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Resiliency and Self-Sustainability of the Lao Iu Mien Community

This paper summarizes what we have learned about resiliency and self-sustainability from the Lao Iu Mien community in the San Francisco Bay Area. We have been learning from members of this diaspora about how they self-organized and came together for less than a decade. We have come to see the power of collective will and action as they form their community in the face of daunting social challenges. There are leaders in the informal sector working together toward shared purposes and with commitments to ongoing improvements. The combined efforts and activities of many people are resulting in a social connectedness that is improving community well-being. It has been a tremendous privilege for us to witness the inner workings of the Iu Mien community, and we are very humbled by what they have carried out and achieved in America.

The Iu Mien people migrated for two thousand years within China and then to Southeast Asia before settling in the United States. They are deeply spiritual people and have self-organized into village structures and family clans. Through their migration experiences, moving from one remote place to another, they developed a way to maintain their cultural values and spiritual beliefs while adjusting to their new environments. In the last century, they have lived in Southeast Asia and later on to the highlands of Laos.

While village life in the Laotian highlands was based on subsistence farming firsthand reports from Iu Mien diaspora and documentation¹ from a U.S. government operations agent indicated that the social quality of life was quite good. A grand priest or shaman was one of the main leaders who worked closely with others to ensure that the needs and aspirations of their members were adequately addressed. By and large, people got along and helped one another.

1. William W. Sage Collection, Special Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe.

In the 1960s, the Lao Iu Mien people collaborated with the United States during the Vietnam War. When the Americans lost the war in the mid-1970s, the Iu Mien were forced to leave their homeland. President Ronald Reagan under his parole authority transferred the Lao Iu Mien population from refugee camps in Thailand to the United States. On the day the Iu Mien arrived in America in the early 1980s, a new chapter began for this ethnic population.

Five thousand Iu Mien refugees arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area and were scattered all over in marginalized communities. During their first decade in America, they experienced a breakdown of their traditional family and village structures. Some of their youth formed their own gang, Sons of Death, to survive in tough neighborhoods. Other youths dropped out of school. Almost all of the Iu Mien families were isolated from one another. And they began to leave behind their Taoist and Buddhist religion.

Wildflowers Institute was introduced to this community when it was organizing Studies 2000, a three-day educational program for local, regional, and national funders. The institute's mission is to design methods and tools to catalyze the innate power in communities. We were asked to apply our approach to helping funders learn more about the resources and challenges of Asian communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Over the course of a year, Wildflowers carried out an extensive literature review, held interviews with academic experts in the field and with heads of community-based organizations, and initiated a series of site visits to learn firsthand about this community and others in the area.

The institute sought many different points of view on the strengths and social challenges of the community and benefited greatly from existing bodies of knowledge and sources of information. But one aspect of community that we could not find was a description and analysis of the strategy that grassroots leaders used to bring their people together. We wanted to know who were the people in leadership, what was their formation, and what are the underlying premises or postulates that everyone holds and that unite different people in the community. We also wanted to learn about this strategy from the community's point of view. This focus required that we have a process that transcended language differences and that illuminated cultural patterns. Our point of view was that our

process would be as beneficial to the community as it was to us. Holding this perspective would build trust between the institute and the community and would also build community confidence in our work.

First, we developed a process for identifying the leaders in the informal sector of the community. We realized that it was this sector and not the institutions where indigenous leaders did the majority of their work. Through introductions from different heads of Asian community-based organizations, we started to meet with their contacts in the Iu Mien community. We met with groups of people in their own setting to gain a better understanding not only because there were different perspectives and experiences in the room, but also because, and perhaps even more important, we could see the social and power dynamics of the group played out in real time. We made a point, for example, to observe how people acknowledged one another informally before the meeting, and we watched where the eyes went in the room when difficult questions were raised and topics were discussed. We made note of individuals whom others deferred to, and as we identified such people, we observed their relationships among one another during and after the meetings. We also made note of the same individuals showing up at different occasions.

Over several meetings, we began to discern the individuals of the community whom others go to for help, advice, and direction. We identified such individuals as informal core leaders. They work closely and collectively to establish a leadership formation that is the backbone of the community. They initiate activities that strengthen certain core values such as intergenerational and extended families, a spiritual way of life, and self-sustainability. They generally do not work for nonprofit community-based organizations and are not paid to do community work. But they are available 24/7. Such individuals are modest, humble, and helpful to others. They do not seek media attention and political positions. Their cooperation transcends organizational and political boundaries. By virtue of their moral actions for decades in the community, they have demonstrated their credibility and thus hold considerable authority and power.

Second, we met with several core leaders of the Iu Mien community, explained our purpose, and invited them to participate in a focus group and to help us organize group

sessions with other stakeholders. We introduced to them Wildflowers Model-building, an interactive tool that enables community members to clarify differences, identify shared goals, and develop culturally authentic action agendas. (We have carried out Model-building sessions in different countries for over a decade, and one of the powers of this tool is that it surfaces deeply held premises that form the social fabric of the community.)

At the invitation of the Iu Mien leaders, Wildflowers uses Model-building to enable members of the community to make their beliefs and priorities clear, to see where they have common ground, and to create a shared vision of the future and a framework for action. Model-building is a four-phase process in which participants build three-dimensional models using blocks and figures, such as cars, trees, animals, and people of different races, ages, genders, and cultures.

Phase One. All participants construct a model of the community and their life in it, enabling them to express the realities they face. Participants describe their models, what is important to them in the community, and what they would like to see in the future.

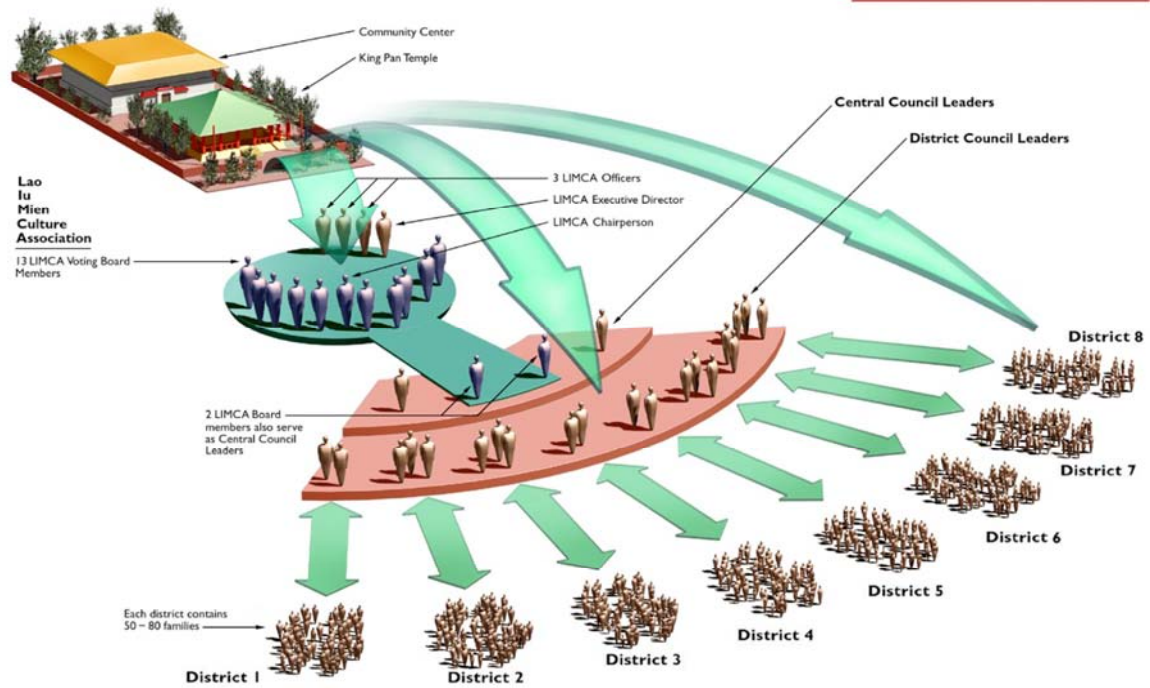
Phase Two. Groups of different stakeholders—youth, women, elders, and others—construct models of the community’s strengths and challenges. By surfacing similarities, this process helps to uncover core values and cultural traditions, identify key organizations and local leaders, and inform a shared understanding of the community.

Phase Three. The entire group builds a single model that brings together the different stakeholders, activities, and organizations around core values and cultural traditions to create a common vision and provide a framework for collective action.

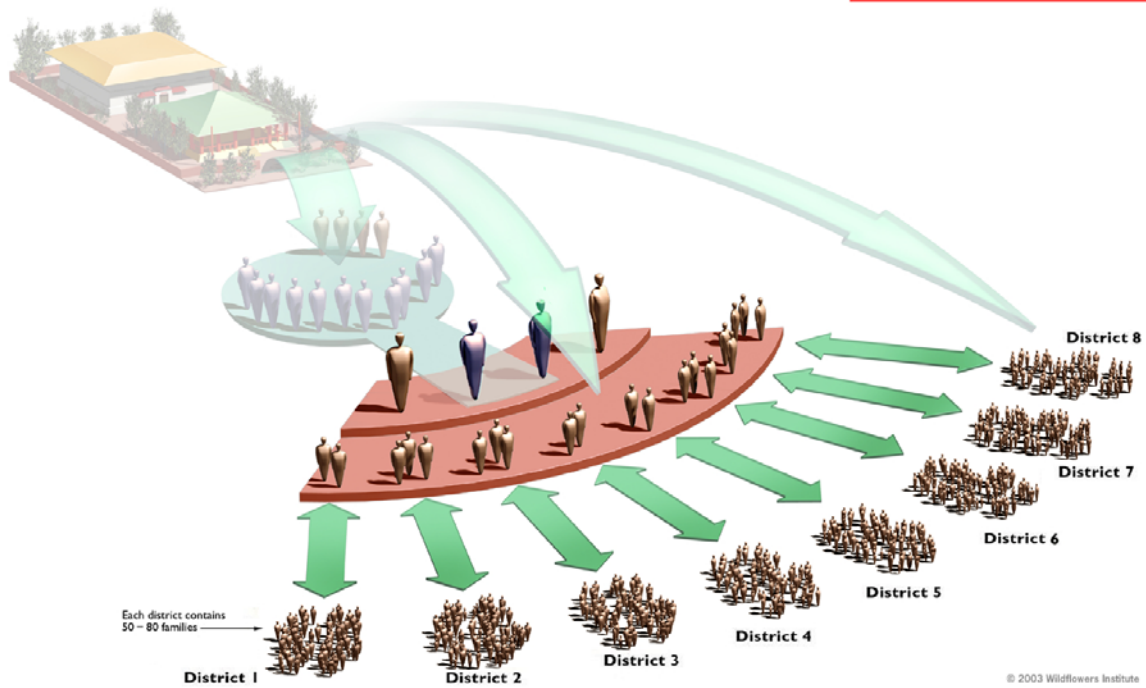
Phase Four. Networks of key groups—cultural, council members, and spiritual leaders—build models of how the overall community vision and culture will inform their future work and how they will go about realizing it.

Third, we documented all of the Wildflowers Model-building sessions by video camera and a digital still camera. This documentation provides us with a chronological record of the models of community that different stakeholders have created. We videotaped the actual models themselves and the presentations made by individuals, small groups, and whole group describing their models. And we took digital images of the salient elements of the model, depicting various activities and social spaces in the community. During the development of group models, we also took digital snapshots of the group's decision-making process. We look for individuals whom other defer to, for how they made decisions among one another, for those who worked alone. We took photos of individuals building different aspects of the group model. Reviewing images of the group process, various aspects of models, and group meetings helped us further identify the informal leaders, core values, and social spaces in the community.

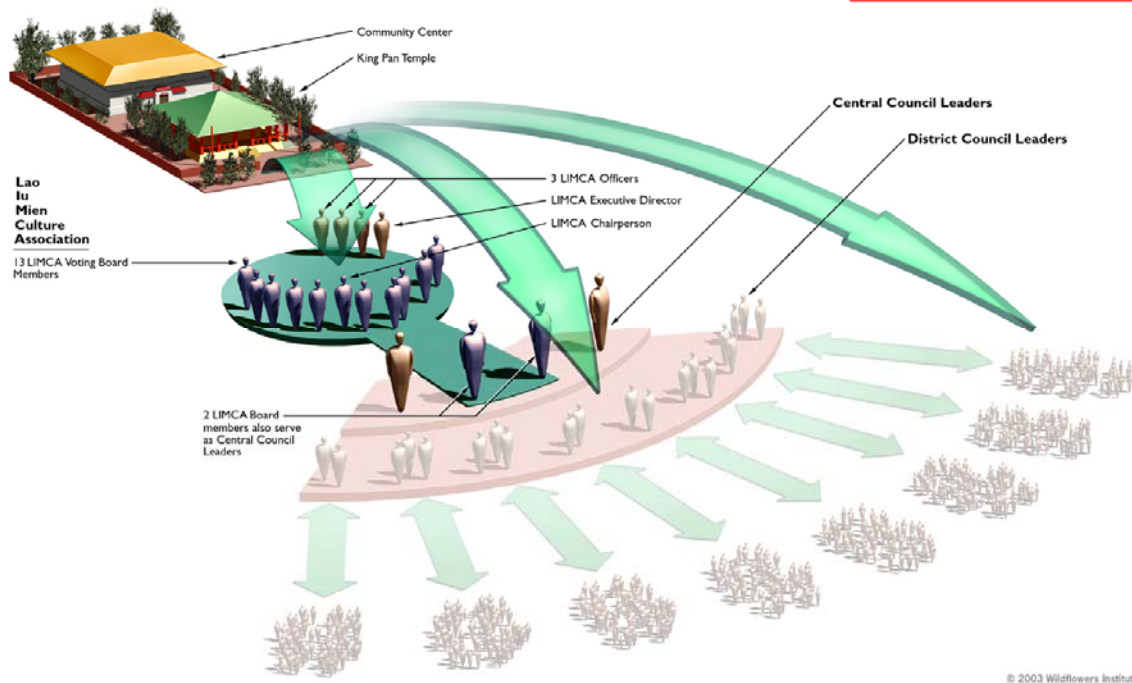
Through this methodology, we came to see and understand the innate power of the Lao Iu Mien community. We learned that a group composed of Iu Mien elders, the grand priest, and community leaders took it upon themselves to develop a strategy—rooted in their culture—that helped individuals and families to adapt to local environments while maintaining and strengthening their identity. These core leaders began to bring families together to discuss what they had in common and what were their shared challenges—language, poverty, social and cultural adaptation, gangs, school dropouts, and so on. From these early discussions, strategies emerged that focused not on addressing each of the social problems but instead on the efforts to build their entire community.



The Model-building sessions with these core leaders revealed their framework of community, the leadership formation, and strategies of the Iu Mien community. The illustration above reflects the overarching strategy. The center of the illustration shows the Lao Iu Mien Culture Association, which serves as the central organ of the community with the Board of Directors representing the major stakeholders. It is this central group that provides clarity, guidance, and direction. LIMCA also serves as an interface between people and institutions inside and outside the community. The lower portion of the rendering represents the eight districts and two leadership groups—district council and central council. The upper portion of the illustration shows the community center and the King Pan Temple. And the three green arrows reflect engagement in the community and the relationships with the board of the Lao Iu Mien Culture Association and with the council members.



This illustration above shows the district leadership formation of the community, with eight districts, district council leaders, and central council leaders. The core leaders that started the Lao Iu Mien Culture Association (LIMCA) in the early 1980s came up with the plan of having eight districts in the San Francisco Bay Area that reflected the social networks of families living in the villages in the highlands of Laos. Most Iu Mien in the Bay Area have strong and powerful memories of their life and relationships in their village, and these memories became a centripetal force that brought families together. When Wildflowers Institute asked community members to build a model of their community in America, for example, we were surprised to see that many of them built a model that showed their dwellings and villages in the highlands of Laos. So having formed eight districts in the San Francisco Bay Area to reflect the village networks in the highlands, the LIMCA leaders introduced the idea of electing two or three district leaders to represent their district. The role of the district leaders was to resolve family conflicts within and between families, a function similar to that of the village chief in the highlands. Finally, the LIMCA leaders established a central council of four elected individuals that advised the district council leaders.



The third illustration shows the institutional formation that focused on bringing everyone together. The LIMCA leaders found a property for sale in East Oakland and raised funds from their community to acquire the land and the existing building. They held their central and district council meetings, established a spiritual space, and provided services to community elders. Outside the building, there was sufficient land to hold an annual festival, to honor their great ancestor, King Pan. Iu Mien from all over the West Coast came to celebrate this festival. Several years ago, they raised an additional two hundred fifty thousand dollars to build a new community center that now serves as a social space for Iu Mien to renew and strengthen social bonds. The women of the community, led by several highly respected individuals, also established a Taoist-Buddhist spiritual temple that was completed this year. Once again, members of the community stepped up and collectively provided over three-quarters of a million dollars for construction and acquisition of the spiritual statues in the temple.

This community strategy has been remarkably successful in bringing different groups of people together, and this in turn has led to a resiliency and a greater self-sustainability. Most of the funding for the center and temple has come from community members even though the earned family income is quite modest. While gang problems still exist,

violence has subsided, and many young people are now graduating from high school. This fact alone is a remarkable turnaround for a community that had the second highest incarceration rate of youth in California in the 1980s and 1990s. Many young people are now attending college, and some are enrolled in graduate schools. College graduates are returning to their community and working in white-collar jobs while living at home with their families. Although the U.S. Census Bureau does not track this ethnic population, the leaders of the community estimate that more than 50 percent of the family households have purchased their own homes.

The story of the Lao Iu Mien community highlights the courage and astuteness of Iu Mien leaders to bring their diaspora together. It is a story that could likely be repeated by other immigrants and indigenous diasporas as well as more heterogeneous communities. What we think should be widely shared and discussed is the following: First, the Iu Mien had an active leadership group that was involved in the overall development of the community. They were involved in such activities as the building of the temple and the implementation of the district structure. They made sure that certain values such as their spiritual practices, extended and intergenerational families, and harmony were at the core of all of these developments. They were also involved in solving difficult problems that inevitably surfaced.

Second, the members of the Lao Iu Mien community had a core of shared objectives that served as a collective voice for action. When some of the elders, grand priests, and community leaders queried Iu Mien families in the 1980s about what their concerns were, most everyone complained about isolation, breakdown of family structures and values, and unrelenting confusion. So when these leaders proposed a district structure formed out of the social and family networks in the highlands of Laos, most everyone agreed and worked with the proposal and worked toward realizing this structure.

Third, there is a commitment to ongoing improvements in the community. After acquiring the land and an old building in East Oakland in the late 1990s, the community raised additional funds to tear down the old building and build a new community center. It wasn't enough to have a sacred space in the old building that lodged sacred statues and objects; they wanted a new temple so that more people could engage in spiritual practices.

Our experiences lead us to think that resiliency and community well-being happen when an intentional process of community formation led by an active leadership group and anchored in the culture of the community exists. When there is authentic cultural leadership and collective will and action, everyone in the community will benefit. And when communities reach this stage in their development, they have the foundation for being self-sustainable.