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The Countries of Birth and Ethnicities of Australia's Hmong and Lao Communities: An Analysis of Recent Australian Census Data

Introduction

From early 1975 until mid-2008, Australia settled approximately 11,200 Hmong and Lao immigrants and refugees, from a diversity of countries across the globe, although most of these immigrants were born in Laos and Thailand.¹ These Hmong and Lao immigrants have come from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, and have entered Australia under an assortment of immigration programmes. At present, there is a paucity of reliable knowledge concerning the ethnicity and ethnicity-related characteristics of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, which in turn has led to some misconceptions within Australia about the size and characteristics of these communities. The principal objective of this article is to provide a clear description of the ethnicity and ethnicity-related characteristics of Australia's Laos-born communities, as well as an indication of the number of ethnic Hmong and Lao born in other countries, but resident in Australia, by conducting a time-series analysis of data from the 1986 and 2006 Australian Censuses of Population and Housing. Through this exercise it is hoped that a greater understanding of the magnitude and ethnic diversity of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia will be achieved, which in turn will furnish community service providers, policy makers and researchers with basic information required to plan for the effective integration of Australia's Hmong and Lao communities into the mainstream of multicultural Australia.²

For the first time in Australia, the 2006 Australian Census has provided a wealth of data relating to the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. This article presents a

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preliminary analysis of some of these data in order to provide community service providers and policy makers with fundamental data, and to encourage researchers to conduct more detailed analyses of the data.

The Conceptualisation of Ethnicity

This article does not seek to contribute to the ongoing extensive philosophical and theoretical debates on what constitutes 'ancestry' and 'ethnicity'³, but rather merely to discuss some of the ethnicity-related factors as they pertain to the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. Nevertheless, due to the contested debates associated with the conceptualizations of 'ancestry' and 'ethnicity', it is necessary to provide some explanations of these two concepts. There are two essential suppositions associated with ethnicity - the objective-scientific ethnic origin concept based upon notions of historical ethnic or ancestral roots, and the subjective ethnic identity concept derived from the notion of personal identification with an ethnic group. These two conceptual perspectives are not mutually exclusive, as several ethnicity-related factors, such as language spoken or religion/spirituality, may be common to both. The nebulous distinction between the concepts of ethnic identity and ethnic origin may be illustrated by Anderson and Frideres's (1981: 39) note that '... language is the most important component of ethnic identity.'

In the academic literature, there is the general proposition that ethnic origin is essentially an historical allegiance to a specific group based upon a common culture, history, language, nationality, and religion. On the other hand, ethnic identity is based upon the ethnic group(s) with which an individual identifies, and this identity is derived not necessarily from the individual's historical ethnicity, but more so from the ethno-cultural traits with which an individual chooses to identify. For example, a Laos-born immigrant living in Australia may be a fifth generation ethnic Chinese. This person's ancestry, or ethnic origin, is Chinese, as this is the cultural and ethnic origin of their ancestors; however, this individual's ethnic identity may be Lao, as she speaks little or no Chinese, but rather Lao, and she is more readily able to identify with Lao culture, history, language, and traditional spiritualities, rather than with the equivalent facets of Chinese ethno-culture.

This article utilises *ancestry* data as an indication of ethnic origin, and *language spoken*

at home data as a manifestation of ethnic identity, although recognising that both associations are not perfect, and thus prone to error.

Ethnicity in Recent Australian Censuses

The Australian population census has never sought to directly ascertain the ethnic identity of the Australian population, but has rather sought to obtain data on a diversity of ethnicity-related factors.⁴ Despite the Federal Australian government adopting a multiculturalism policy since 1973, the concept of ethnic identity continues to be generally uninterpretable or misinterpreted by the majority of the Australian population (Borrie 1984: 62). However, an indication of the ethnic identity of the Australian population has been derived from census questions on *language(s) spoken (at home)* and *religious denomination*⁵. A question on *languages regularly used* was included for the first and only time in the 1976 Census, and a question on *language(s) spoken at home* has appeared in each Census commencing with the 1986 Census; a *religious denomination* question has been included in every Australian quinquennial Census since Federation in 1901.

Prior to the release of the 1986 Census results, insufficient reliable data existed concerning the ethnicity of the Australian population. Australian population Censuses from 1971 up until 1981 made recourse to gathering data on various attributes, such as country of birth, country of birth of parents, citizenship, and religion which, when manipulated together, were used to formulate a somewhat unreliable surrogate of ethnicity. The 1976 Census also contained questions on *racial origin* and *languages spoken*, while in the 1986 Census the former question was replaced by an *ancestry* question, and the latter question was reintroduced, after being omitted in the 1981 Census, in a modified form as *language(s) spoken at home*. The *ancestry* question first appeared in the 1986 Census, and after internal Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) evaluation (ABS 1990),⁶ reappeared in the 2001 and 2006 Censuses.

Since the early 1980s, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) allocated considerable resources in its effort to develop an ethnicity question for the 1986 Census, and, following the recommendations of the 1986 Population Census Ethnicity Committee, a question on ancestry was included on the 1986 Census form, despite doubts concerning its reliability (Borrie 1984:

69-72, 82-84).⁷ For the Indochinese communities in Australia, the reliability of their ancestry response(s) on the 1986 and 2006 Census forms was certainly influenced not only by their interpretation of the *ancestry* concept, but also, possibly, by how this concept was interpreted and translated for the respondent, if the respondent was not competent enough in English to complete the census form themselves.

The author is aware of only one published study that has been conducted to assess the reliability of responses to the *ancestry* and *language(s) spoken at home* questions on the 1986 Census form (Khoo 1988), and two evaluations of the 2001 Census questions (Khoo and Lucas 2004; Khoo 2006), which find that the quality of the data from these questions is of a good standard. Currently the ABS is engaged in an evaluation of the 2006 Census ethnicity-related data, the results of which should be published in 2010. In order to assist in the interpretation of data from the *ancestry* and *language(s) spoken at home* questions, a discussion of the perceived limitations of these data, as it relates to the Indochinese communities in Australia will be briefly addressed.

During the author's participation in the development of the *ancestry* question for the 1986 Census, he conducted several hundred interviews with respondents from Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam during the testing and refining of this question. From these interviews, and subsequent discussions, the author perceives that the responses to the 1986 Census ancestry question are generally of a high reliability for the Indochinese communities in Australia, due to the accuracy of the reasons given by those respondents who completed test-census forms as to their interpretation of the information this question sought to elicit.⁸

This perceived level of reliability with respect to the *ancestry* question cannot, however, be extended to the *language(s) spoken at home* question, especially for minority ethnic groups from Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam; for example, the ethnic Chinese. Although Chinese has only one modern written form, there are about six principal spoken Chinese languages (each with a multitude of dialects), of which about five languages are widely used within the ethnic Chinese communities in Indochina. It is not uncommon for ethnic Chinese from different dialect groups to inter-marry in Indochina, and if the spouses do not speak a common Chinese dialect then the language spoken at home is more than often the principal language of the host society, *viz.* Khmer, Lao or Vietnamese. Their children may acquire one or both parental Chinese language(s), attend a local Chinese school (where generally

Mandarin was taught), or fail to learn any Chinese languages. From observations in Laos and Viet Nam since early 1975, the two most salient factors which influence the propensity of these children to acquire a knowledge of a spoken Chinese language are the number of generations the children's parents have been in Indochina, and whether the parental home is in an area of high ethnic Chinese concentration, for example the suburb of Cho Lon in Sai Gon, Viet Nam. The longer a family's ancestors have been away from China, for example five or more generations, the less likely it is that subsequent generations will speak Chinese, *ceteris paribus*. On the other hand, children raised in a neighbourhood where the majority of the population, especially those with whom the children socialise, speak a Chinese language, then the children are more likely to acquire at least some spoken proficiency in the language(s) spoken by the other neighborhood children. Therefore, individual ethnic Chinese born in the countries of Indochina may not necessarily speak Chinese at home, but may still have the ability to converse in several Chinese dialects or languages, which may or may not be the dialect(s) or language(s) spoken by their parents. In addition, from observations in Laos and Viet Nam, second generation ethnic Chinese, born in Laos or Viet Nam of parents of different Chinese language groups and brought up in neighbourhoods with few, if any, other ethnic Chinese, do not speak Chinese at home, but may, and this is more probable for males than females, have had the opportunity to learn a Chinese language at a local Chinese school.

Also partially related to the above discussion is the issue of inter-ethnic marriage. Western research has shown that the offspring of an inter-ethnic marriage generally acquires the language of the dominant society, rather than the minority parent's language (Stevens 1985; Stevens and Swicegood 1987: 77). Thus, the language spoken at home from the offspring of such as union is more than likely the language of the host society, rather than the minority ethnic parent's spoken language. Children born in Laos of a marriage between an ethnic Chinese and an ethnic Lao will probably speak Lao at home, rather than Chinese, and this is clearly evident in the 2006 Australian Census data presented below.

For the 1986 and 2006 Australian Census *language(s) spoken at home* question, only one non-English language response was coded, unlike the similar questions in recent Canadian Censuses where up to two responses were coded. As only one response to this question was coded, this reduces the reliability of the data of individuals who speak more than one non-English language at home. For example, consider the case of an ethnic Lao-

Vietnamese family, who were all born in Laos, and though only the parents speak Vietnamese, all family members speak Lao. The parents speak Lao all of the time with their children, while between themselves and with Vietnamese friends they speak Vietnamese. The parents' response to the *language(s) spoken at home* question was Lao and Vietnamese, though only the former was coded. In this situation, the language(s) spoken at home data do not accurately reflect the ethnic reality of the parents, and thus any inference made from such data will be distorted.⁹

The 2006 Census questions of concern to this article are provided in Figure 1. The 2006 Census non-response rate to the *ancestry* question was 8.1 per cent, as well as 6.9 per cent for the *country of birth question* and 5.7 per cent for the *language spoken at home* question (ABS 2007).

12 In which country was the person born?
 • Remember to mark box like this:

- Australia ► Go to 14
- England
- New Zealand
- Italy
- Viet Nam
- Scotland
- Greece
- Other – please specify

16 Does the person speak a language other than English at home?
 • Mark one box only.
 • If more than one language other than English, write the one that is spoken most often.
 • Remember to mark box like this:

- No, English only ► Go to 18
- Yes, Italian
- Yes, Greek
- Yes, Cantonese
- Yes, Arabic
- Yes, Vietnamese
- Yes, Mandarin
- Yes, other – please specify

18 What is the person's ancestry?
 • Provide up to two ancestries only.
 • Examples of 'Other – please specify' are: GREEK, VIETNAMESE, HMONG, DUTCH, KURDISH, MAORI, LEBANESE, AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDER.
 • See page 7 of the Census Guide for more information.
 • Remember to mark boxes like this:

- English
- Irish
- Italian
- German
- Chinese
- Scottish
- Australian
- Other – please specify

Figure 1: Ancestry, Country of Birth and Language Spoken at Home Questions - 2006 Census

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics *Census Dictionary: Australia 2006 (Reissue)*, ABS Catalogue Number 2901.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 2006.

The Ethnic Diversity of Laos

Laos has a very diverse ethnic population, with the 2005 Lao Census identifying '49 different ethnic groups' (National Statistics Centre of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2009). Other sources claim that at least 82 Laotian languages are spoken in contemporary Laos, excluding Chinese, Khmer and Vietnamese languages (Ethnologue 2009; Central Intelligence Agency 2009). In early March 1985, Laos conducted its first national population census, which recorded a population of 3,584,803 people; the third Lao Census of 2005 enumerated a population of 5,609,997 people (Cultural Profiles 2009), although the National Statistics Centre of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (National Statistics Centre of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2009) gives a figure of 5.62 million.

Although all three recent Lao Censuses have collected data on the ethnicity of the population, these data are not readily available from Lao sources. The data below are projections of the size of the various ethnic groups in Laos as of early 1975, based on 1970 estimates (Whitaker *et al.* 1985: 41-60):

Table 1:
Number and Percentage Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Laos - 1975 Estimates

| Ethnic Group | Number | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Lao Loum | 1,524,000 | 48.0 |
| Lao Theung | 762,000 | 24.0 |
| Lao Suong | 318,000 | 10.0 |
| Lao Tai | 222,000 | 7.0 |
| Vietnamese | 222,000 | 7.0 |
| Chinese | 63,500 | 2.0 |
| Thai | 63,500 | 2.0 |
| Total | 3,175,000 | 100.0 |

Source: Donald P. Whitaker, Helen A. Barth, Sylvan M. Berman, Judith M. Heinmann, John E. MacDonald, Kenneth W. Martindale and Rinn-Sup Shinn *Laos: A Country Study*, The American University, Washington, DC, 1985, pp. 41-60.

The Lao Loum (Lao Lum), or ethnic Lao, are also referred to as the lowland Lao as they inhabit the plains of Laos. The Lao Theung consist of about 50 different ethnic/tribal groups that reside on mountain slopes, while the Lao Suong (Lao Sung) are the ethnic/tribal groups which inhabit the mountain tops, of which the Hmong are the largest group. The Lao Tai is comprised of seven T'ai language speaking ethnic groups. As of early 1975, the majority of the ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese lived in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and were mainly involved in various commercial activities. Finally, the Thai group are the descendants of those ethnic Thais who remained in Laos after the end of the Thai domination of Laos. There was also a small expatriate European population in Laos up to early-mid 1975.

In the decade immediately following the removal of the royalist ministers in the Lao government in May 1975, in the order of 370,000 people fled Laos into Thailand. About 40 per cent of this number were from the hill tribes, predominantly the Hmong, with the rest being Lao Loum, in addition to large numbers of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese.

The ethnicity data from the recent Lao Censuses are based on ethnic-linguistic groupings, rather than ethnicity *per se*, with data from the 2005 Census provided below. Due to changes in classifying and naming ethnic, or ethno-linguistic, groups in Laos over the past three decades or so, the article will not enter into a discussion of the changing ethno-linguistic distribution of Laos over this period of time. Rather the above data are presented as background information, to the discussion which follows.

Table 2:
Percentage Distribution of Ethno-Linguistic Groups in Laos - 2005 Lao Census

| Ethno-Linguistic Group | Names of Specific Ethnic Groups | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Tai-Kadai | Lao, Tai, Lue, Thai Neua, etc. | 66.2 |
| Mon-Khmer | Kammou, Lamet, Khmer, etc. | 22.8 |
| Hmong-Mien | Hmong and Iu Mien | 7.4 |
| Sino-Tibetan | Akha, Lahu, Sila, etc. | 2.7 |
| Others | Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. | 0.9 |
| Total | | 100.0 |

Source: Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (United States Department of State), *Background Note: Laos* (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>, accessed 2 January, 2009), and Satoshi Yokoyama 'The Situation of Ethnic Minorities in Laos', pp. A6-1 to A6-8 in *Lao Health Master Planning Study: Progress Report 1* (<http://www.nsc.gov.la/>, accessed 2 January, 2009), Table 3.10.1, p. A6-2.

Ancestry of the Laos-Born Communities in Australia

The 2006 Australian Census enumerated 9,372 Laos-born people resident in Australia (out of a population of 19.855 million residents), compared to 7,422 at the time of the 1986 Census.¹⁰ Only 446 (4.8 per cent) of the Laos-born did not answer the ancestry question in the 2006 Census, and when we pro-rate the responses provided, we arrive at the following distribution of ancestry responses for the Laos-born in 2006:

- 64.81 per cent Lao,
- 17.51 per cent Chinese,
- 6.83 per cent Hmong,
- 4.94 per cent Vietnamese,
- 1.85 per cent English,
- 1.76 per cent Thai,
- 1.16 per cent Australian,
- 0.25 per cent French,
- 0.12 per cent Khmer, and
- 0.67 per cent other.

The above distribution is substantially different from those presented in Tables 1 and 2, especially with respect to the over-representation of the Chinese and Vietnamese in the Australian Laos-born population. This over-representation is not unexpected, considering the emigration of many ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese from Laos after mid-1975. In addition, we must note that while the Australian data are based on ancestry, the Lao data are based on ethno-linguistic group, thus some minor variations would be expected. While the French and Vietnamese populations are a reflection of 19th and 20th Century French colonisation of Laos (Stuart-Fox 1982, 1986, 1997), and the Thai and Khmer groups a representation of Cambodia and Thailand sharing national border with Laos, the small Australian and English figures are indicative of some Laos-born individuals considering themselves Australia-Lao, as well as some Australians having given birth to children in Laos.

In an effort to understand more clearly the ancestry of the Laos-born community in Australia, Table 3 presents 2006 Census data on the first ancestry response cross-tabulated by the second ancestry response (where applicable) for this community. Table 3 reveals that 91.4 per cent of the Laos-born provided only one response to the *ancestry* question, or did not answer the question. Of those who provided multiple responses, the main multiple responses

were:

- 287 Chinese-Lao, but only 46 Lao-Chinese,
- 105 English-Lao, but no Lao-English,
- 71 Lao-Thai, but only 26 Thai-Lao,
- 45 Lao-Vietnamese, with 37 Vietnamese-Lao, and
- 42 Australian-Lao, and 5 Lao-Australian.

Considering the historical ethnic diversity of Laos, most of the responses in Table 3 are not unexpected. At the same time, considering the number of Anglo-Celtic Australians who have worked and lived in Laos over recent decades, and a number of these Anglo-Celtic Australians have 'Lao' spouses, the number of Australian/English-Lao counted in the 2006 Census is not unexpected. However, an issue which does require some further investigation, and will be discussed later in this article, is the ordering of responses, *viz.* why there were 287 Chinese-Lao, but only 46 Lao-Chinese, or why the 2006 Census enumerated 71 Lao-Thai, but only 26 Thai-Lao, and what role parental ancestry played in the ordering of responses. An issue of interest is comparing the above results with those of the 1986 Census.

Table 3:
First Ancestry Response by Second Ancestry Response of Laos-born - 2006 Australian Census

| | Second Ancestry Response | | | | | | | | | | Total | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------------|--------------|-----|
| | Australian | French | Chinese | Hmong | Khmer | Lao | Thai | Vietnamese | Other | Not Applicable | | |
| First Ancestry Response | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Australian | | | | 4 | | 42 | | | | | 41 | 87 |
| English | 6 | | 7 | 4 | | 105 | | | | | 58 | 180 |
| French | | | | | | 3 | | 5 | | | 4 | 12 |
| Asian, so described | | | | | | 3 | | | | | 18 | 21 |
| Chinese | 12 | | | | 6 | 287 | 16 | 17 | 3 | 1,298 | 1,639 | |
| Hmong | | | | | | 8 | | | | 644 | 652 | |
| Khmer | 3 | | | | | 3 | | | | 0 | 6 | |
| Lao | 5 | 12 | 46 | 5 | | | 71 | 45 | 6 | 5,603 | 5,793 | |
| Thai | | | | | | 26 | | | | 58 | 84 | |
| Vietnamese | | | 7 | | | 37 | | | | 370 | 414 | |
| Other | | | 5 | | | | | | 4 | 15 | 24 | |
| Inadequately Described | | | | | | | | | | 16 | 16 | |
| Not Stated | | | | | | | | | | 446 | 446 | |
| Total | 26 | 12 | 65 | 13 | 6 | 514 | 87 | 67 | 13 | 8,571 | 9,374 | |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Coughlan (1988, 1989b, 1990a) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the 1986 Australian Census ethnicity data on the Indochinese communities in Australia. His analysis of responses to the 1986 Census *ancestry* question revealed the following ancestry distribution for the Laos-born, with the proportion changes between the 1986 and 2006 Censuses in brackets:

- 73.59 per cent Lao (-8.78 percentage points),
- 18.31 per cent Chinese (-0.80 percentage points),
- 4.95 per cent Vietnamese (-0.01 percentage points),
- 1.31 per cent Hmong (+5.52 percentage points),
- 0.68 per cent English (+1.17 percentage points),
- 0.25 per cent Thai (+1.51 percentage points),
- 0.09 per cent French (+0.16 percentage points),
- 0.07 per cent Khmer (+0.05 percentage points),
- 0.00 per cent Australian (+1.16 percentage points), and
- 0.75 per cent other.

The ancestry distributions between the two Australian Censuses are very similar, except for the Hmong and the Lao. Unfortunately, in the 1986 Census there were clerical coding errors with respect to coding the county of birth of individuals who provided Hmong as their ancestry, resulting in many individuals who had recorded 'Hmong' as their ancestry being coded to the country of birth category 'Uruguay'.¹¹ This error was not detected until after the 1986 Census forms were destroyed, and thus remedial action could not be taken to rectify the errors, and therefore the above 1.3 per cent figure, representing 97 Laos-born Hmong in 1986, is a severe under-representation, compared to the 665 Laos-born Hmong counted in the 2006 Census. Conducting further analysis of the 2006 Census data, taking into account data from the *period of residence in Australia* question could aid in verifying the changes between the two Censuses. The next task is to attempt to verify, or at least clarify, the data presented in this section by examining data from the *language(s) spoken at home* question.

Language Spoken at Home of the Laos-Born Communities

Language spoken data provide an indication of ethnic identity, rather than ethnic origin which is more generally associated with the notion of ancestry. The weaknesses of the Australian Census *language(s) spoken at home* question are, firstly, the question refers only to

languages other than English spoken *at home*, and secondly, as noted previously, only one non-English language response is captured during data processing. Despite these deficiencies, historically the question has delivered reliable and useful data (Borrie 1984; Coughlan 1990a: 6-7).

Only 97 (1.0 per cent) of the Laos-born did not answer the *language(s) spoken at home* question in the 2006 Census, and when responses are pro-rated the following distribution of languages spoken at home for the Laos-born are produced, with the ancestry proportions in brackets:

- 65.93 (64.81) per cent Lao,
- 7.62 (1.85) per cent English,
- 7.05 (17.51) per cent Mandarin,
- 6.82 (6.83) per cent Hmong,
- 5.29 (4.94) per cent Vietnamese,
- 3.05 (see Mandarin) per cent Cantonese,
- 1.97 (1.76) per cent Thai,
- 0.50 (see Mandarin) per cent Teochew,
- 0.38 (0.03) per cent Croatian,
- 0.27 (0.25) per cent French,
- 0.12 (see Mandarin) per cent Hakka, and
- 1.12 per cent other languages.

These data indicate a high degree of consistency between the ancestry and language profiles, except for the higher proportion of English language speakers, and lower proportion of Chinese speakers (10.8 per cent for language and 17.5 per cent for ancestry). The high number and proportion of *only* English speakers at home, 707 or 7.6 per cent of Laos-born individuals, is primarily among younger Laos-born individuals who received most of their education in Australian schools, as well as the growing number of Laos-born individuals who are marrying mainstream Australians.¹² The lower proportion of Chinese language speakers was expected in light of the earlier discussion of Chinese migration and intermarriage in Laos. On the other hand, the presence of 34 Croatian speakers, and only three people of Croatian ancestry born in Laos, requires explanation, and is likely to be an automated computer coding error.¹³ Overall, the ancestry and language spoken at home profiles support each other.

In order to gain a greater understanding of ethnicity of the Laos-born communities in Australia, cross-tabulated data in response to the *ancestry* and *language(s) spoken at home* questions are presented in Table 4,¹⁴ revealing some interesting information. For example,

while 90.4 per cent of people of Hmong ancestry spoke Hmong at home, the figure was a slightly lower at 85.8 per cent of the people of Lao ancestry speaking Lao at home, 73.7 per cent for the Vietnamese and 55.0 per cent for the Chinese. These percentages, and the data in Table 4, would indicate that there is little inter-ethnic marriage involving the Hmong, while there is a higher proportion of such marriages, or language loss, for the Vietnamese and Chinese communities born in Laos, which confirms earlier research (Coughlan 1990a).

Table 4:
Language Spoken at Home by First Ancestry Response of Laos-born - 2006 Australian Census

| Language Spoken at Home | First Ancestry Response | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|---------|--------|---------|-------|-------|------|------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | Australian | English | French | Chinese | Hmong | Lao | Thai | Vietnamese | Other | Not Stated | Total |
| English | 11 | 20 | 0 | 131 | 17 | 464 | 5 | 33 | 7 | 19 | 707 |
| French | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 25 |
| Croatian | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 31 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 34 |
| Hmong | 3 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 584 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 14 | 633 |
| Lao | 67 | 134 | 7 | 515 | 25 | 4,948 | 44 | 54 | 32 | 290 | 6,116 |
| Thai | 0 | 8 | 0 | 41 | 4 | 88 | 31 | 7 | 0 | 4 | 183 |
| Vietnamese | 0 | 6 | 0 | 34 | 0 | 97 | 4 | 306 | 8 | 37 | 492 |
| Chinese, not further defined | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| Cantonese | 0 | 3 | 0 | 258 | 3 | 12 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 284 |
| Hakka | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| Mandarin | 0 | 6 | 0 | 578 | 3 | 49 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 15 | 654 |
| Teochew | 0 | 0 | 0 | 46 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 46 |
| Other | 3 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 10 | 40 | 0 | 3 | 9 | 3 | 80 |
| Not Stated | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 57 | 97 |
| Total | 88 | 180 | 10 | 1,639 | 652 | 5,793 | 84 | 415 | 66 | 447 | 9,374 |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

The other interesting feature of Table 4 is with respect to the 'Not Stated' ancestry response, and here we note that 64.9 per cent of the Laos-born who did not answer the ancestry question indicated that they spoke Lao at home, and 8.3 per cent spoke Vietnamese, thus indicating that most of those who did not respond to the ancestry question were

probably ethnic Lao. In addition, of the individuals born in Laos who indicated that they were of Australian or English ancestry, 79.8 per cent of the former and 74.4 per cent of the latter group spoke Lao at home, and only 13.1 per cent of the former and 11.1 per cent of the latter group spoke only English at home, thus supporting the conjectures in the previous section. An examination of the second ancestry responses, where applicable, cross-tabulated by language spoken at home largely support the above findings, and thus these data will not be discussed further here.

The language profile of the Laos-born communities from the 1986 Census has been reported by Coughlan (1988, 1989b, 1990a), whose analysis of the language spoken at home data revealed the following language distribution for the Laos-born, with the proportion changes between the 1986 and 2006 Censuses in brackets:

- 77.72 per cent Lao (-11.79 percentage points),
- 12.78 per cent Chinese (-1.92 percentage points),
- 3.80 per cent Vietnamese (+1.49 percentage points),
- 2.14 per cent English (+5.48 percentage points),
- 0.60 per cent Thai (+1.37 percentage points),
- 0.60 per cent French (-0.33 percentage points),
- 0.06 per cent Khmer (-0.06 percentage points), and
- 2.30 per cent other.

Once again, the above figures suggest that the language distributions for the Laos-born from the two Australian Censuses are very similar, except for the English and Lao speakers. Unfortunately, in the 1986 Census all Chinese dialects and languages were coded to the category 'Chinese', and there was no coding of the Hmong language, and thus 'Hmong' responses were coded to the category 'Other Asian Languages', and thus the Hmong are missing from the above figures. The percentage changes in the language profile of the Laos-born between the 1986 and 2006 Censuses largely mirror those changes presented earlier with respect to the ancestry profile, thereby supporting the earlier discussion.

While the previous sections have provided an ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, an equally important exercise is to attempt to determine the numerical size of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. To accomplish this exercise, 2006 Australian Census data for the ethnic Hmong and Lao in Australia, irrespective of country of birth, need to be examined.

Countries of Birth of People with Hmong or Lao Ethnicity in Australia

Information obtained from the previous sections has been used to construct an ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, which in turn may be used to inform the construction of a profile of the ethnic Hmong and Lao in Australia. Table 5 presents data on the main countries of birth of Australian residents of Hmong and Lao ancestry, as well as those who spoke Hmong or Lao at home, and indicates that there were 2,011 Hmong speakers in Australia at the time of the 2006 Census, as well as 9,374 Lao speakers. In addition, there were 2,188 people of full or part Hmong ancestry, as well as 10,765 individuals of full or part Lao ancestry. As expected, the main countries of birth of the Hmong and Lao are Australia, Laos and Thailand; 32.4 (67.7) per cent of the Hmong (Lao) speakers were born in Laos, 43.4 (25.6) per cent in Australia, and 23.3 (4.0) per cent in Thailand; in addition, 31.2 (60.3) per cent of the individuals of Hmong (Lao) ancestry were born in Laos, 45.4 (33.9) per cent in Australia, and 21.7 (4.5) per cent in Thailand. The high proportions for Thailand reflect the longer period of time that many Hmong immigrants to Australia spent in Thai refugee camps, compared to the Lao and other Indochinese refugees, as well as the high fertility levels of the Hmong compared to the Lao as reported by Coughlan (1990b).

The data in Table 5 also confirm what is known from anecdotal evidence, that there has been a small migration of ethnic Hmong and Lao from countries such as France, New Zealand, and the United States of America to Australia.¹⁵ However, the small, but not insignificant, number of ethnic Lao born in Croatia - 90 Lao speakers and 22 individuals of Lao ancestry - is a computer scanning error in the processing of the 2006 Census schedules, as noted in Endnote 13.

Table 5:
Country of Birth by Hmong/Lao Language Spoken at Home, Hmong/Lao First Ancestry Response and Hmong/Lao Second Ancestry Response - 2006 Australian Census

| | Language Spoken At Home | | First Ancestry Response | | Second Ancestry Response | |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|--------------------------|-------|
| | Hmong | Lao | Hmong | Lao | Hmong | Lao |
| Country of Birth of Person | | | | | | |
| Australia | 849 | 2,313 | 914 | 2,412 | 52 | 1,032 |
| New Zealand | 9 | 50 | 8 | 50 | | 23 |
| | | | | | | |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | | 10 | | | | |
| Croatia | | 90 | | 22 | | |
| England | | 5 | | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| France | | 15 | | 20 | | 6 |
| Greece | | 6 | 3 | 4 | | |
| Germany | | 3 | | | | 3 |
| Other Europe | | 5 | 6 | 6 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Cambodia | | 13 | | 3 | | 12 |
| China (Excludes SARs and Taiwan Province) | | 7 | 3 | 4 | | 3 |
| Japan | | 4 | | 3 | | 5 |
| Laos | 635 | 6,117 | 651 | 5,792 | 13 | 512 |
| Nepal | | 3 | | | | 3 |
| Philippines | | 4 | | 3 | | 4 |
| Thailand | 456 | 357 | 456 | 305 | 6 | 167 |
| Viet Nam | | 12 | 3 | 3 | | 7 |
| Other Asia | 9 | | 7 | 13 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| United States of America | | 14 | 3 | 14 | | 3 |
| | | | | | | |
| Other | | | | 4 | | 5 |
| | | | | | | |
| Inadequately Described | | 3 | | 3 | | 3 |
| | | | | | | |
| Not Stated | 53 | 343 | 60 | 268 | | 42 |
| | | | | | | |
| Total | 2,011 | 9,374 | 2,114 | 8,932 | 74 | 1,833 |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Other than the 'Croatian' anomaly, the data in Table 5 support the preceding Laos-born data, and confirm what has been ascertained from earlier research and communications with Hmong and Lao community members in Australia, and thus furnishes no surprises. The actual numbers in Table 5 for the Hmong and Lao for the language spoken at home and first ancestry responses are also fairly close, in light of our previous discussions. The next task is to look a little more closely at the ancestry profiles of Hmong and Lao Australians.

Hmong and Lao Ancestries in Australia

The previous section clearly indicated that the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia were born in numerous countries, and with the prospect of inter-ethnic marriages, both within Laos as well as other countries, such as multicultural Australia, we may expect the expansion of small multi-ethnic Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. Certainly this is nothing new, as we know from the modern socio-ethnic history of Laos, and from observations in Laos since early 1975, that there has been a small degree of inter-ethnic marriage involving the ethnic Lao, Chinese and Vietnamese communities in Laos from at least the late 19th Century. In an attempt to quantify the degree of this inter-ethnic mixing of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, Table 6 presents 2006 Census data on the total Australian population, involving people with Hmong or Lao ancestries, which indicates that there is not a high degree of multiple ancestries involving the Hmong or Lao in Australia. Overall, of the 2,190 Australian residents who indicated that they were of Hmong ancestry, only 4.9 per cent were of mixed Hmong ancestry, while 21.2 per cent of the 10,764 Lao were of mixed ancestry. The most common ancestry responses associated with the Hmong and Lao were Chinese, Thai, Australian, English, Vietnamese and Khmer, which is not substantially different to the data presented in Table 3. Overall, the data suggest that the poly-ancestries of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia are not that different to the ancestry profiles of Laos-born communities in Australia.

Table 6:
First Ancestry Response by Second Ancestry Response for Individuals With Hmong or Lao Ancestries - 2006 Australian Census

| Ancestry | First Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and Second Ancestry Response Left Hand Column | | Second Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and First Ancestry Response Left Hand Column | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| | Hmong | Lao | Hmong | Lao |
| Australian | | 15 | 19 | 338 |
| Maori | | 5 | | 4 |
| New Zealander | | 6 | | 4 |
| Assyrian/Chaldean | | 5 | | 3 |
| Dutch | | 9 | | 3 |
| English | | 7 | 21 | 281 |
| French | | 18 | | 6 |
| German | | 3 | 3 | 9 |
| Greek | | | | 9 |
| Irish | | 5 | 3 | 3 |
| Italian | | | | 19 |
| Maltese | | | | 8 |
| Portuguese | | 3 | | 7 |
| Serbian | | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| Scottish | | | | 9 |
| Spanish | | | | 10 |
| Chinese | 7 | 98 | 13 | 610 |
| Filipino | | 25 | | 16 |
| Hmong | | 12 | | 14 |
| Khmer | 3 | 31 | | 48 |
| Lao | 13 | | 9 | |
| Sinhalese | | 5 | | |
| Thai | | 152 | | 243 |
| Vietnamese | 3 | 101 | | 124 |
| Chilean | | 6 | | 10 |
| Mauritian | | 5 | | |
| Other | 7 | 35 | 3 | 47 |
| Inadequately Described | | 4 | | 5 |
| Not Applicable | 2,083 | 8,375 | | |
| Total | 2,116 | 8,931 | 74 | 1,833 |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

As with the data in Table 3, the data in Table 6 reveal some interesting differences in the response orderings of the ancestries of the Hmong and Lao with multiple ancestries. For example, from the first line of Table 6, 15 people indicated that they were Lao-Australians, but 338 recorded themselves as Australian-Lao; in addition, 98 individuals indicated that they were Lao-Chinese, while 610 recorded that they were Chinese-Lao. Why the marked differences in the two sets of groupings of the same ancestries, and what reasons do individuals of mixed ancestry choose for selecting the order of their responses? What are the roles of country of birth, mother language, sense of ancestral/ethnic identity, etc. in this selection process? And is this issue of ancestry ordering important? The responses to these questions are beyond the scope of this article, however previous field experience in Laos and with the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia can provide some preliminary answers.

If we can use the ancestry responses Lao-Chinese and Chinese-Lao as examples. Individuals who consider themselves Chinese-Lao, are more than likely to have not been born in Laos, or if born in Laos are more likely to speak Chinese than Lao; thus their sense of Chineseness is stronger than their feeling of being Lao. On the other hand, Lao-Chinese individuals are more than likely to have been born in Laos of parents of full or part Chinese ancestry, and or are more likely to speak Lao rather than Chinese; thus, they feel more Lao than Chinese, but acknowledge both ethnicities are important to their identity. Of course, there are numerous other explanations, and this issue requires further research.

Ancestries of Hmong and Lao Speakers in Australia

In order to provide some clearer understanding of the previous ancestry data, the final exercise is to examine the ancestries of Hmong and Lao speakers in Australia. The data in Table 7 reveal that 93.6 per cent of individuals who spoke Hmong at home were of Hmong ancestry, with an additional 2.5 per cent speaking Lao at home. This high degree of correlation between the two ethnicity factors is expected, as we recall from Table 6 that 95.1 per cent of individuals who indicated that they were of Hmong ancestry only provided one ancestry response. The other important ancestry of the Hmong speakers was English, with a figure of 1.0 per cent. The picture is slightly different for those who speak Lao at home, as would be expected from Table 6, as only 77.8 per cent of individuals of Lao ancestry provided

only one ancestry response. For those who indicated that they spoke Lao in Table 7, only 77.9 were of Lao ancestry, with an additional 8.1 per cent of Chinese ancestry, 3.3 per cent of English ancestry, 3.1 per cent of Thai ancestry, and 2.4 per cent of Australian ancestry. The lower correlation between these two ethnicity factors is expected in light of the earlier data analysis.

Table 7
First and Second Ancestry Responses of Individuals Who Gave Hmong or Lao as Their Language Spoken At Home - 2006 Australian Census

| Ancestry | Language Spoken at Home Hmong/Lao and First Ancestry Response Left Hand Column | | Language Spoken at Home Hmong/Lao and Second Ancestry Response Left Hand Column | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| | Hmong | Lao | Hmong | Lao |
| Australian | 17 | 206 | | 32 |
| English | 20 | 320 | | 3 |
| Irish | | 6 | | |
| French | | 5 | | 12 |
| Bosnian | | 6 | | |
| Croatian | | 140 | | 7 |
| Other European | | 24 | | 9 |
| Hmong | 1,850 | 42 | 23 | 6 |
| Khmer | | 11 | | 11 |
| Lao | 41 | 7,006 | 9 | 682 |
| Thai | | 175 | | 127 |
| Vietnamese | | 90 | | 61 |
| Chinese | 8 | 739 | 0 | 65 |
| Other Asian | | 19 | | 22 |
| Other | 11 | 12 | 3 | 22 |
| Inadequately Described | 19 | 10 | | 6 |
| Not Applicable | | | 1,978 | 8,309 |
| Not Stated | 47 | 563 | | |
| Total | 2,013 | 9,374 | 2,013 | 9,374 |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Finally, Table 8 uses the same variables as Table 7, but expresses the data in a different format, by examining the languages spoken at home of individuals of Hmong and Lao ancestry, and reveals that 86.7 per cent of individuals of Hmong ancestry spoke Hmong at home, with an additional 6.9 per cent speaking only English at home. Once again, this high degree of correlation between the two ethnicity factors is expected, as we recall from Table 6, that 95.1 per cent of individuals who indicated that they were of Hmong ancestry only provided one ancestry response. The other main languages spoken by those of Hmong ancestry were Lao 2.2 per cent, Chinese languages 0.9 per cent and Thai 0.6 per cent. In addition, once again, the situation is slightly different for those of Lao ancestry, as would be expected from Table 6, as only 77.8 per cent of individuals of Lao ancestry provided only one ancestry response. For those of Lao ancestry in Table 8, only 72.5 per cent spoke Lao at home, with an additional 17.5 per cent speaking only English at home. Once again, the lower correlation between these two ethnicity factors is expected in light of the earlier data analysis. The other main languages spoken by those of Lao ancestry were Thai 3.1 per cent, Vietnamese 2.1 per cent, Chinese languages 2.0 per cent, and Hmong 0.5 per cent.

Overall, the above data would tend to suggest that there is a high level of language maintenance for the Hmong communities in Australia, as well as degree of language loss for the Lao communities in Australia.

Table 8
Language Spoken at Home of Individuals Who Gave Hmong or Lao as Their First and Second Ancestry Response - 2006 Australian Census

| Language Spoken at Home | First Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and Language Spoken at Home Left Hand Column | | Second Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and Language Spoken at Home Left Hand Column | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| | Hmong | Lao | Hmong | Lao |
| English | 108 | 1,220 | 41 | 637 |
| French | | 13 | | 9 |
| Croatian | | 70 | | |
| Other European | 3 | 10 | | 11 |
| Arabic or Persian | | 3 | | 6 |
| Hmong | 1,849 | 41 | 23 | 9 |
| Khmer | 3 | 3 | | 32 |
| Lao | 42 | 7,008 | 5 | 682 |
| Mon-Khmer, not elsewhere classified | 16 | | | |
| Thai | 13 | 150 | | 176 |
| Vietnamese | 6 | 137 | | 87 |
| Chinese, not further defined | | | | 5 |
| Cantonese | 3 | 14 | 4 | 41 |
| Hakka | | 3 | | |
| Mandarin | 10 | 66 | 3 | 74 |
| Teochew | | 3 | | 7 |
| Other Asian Language | | 18 | | 3 |
| Other | 22 | 45 | | 17 |
| Inadequately Described | 8 | 11 | | |
| Not Stated | 31 | 117 | | 38 |
| Total | 2,114 | 8,932 | 76 | 1,834 |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Discussion and Conclusion

The number of people in Australia who were born in Laos and who indicated that they were of Chinese ancestry is probably marginally under-represented in the ancestry data, and substantially under-represented in the language spoken at home data presented above. The major immigration of ethnic Chinese into the countries of Indochina began in the last quarter of the 19th Century (Stuart-Fox 1982, 1986, 1997), and was particularly intense during the first and early second quarters of the 20th Century in the case of Laos and Viet Nam. It is now likely that some of the young descendants of the ethnic Chinese who settled in Indochina during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries were absorbed, both culturally and linguistically, into the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese societies through inter-ethnic marriage. The present day descendants of these early Chinese immigrants into Indochina may have, for example, one eighth or one sixteenth Chinese ancestry, while the predominant component of their ancestry is the ancestry of the indigenous population of the host Indochinese society, viz. Khmer, Lao or Vietnamese ancestry. From observation, such individuals would more than likely indicate that their ancestry is the ancestry of the indigenous population of the host society, for example Lao ancestry, rather than their correct ancestry, Lao-Chinese.

The above basic analysis of the 2006 Australian Census data revealed that at the time of the 2006 Census, August 2006, about 9,372 Laos-born people resided in Australia; there were 2,190 individuals of Hmong ancestry and 10,769 of Lao ancestry in Australia; as well as 2,012 Hmong speakers and 9,376 Lao speakers. The 2006 Census data also revealed that 86.7 per cent of those of Hmong ancestry spoke Hmong at home, while only 72.5 per cent of those of Lao ancestry spoke Lao at home, with a significant 17.5 per cent speaking only English at home.

Unfortunately, this article could not reproduce with the 2006 Census data the earlier more detailed analysis of the 1986 Census data (Coughlan 1988, 1989b, 1990a), due to changes in the categories for the *birthplace of parents* questions in the 2006 Census compared to the 1986 Census.¹⁶ However, to compensate this, the greater detail provided by an enhanced coding of the *ancestry* and *language spoken at home* questions, which allowed for *Hmong*, *Hmong-Mien* and *Lao* ancestries, as well as *Hmong* and *Lao* languages, allowed for a

more comprehensive discussion than was previously possible for these aspects of ethnicity.

Certainly more detailed analysis of the 2006 Census data, supplemented with ethnographic field research, is required to provide greater explanatory power to the data presented above. For example, in situations where parents and children are residing in the same dwelling, a family-based analysis of the 2006 Census data could take into consideration the ancestries of, and languages spoken at home by, both parents, and compare these with the ancestry and languages spoken at home responses of their children living at home, as well as the ages of these children. Such an analysis could provide an indication of language loss and maintenance within the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, especially if the period of residence in Australia and age of the parents and children were taken into account. In addition, ethnographic research could enhance the just proposed research by also investigating the ethnic identities of individuals concerned, as well as specifically investigating the ethnic identity of those who are part of inter-ethnic marriages/relationships. For example, we are aware of families with children in Australia where both parents were born and raised in Laos, and while one parent is ethnic Lao, the other parent is ethnic Vietnamese; in some of these inter-ethnic Lao-Vietnamese families only Lao is spoken, in other families only Vietnamese is spoken, and in some families both languages are spoken, by all family members. In this type of situation, how does one's ancestry and language usage influence their ethnic identity?

As noted earlier, the Australian census collects and codes data on only one non-English language spoken at home, which means in the case of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual individuals and families, which many Hmong and Lao families are, the census language spoken at home data do not provide an accurate and reliable indication of language usage, let alone ethnic identity and ethnic origin. However, it is our belief that the preceding data and analysis provide a reasonably good indication of the ethnicity of the Laos-born communities in Australia, as well as an understanding of the ethnic characteristics of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia.

In conclusion, this article has been able to construct a basic ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, and gained some idea of the size of the ethnic Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, but more research needs to be conducted if we are to gain a greater understanding of the ethnic diversity and dynamics of these communities. It is hoped,

members of the Hmong-Australian and Lao-Australian communities will take on this research in the near future.

Abstract

From the beginning of 1975 until mid-2008, approximately 11,200 Hmong and Lao immigrants and refugees have settled in Australia. Although these immigrants are well aware of their ancestral origins and ethnicity identity, within the broader Australian community there is a general ignorance of the ethnic diversity of Laos, as well as some misunderstanding about the number of Hmong and Lao immigrants and their descendants in Australia.

This article presents a brief preliminary analysis of *ancestry*, *country of birth*, and *language spoken at home* data from the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing relating to the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, with the main emphasis on the responses to the *ancestry* and *language spoken at home* questions. The analysis and data presented here seeks to (i) develop an ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, and to discuss how this profile has changed since 1986, and (ii) produce an estimate of the size of the ethnic Hmong and Lao communities in Australia as of mid-2006.

The 2006 Census data show that of those persons born in Laos, approximately 65 per cent indicated that they were of Lao ethnicity, 15 per cent of Chinese ethnicity, seven per cent of Hmong ethnicity and five per cent Vietnamese ancestry; while at the same time there were 2,190 people of Hmong ancestry and 10,769 of Lao ancestry resident in Australia.

Notes

1. At the beginning of 1975 there were about 150 Lao people in Australia, including students and diplomatic representatives (Coughlan 1990a: 101).

2. This paper is merely a starting point, as more detailed analysis of the 2006 Census data is required to construct comprehensive cultural-social, economic, and demographic profiles of these communities, along the lines of earlier analyses of Australian census data conducted by Coughlan (various years), Thatcher and Coughlan (1996), and Coughlan and Thatcher (1997).

3. See Coughlan (1990a: 4-6) for a brief discussion on this issue.

4. For a brief discussion of the history of developing and measuring ethnicity-related variables in modern Australian population censuses see Borrie (1984) and Coughlan (1990a: 6-7).

5. The *religious denomination* question is the only optional question in Australian population censuses.

6. Coughlan's (1989b) detailed analysis of the 1986 Census data for Asian-Australians - which incorporated an analysis of cross-tabulated responses to the ancestry (two responses if given), country of birth of person, country of birth of mother, country of birth of father and main non-English language spoken at home questions - concluded that overall Asia-born individuals' responses to the ancestry question delivered additional and valid data.

7. The author was employed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in the Population Census and Demography

Branch, during 1980-1986, and participated in the development of the ancestry question for the 1986 Census, as well as being a member of the Secretariat to the 1986 Population Census Ethnicity Committee. This Committee was chaired by Professor 'Mick' Wilfred David Borrie.

8. This confidence in the 1986 Census ancestry data does not automatically transfer to the 2006 Census data.
9. A 1982 Australian study of 156 Viet Nam-born immigrants revealed that 54 per cent spoke two languages other than English, and a further five per cent spoke three or more languages (Chiplely *et al.* 1985: 29).
10. The 2006 Census count is close to what was expected considering inter-census demographic events. Between the times of the 1986 and 2006 Censuses, approximately 3,450 Laos-born individuals arrived in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship *Settler Arrivals*, various years), while about 530 Laos-born individuals permanently emigrated from Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship *Emigration*, various years), giving a net gain of around 2,920 residents. Over the same period, roughly 430 Laos-born individuals died in Australia, producing an inter-census gain of about 2,490 Laos-born residents.

Thus, the 1986 Census count of 7,422 plus the overall inter-census gain of about 2,490, produces an expected count of approximately 9,910, slightly more than the actual count of 9,372 by 5.7 per cent, which is overall a very close result, assuming that both census counts are reliable.

11. In the 1986 Census, 881 individuals who provided Hmong as their ancestry (826 with Hmong as their first ancestry response, and 55 with Hmong as their second ancestry response) were coded as being born in Uruguay. While it is plausible that a few of these Hmong could have been born in Uruguay, it is probable that the vast majority were born in Australia, Laos or Thailand. The probable explanation as to how this error occurred is discussed in more detail in Coughlan (1988: 6-7).

12. Between 1984 and 2002, the only years for which data have been published, 725 Laos-born bridegrooms and 778 Laos-born brides had legal/registered marriages in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics *Marriages and Divorces*, various years). Of these 725 bridegrooms, 51.2 per cent married brides born in Laos and 7.6 married brides born in Australia; in addition, of the 778 brides, 47.7 per cent married bridegrooms born in Laos and 17.2 married bridegrooms born in Australia.

However, between 2001 and 2002, 171 Laos-born bridegrooms and 203 Laos-born brides had legal/registered marriages in Australia, and of the 171 bridegrooms, 44.4 per cent married brides born in Laos and 14.0 married brides born in Australia; in addition, of the 203 brides, 37.4 per cent married bridegrooms born in Laos and 20.7 married bridegrooms born in Australia, thereby indicating an increasing rate of inter-country of birth marriages involving the Laos-born communities.

In addition, Khoo and Lucas' (2004: 46) analysis of 2001 Australian Census ancestry data indicated that 21.3 per cent of married males of Lao ancestry had a spouse of a different ancestry, and 28.0 per cent of married females of Lao ancestry had a spouse of a different ancestry.

13. According to Michael Collins of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (personal communication, January 23, 2009): 'The processing of information from Census forms is now mostly automated, using scanning, Intelligent Character Recognition and other automated processes. Quality assurance procedures are used during Census processing to ensure processing errors are kept at an acceptable level.' Clearly 'an acceptable level' of errors is not high for the ABS.

As character recognition is used to capture the *ancestry*, *country of birth*, and *language spoken at home* data from the 2006 Census, it is probably that the responses 'Croatian' and 'Laotian', which do appear a little similar when written, have been confused by the computers reading the 2006 Census forms.

14. At times there will be slight variations in the totals for various categories between some of the tables presented here. This slight difference in the totals between tables is due to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

introducing random error in cross-tabulated tables to protect individual confidentiality. Thus, cells in cross-tabulations with low numerical values are to be interpreted with care, as the ABS warns: 'No reliance should be placed on small cells as they are impacted by random adjustment, respondent and processing error' (ABS, 2006: 201).

^{15.} The magnitude of immigration and emigration of Laos-born people into and out of Australia could be ascertained by examining the arrivals and departures data of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, based on country of birth by country of last residence for immigration movements, and country of proposed residence for emigration movements. Although such detailed data have been collected for many years, they are only available for purchase from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, and the author does not have these data at this time.

^{16.} In the 1986 Census, responses to the *country of birth of individual*, *country of birth of mother* and *country of birth of father* questions were coded to one of 89 specific countries and 9 general regional groupings. In addition, responses to the *ancestry* question were coded to one of 93 specific categories and three general categories, and data for the *language spoken at home* question were coded to 59 specific languages and five general categories.

However, for the 2006 Census, responses for country of birth of individual was coded to one of 284 categories, while responses for country of birth of mother and country of birth of father were coded to one of two categories (*Australia* or *Overseas*), while ancestry was coded to one of 274 categories and language spoken at home was coded to one of 430 categories.

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