

Moua Lia's assignment

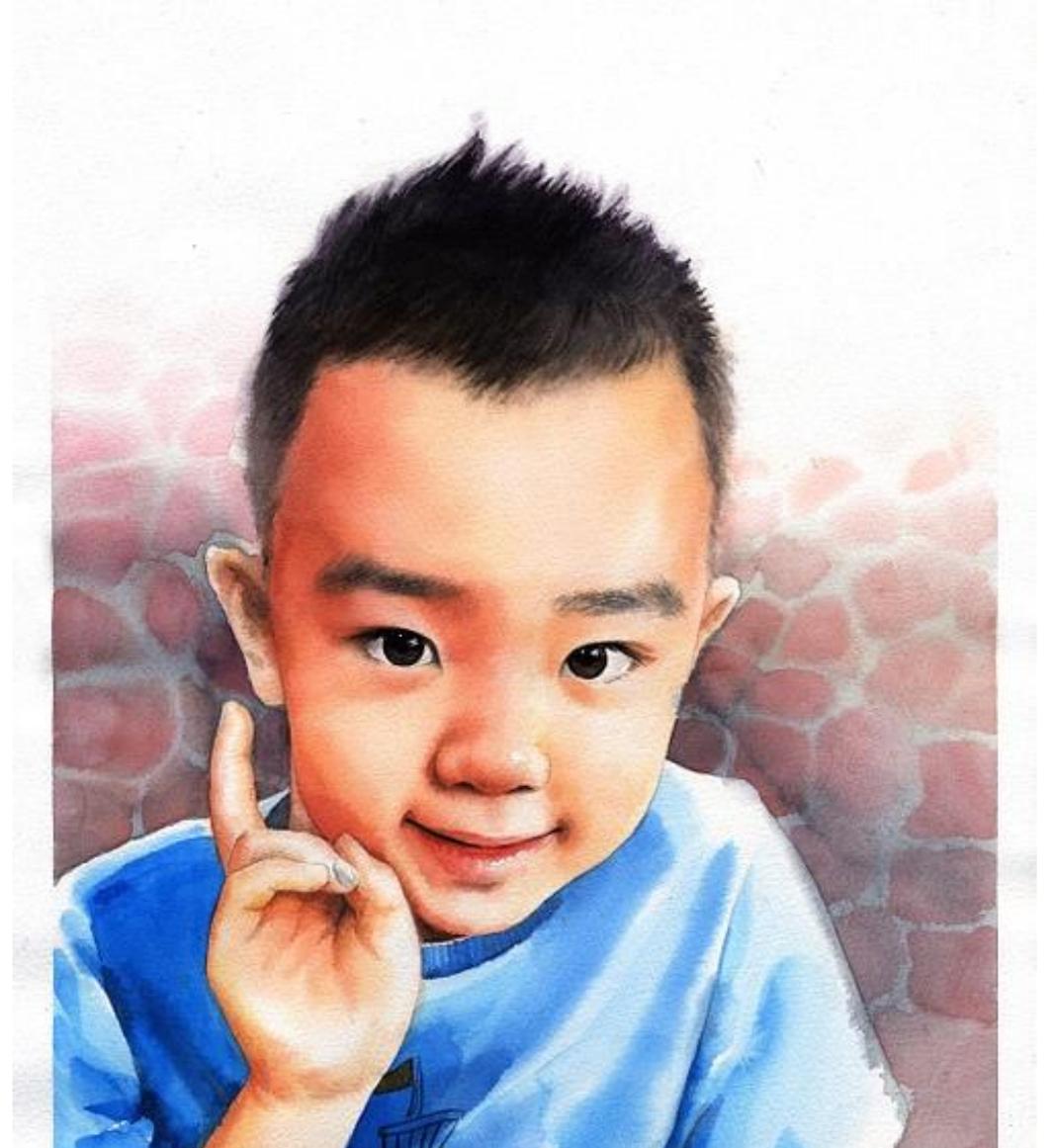
Scholarly sources:

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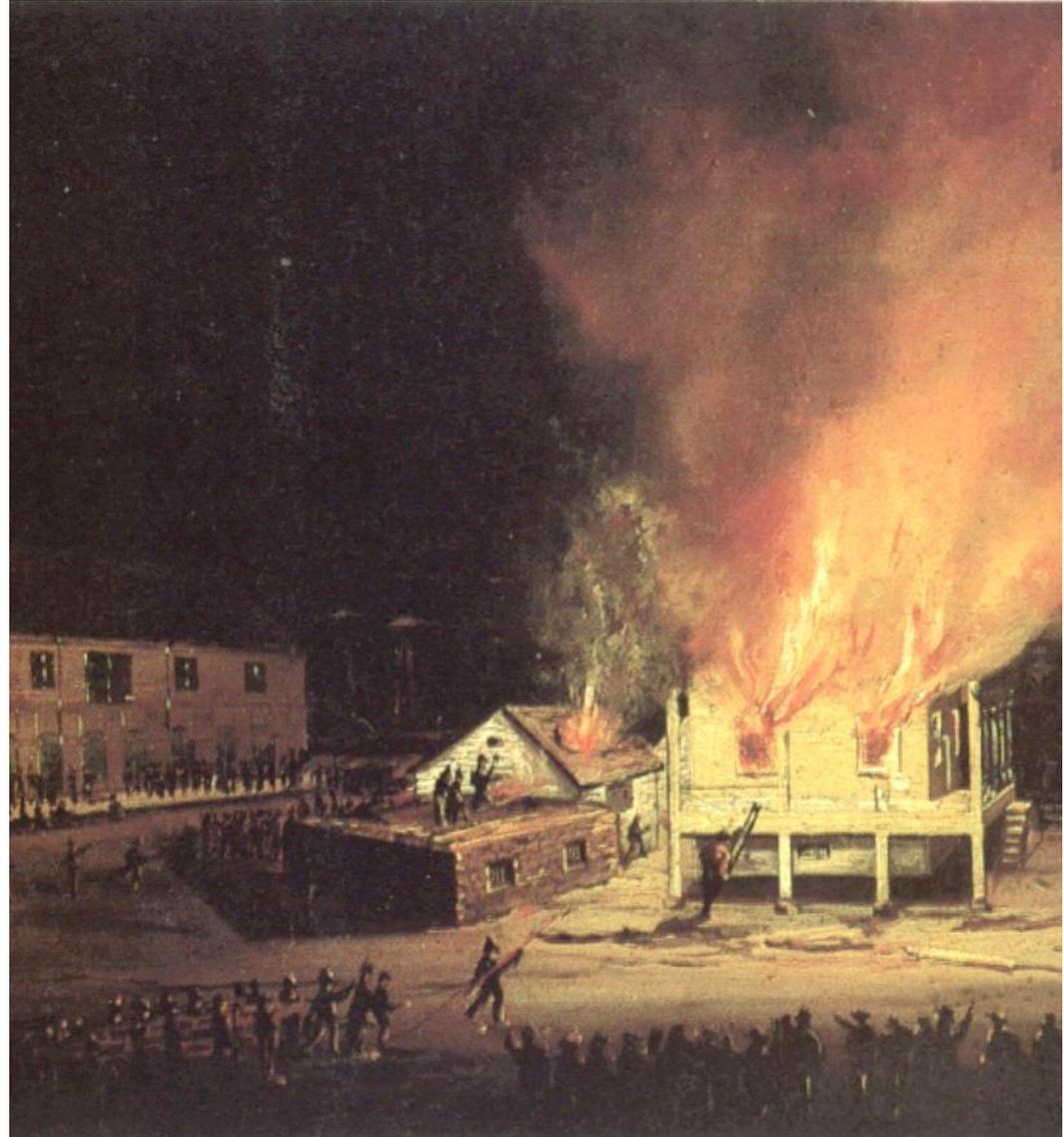
Meet Moua Lia

Moua Lia was an eight-year-old Hmong boy living in a refugee camp in Thailand in 1978. He'd come from Laos.



He and his people had run away when the Communists took over their lands at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The communist soldiers burned and massacred whole villages.

The Communists had tried to kill all the Hmong at that time. This was because many Hmong had backed the United States against the Communists in the war.



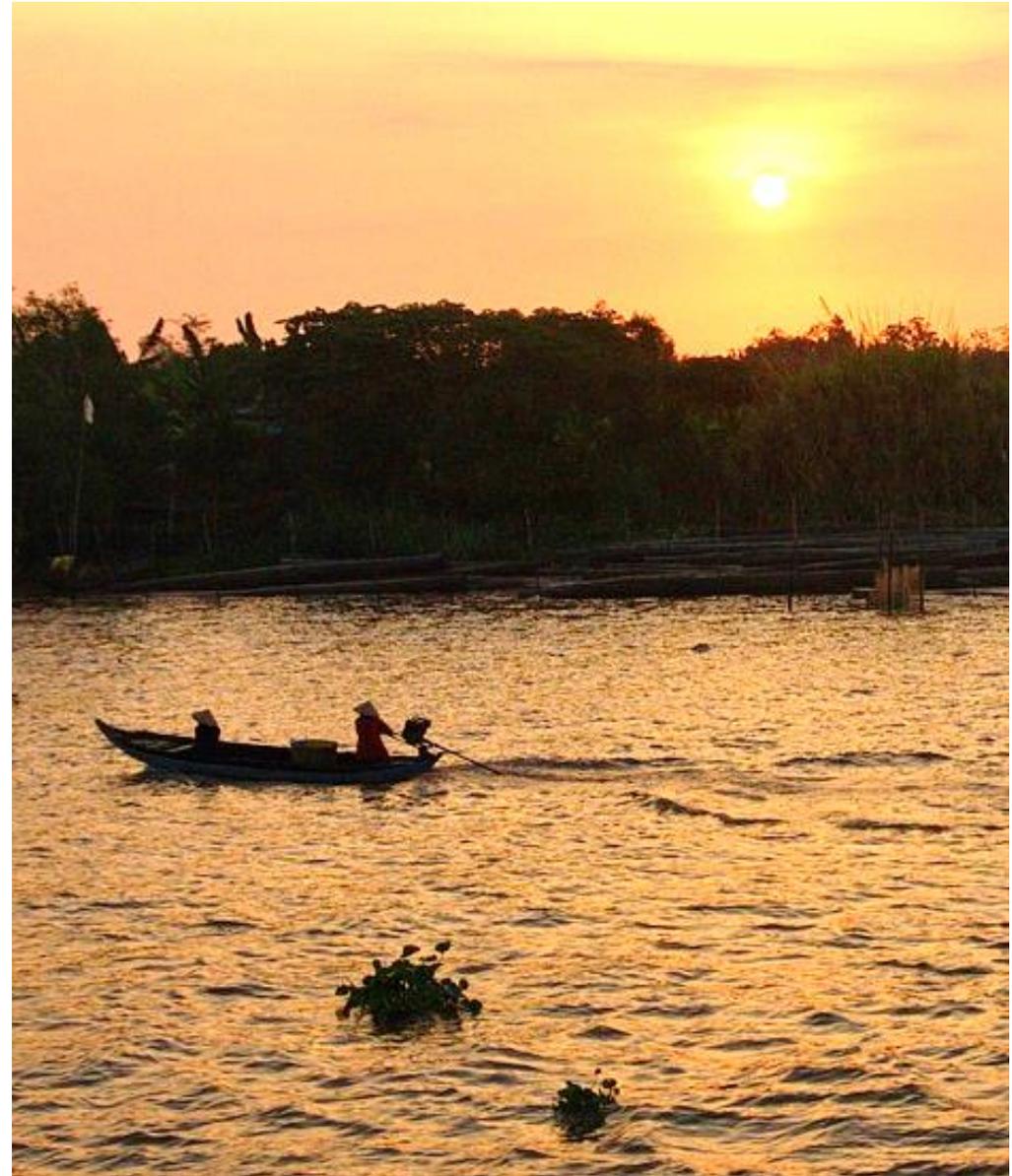
Their flight had been tragic. Moua Lia's family ran for the Mekong River with thousands of people from their villages. The Mekong was the border between the countries of Laos and Thailand.

Here is the map where you can see the Mekong River. Look for Laos where the Hmong had lived and Thailand where they were trying to get to the refugee camps. To the east is Vietnam where the war was started.



After coming close to the Mekong River, many died before they got across.

Moua Lia's father, grandfather, grandmother, uncles, aunts, and five older brothers died trying to make it across the river to Thailand.



In the refugee camp, Moua Lia still had his mother and baby brother with him.



He also had his two sisters.



And a great grandfather
from his father's side of the
family.



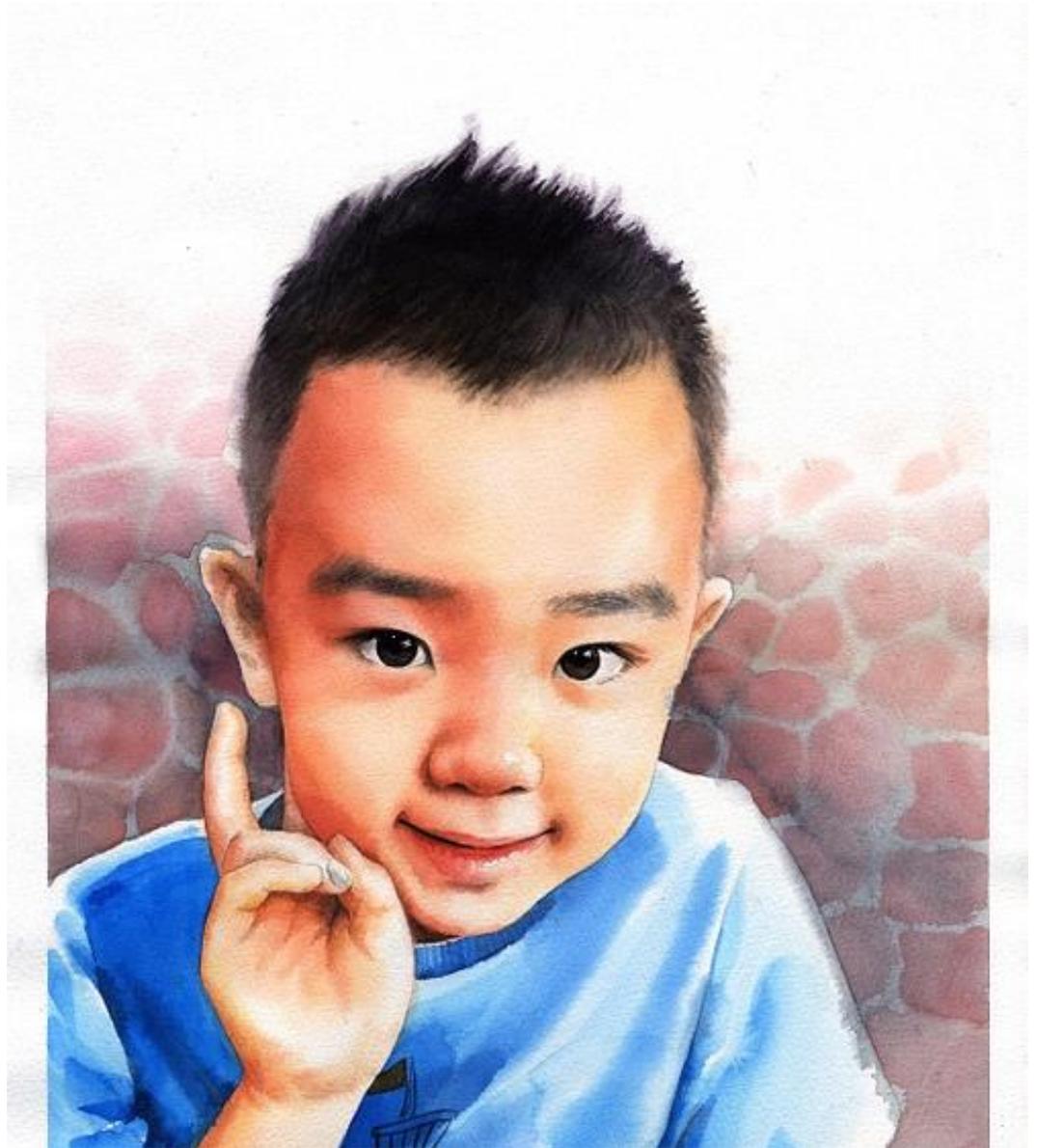
Moua Lia's assignment

It was Moua Lia's great grandfather, Yang Kai, who gave him his assignment.

He had come to Moua Lia with these words: "My dear grandson. You are the oldest male left in your mother's family. You must now take on the responsibility of a man. We wait here at this camp in the hope that we may get the order one day to go to America even though we know nothing about life in this America. Are you ready to do something for your family?"



"Oh yes," responded little Moua Lia, with his finger in the air. "If I am to be a man, I will take on whatever responsibility you give me."



Old Yang Kai explained: "As much as we need to be rescued by these Americans, we also run the risk of losing our entire history. We must record this now before all of the elders are gone. We have to tell the story of where we came from and where we went."

"But so few of us know how to read or write," argued Moua Lia. "How can we record any history?"



"Ah," sighed the old man. "This is where the elders of our clan have come up with a solution. You see how the camp gives us new clothes and then we throw away all the old ragged ones?"

Moua Lia nodded.

"Well, this is what we will do. The men, like you, must cut those rags into little figures like people or trees or houses, and our women—who have stitched our beautiful new year's outfits for generations (see right)—can sew these onto quilts. They will be arranged in ways that tell many stories of our past. We elders will recite these stories as they have been handed down from our ancestors."

Moua Lia liked this idea very much.



The first story cloth

The following day many camp elders of Moua Lia's clan began to lead groups of young men in the recording of Hmong history. They talked about the earliest stories of life in China, when they struggled to keep their traditions while being persecuted.

"The Hmong fought the Chinese with cross bows," said one elder proudly. "They lured whole units of Chinese soldiers into gorges and then rolled rocks on them. The Hmong fighters were feared everywhere."

That day, Moua Lia and the young men traced outlines of rocks and little warriors on the fabric and cut these out.



"And over 100 years ago," continued another elder the next day, "the Chinese empire lost a major war to the British. To pay the British, they taxed the poor, especially us—the Hmong. We rebelled, but in the end, we lost.

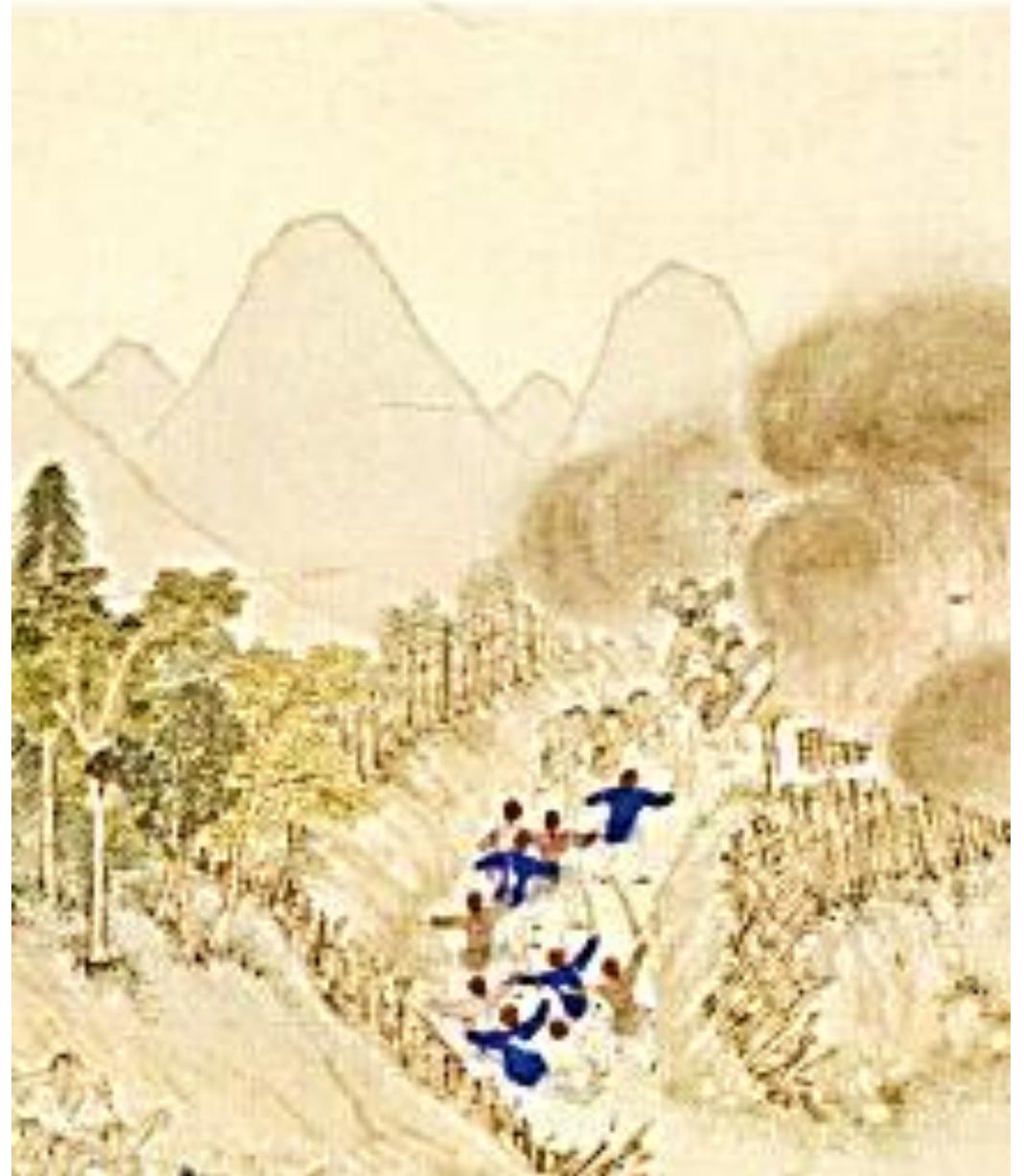
"The Hmong had to leave their homes. This time many of us left China for good."

The women began to gather the cut-out figures from the men.



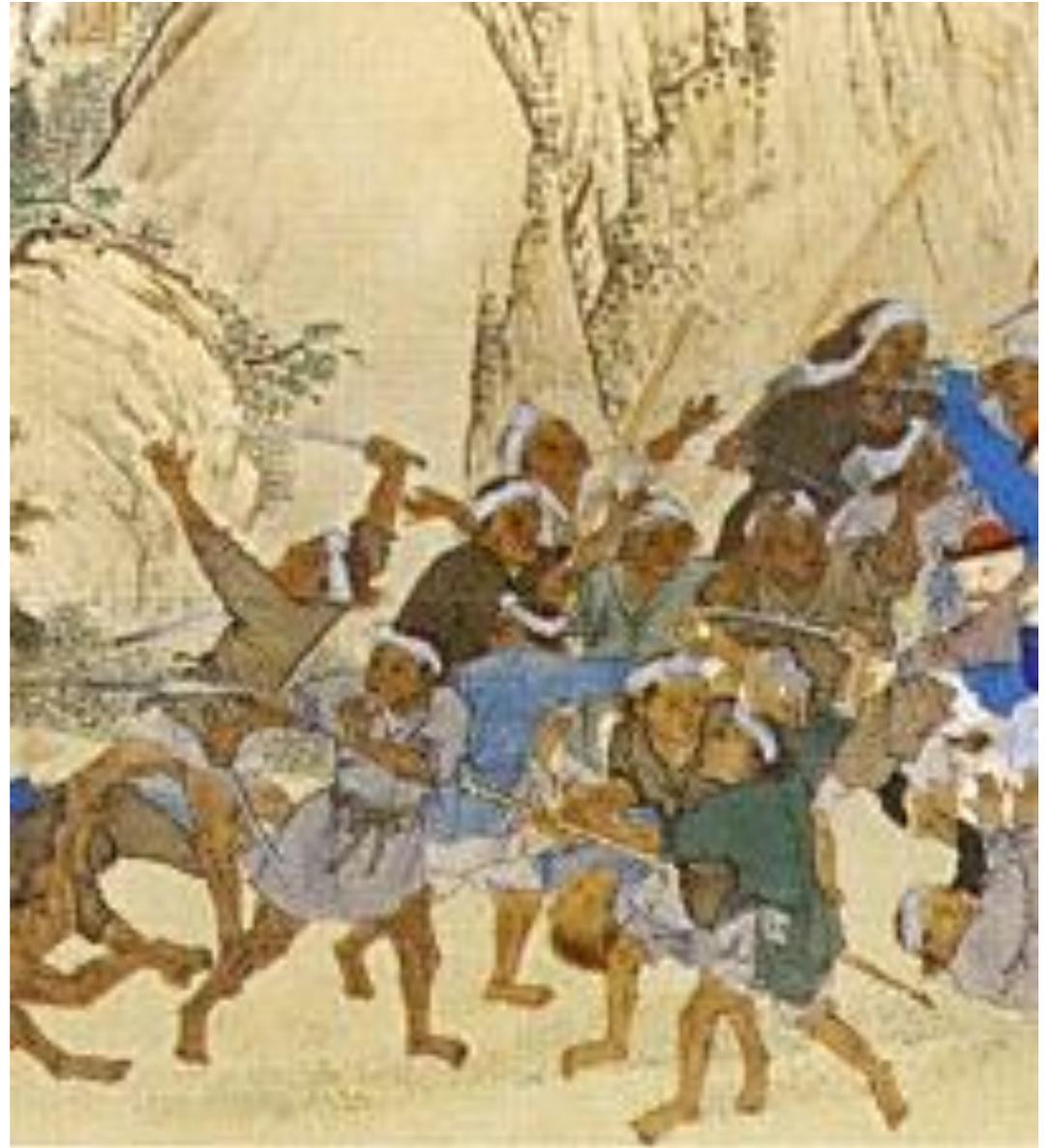
Great Grandfather Yang Kai took up the story. "We found vacant land in Southeast Asia. There were already people in the low lands. The only places left were the mountaintops. This new land gave us the freedom to live as we wanted for awhile, but we had to clear the trees to farm and haul in water."

Moua Lia struggled to try and cut mountains out of the fabric. The women told him not to be concerned. They could stitch in the mountains.

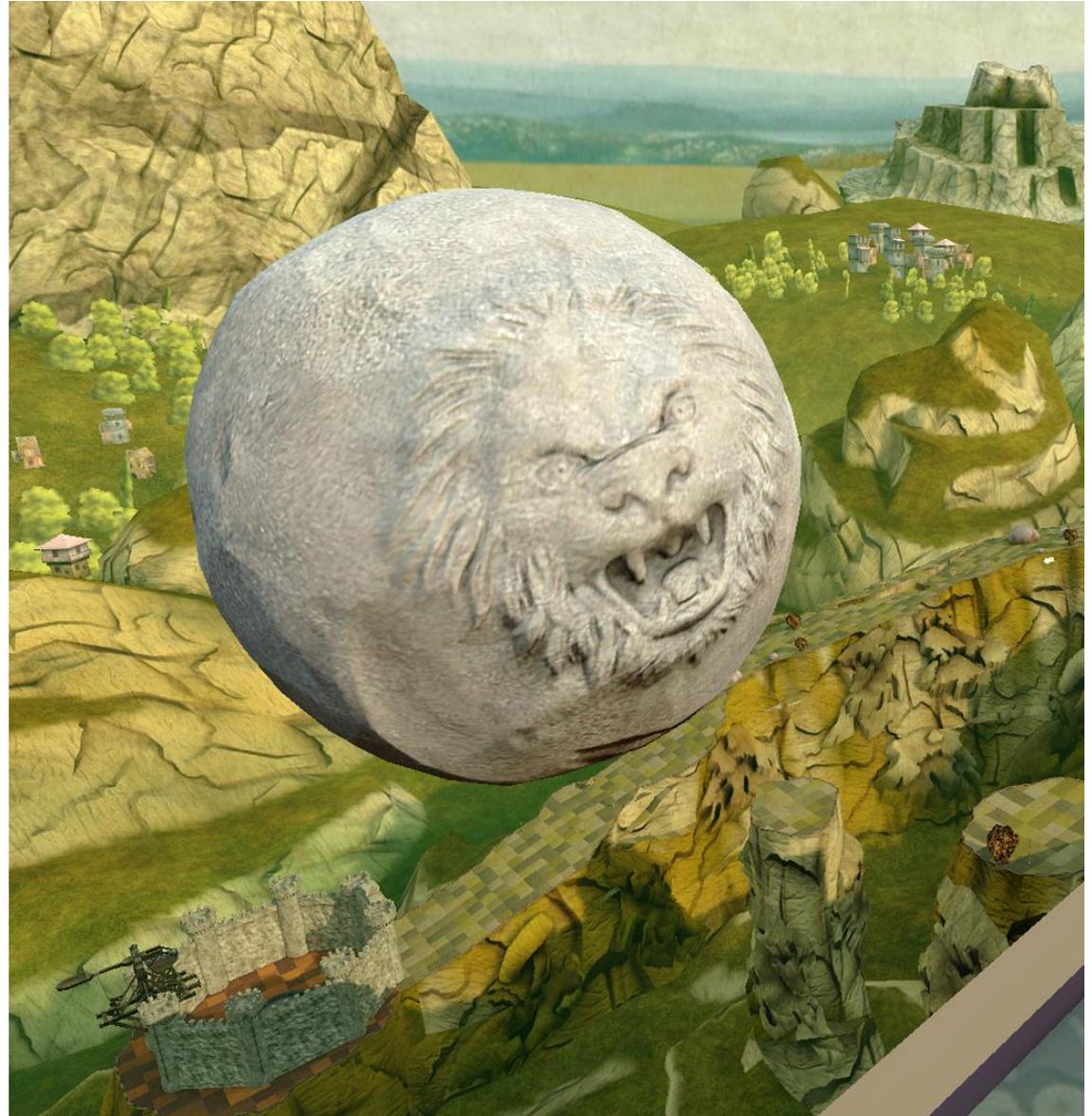


The next day one of the elders began talking about life in Laos, a country then ruled by the French. "The French treated the Hmong poorly and collected heavy taxes. Again, the Hmong rebelled. The French couldn't understand why the Hmong rebelled and called the rebellion 'The Mad Man's War.'"

Moua Lia frantically cut out as many soldiers as he could from the cloth. The men together cut out twenty.



The elder continued: "The Hmong also used methods that they had mastered while fighting in China. They would get the enemy to follow them into gorges and then roll rocks down the mountain. Eventually some Hmong were given land to live on and farm in the low lands."



The women spoke up. "Wait, we have enough cutouts for one quilt already. Can we end this story with something happy?"

"Ah, yes," replied Great Grandfather Yang Kai. "Try this. After the harvest season each village would set a date for the New Year celebrations. For three days people did nothing but feast and party in the celebrations and wear their most beautiful clothes. This was the time for young people to play games and hopefully find a mate."

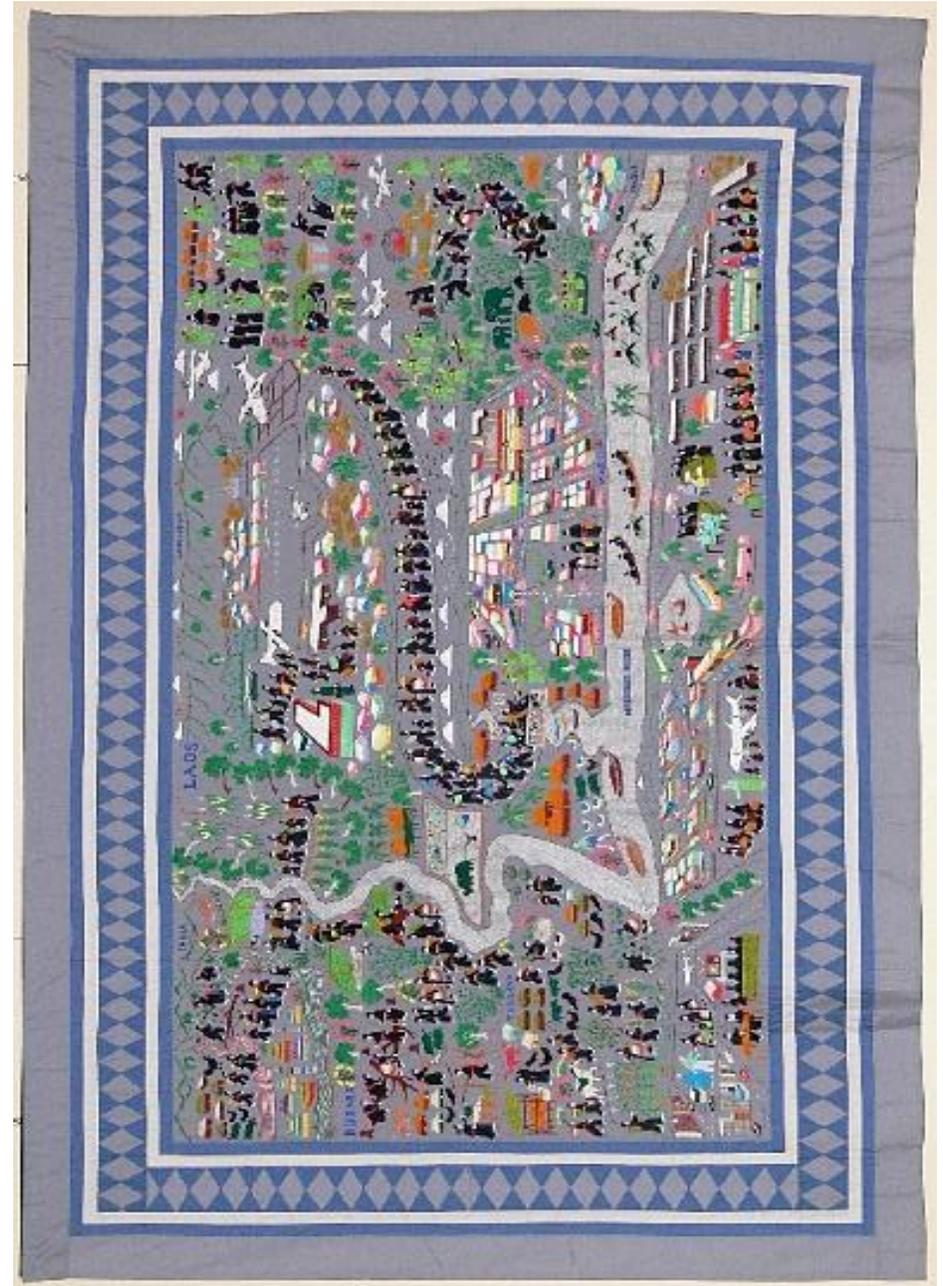
The women liked this.



The women laid out all the cutouts and stitched them onto a lovely blue tapestry. In three days they presented the very first story cloth to the men.

Moua Lia shrieked. It was so beautiful and so complete. He felt very proud that he'd made contributions.

"But now we must do the second cloth, which will tell the story about our role in the Vietnam War," insisted Great Grandfather Yang Kai.



The second story cloth

"It was all about the Americans," began one of the elders. "They feared that the Communists would take over the world, so America started sending advisers to Southeast Asia to prevent this. The Hmong were recruited to become America's foot soldiers in Laos in their fight against communism."

The men began to cut out figures of Americans.

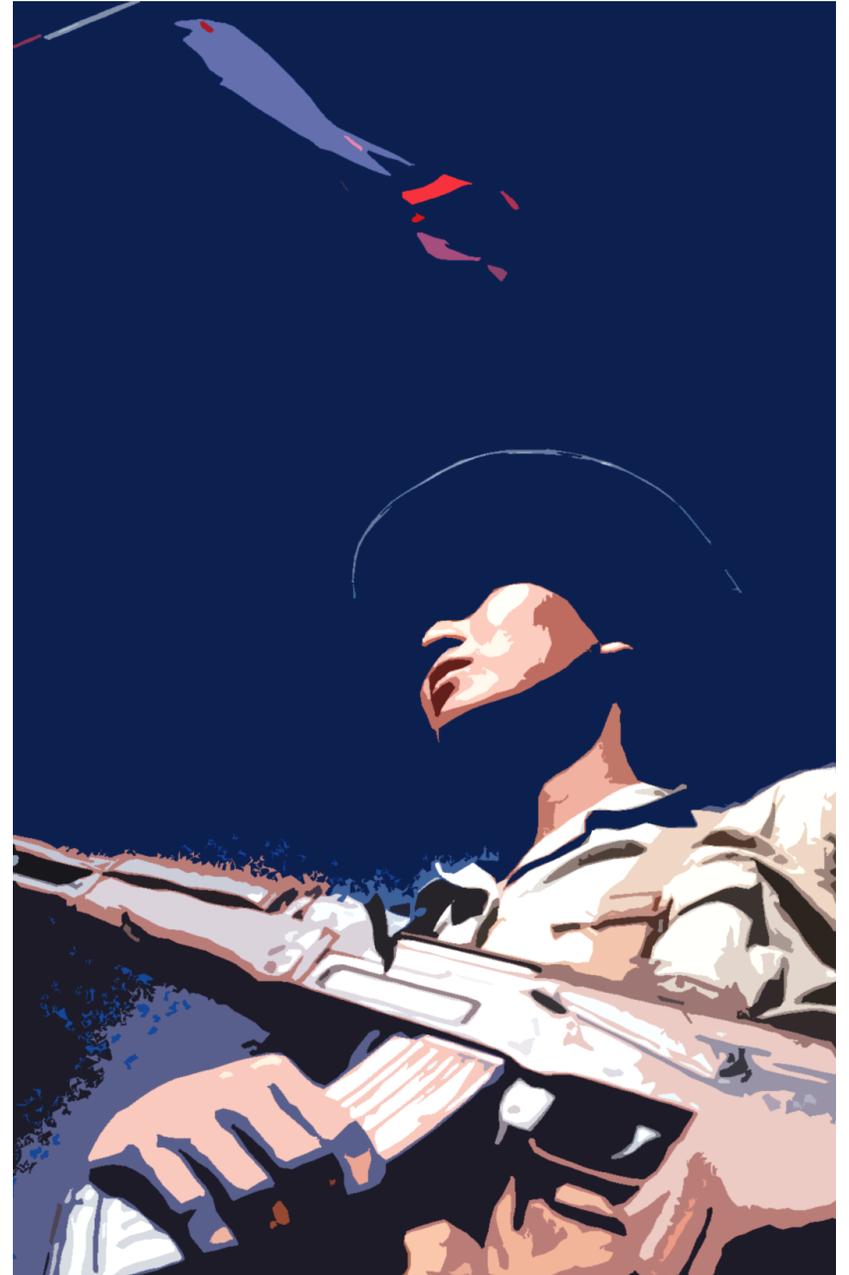


"The war in Laos lasted fifteen years," continued the elder. "The Hmong had an army of 30,000 soldiers that fought for America. Children also fought. One of the best fighter pilots in the world was Lee Lue, the fearless Hmong who went out on over 500 missions."

Moua Lia began cutting out airplanes. That was the fun part.



The elder continued. "But the Americans got tired of fighting in the Vietnam War, so they got out. When America left Vietnam, they packed up and left Laos too. The Hmong were left to fend for themselves. But unfortunately for the Hmong, the Communists ended up in control and wanted to get even with those who had helped the Americans."



"The communist soldiers came to Hmong villages and killed everyone," the elder cried.

Moua Lia knew this part of the story.

"To speed up the killings, the communists sprayed chemicals on villages. People, animals, and crops were wiped out. We called this chemical Yellow Rain."

Moua Lia didn't know how to cut out anything like Yellow Rain. He asked the women if they could stitch this and they said they could.

They quit for the day.



Great Grandfather Yang Kai picked up the story again the next morning. "Many from the former Hmong army stuck together to defend themselves on Phu Bia Mountain. It didn't work. There the communist army slaughtered the Hmong."

Moua Lia felt the tears well up in his eyes. His other grandfather had been killed on that mountain.

But he remembered he was supposed to be the man of the family now. He took a deep breath and started to trace the figures of Communists with guns on his cloth.



Great Grandfather Yang Kai continued.
"Other members of our people tried to
get to Thailand by crossing the Mekong
River. To cross the river people blew up
plastic bags or made bamboo rafts."

The women promised to embroider in
the river.



Another elder spoke up. "We know what happened next. If you made it across the river, Thai officials would take you to a refugee camp to register. Although the refugee camps were a lot better, they were still pretty bad."

The young men looked around the camp to trace the figures of the Thai refugee shacks.

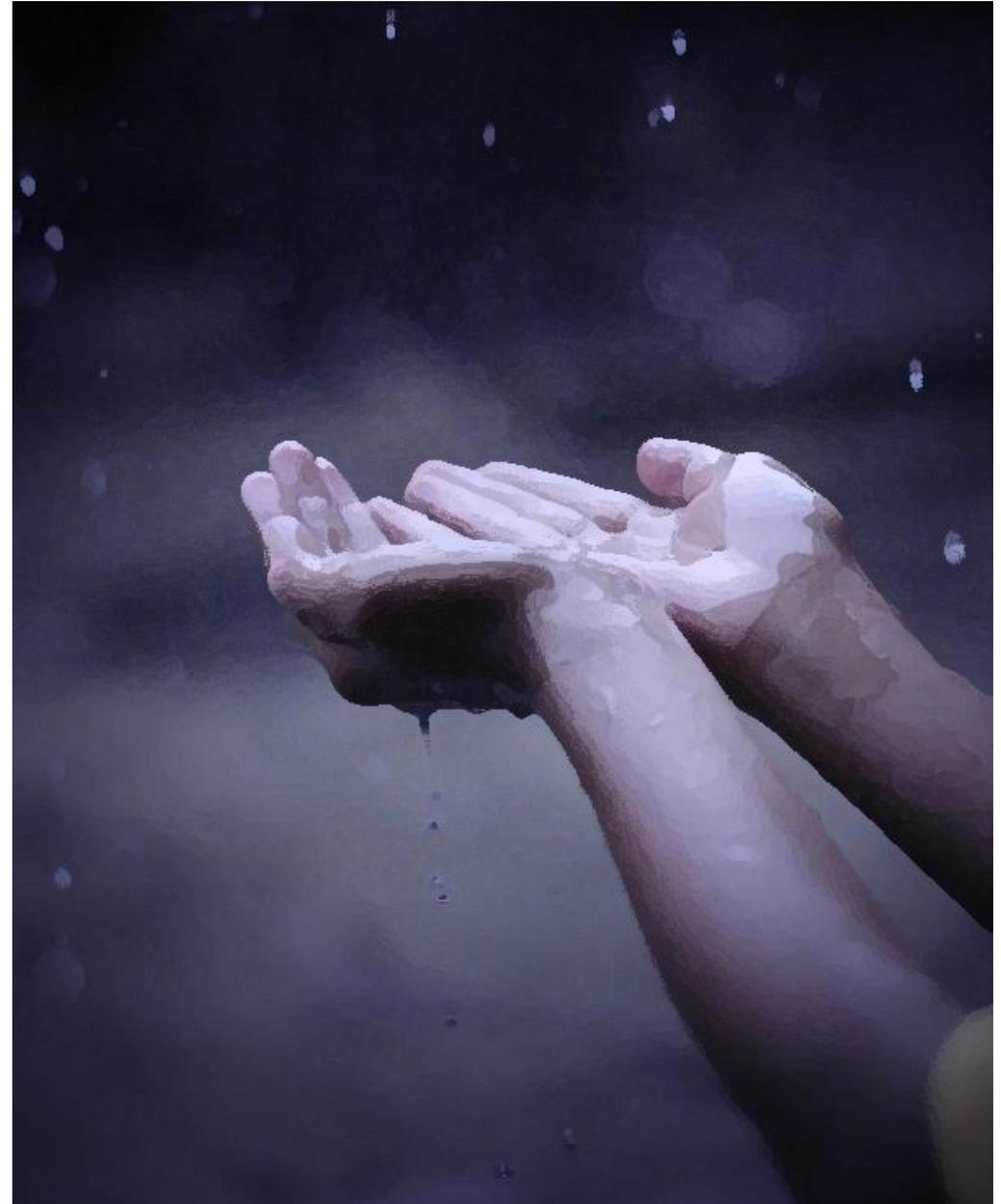


The elder continued. "Here today in the camp, we spend a lot of time waiting. Every other day we wait for the UN truck to deliver food. At night we wait for the water pump to open so we can fetch water for cooking and bathing. Some people wait for their names to appear on the list to go to America. Others are still waiting for Laos to get better so they can go back home."

Moua Lia knew what he and his family were waiting for—America. He cut out the UN truck and then an American flag.



The next day, Great Grandfather Yang Kai took up the story again. "Water is always in short supply here so we must show that it was a welcoming sight when it rained. Instead of running for shelter the kids soaped themselves up and took a cool rain shower. While many of the kids didn't know how hopeless the camps were, many of the adults just gave up hope of a normal life. Funerals were a daily event. Being sick was the rule."



"And I guess that kind of brings us up to date," one of the elders said.

"No!" insisted one of the women. "We women refuse to end the story of our history here. We need to end this story cloth on a note of hope."

But the men could not think of anything to add.

So the second cloth went unfinished.



And Moua Lia and his clan members waited and waited at the camp. Some died. The Thai officials filled out papers for them and gave them tests for months. But nothing happened.



And then something did. The news came that some clan members had gotten sponsors in the United States. They would soon board the train to the airport and then to America. It was a time of sadness and uncertainty more than happiness or joy. The people only knew America as a word. No one had a clue to what America even looked like.



But the women were more optimistic than the men. "We must look at this as a sign of hope," they claimed. "Things may indeed go well for us in the new country."

And so they finished the second story cloth. They added the part about leaving for America.



And so Moua Lia and his family packed up their few belongings—and the story cloths—and took the train to the airport.

From there they flew to America, where their lives started all over again.



The end

Let's talk!!!!!!