao.

Soua Leng Thao, 74, is famous for his handlebar moustache and his skill as a shaman, or spirit healer. He says he's busy solving marital disputes every day - "poverty makes people testy."

He tells Sou Thao's wives, "Be patient - he'll change his mind when everyone else is gone."

But Yang is not convinced. In her high-pitched voice, she says later, "We know exactly what's going on: The shaman wants us to stay with him until we run out of time." Thai officials plan to close the camp by early next year, and the fate of those left behind hasn't been decided.

The next afternoon, Thao turns up at his wives' sewing shop. He takes a seat and summons a wife on either side.

"No matter what, I will never change my mind," he calmly announces.

"I've got to go!" screams Lue Yang. "I'm happy to pay for a third wife - a lady as beautiful as me."

Nou Xiong says she's going for her interview at the camp refugee processing center anyway.

"No!" Thao says. "I'll get violent if you go behind my back."

In June, Xiong says, Thao trashed the wives' sewing shop and pulled her hair for going to the processing center with their children. After she complained to the Thai military, she said the soldiers kept him in the barracks for several weeks.

Thao could not be reached for comment. U.S. State Department officials would say only that a man about Thao's age had been detained by the Thai military for two weeks until he cooled off and promised not to harm his wives.

On Aug. 11, Xiong told her husband that she and their eight children were leaving for Sacramento the following day to rejoin her only sibling, her older sister.

Xiong said Thao replied, "I give up." He told her he was ready to go to Minnesota with second wife Yang.

In her sister's living room in south Sacramento - where the family is sleeping on the floor until they find their own place - Xiong was all smiles over her new life, and her new-found freedom.

She's spoken to her husband twice since she arrived, she said, and he tells her he misses her a lot. "He said after he goes to Minnesota, he will come down here to get us," Xiong said. "But I'm not too sure if I should go or not."

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee / Manny Crisostomo
Sou Thao, 38, center, doesn't want to leave Thailand and has demanded his two wives stay also. At right is Lue Yang, and at left is first wife Nou Xiong. The wives have schemed to get out of the squatters camp. Thao has summoned his wives to their sewing job to tell them he won't let them go. "Eighteen years I've been married to him, sewing pa ndao ... while he always wanders around, drinking, doing nothing to help the family," Yang says. "The only word he says is 'no.' "

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