

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I am joined today by Tom Chang, recent graduate of UW-Madison's Curriculum and Instruction master's program. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Tom Chang

No problem

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So it'd be great if you could first just give us kind of a general overview of your educational and linguistic background and what you're currently up to.

Tom Chang

Yes. So I am a first generation Hmong American student. I got a bachelor's degree in English. And then I continued on to earn a degree in Curriculum and Instruction at UW-Madison. And recently, I was accepted to a Ph.D program. So looking forward to going back to school.

Claire Darmstadter

Congratulations, I'm, so I'm pretty embarrassed to admit it. But up until probably about six months ago, I did not know much at all about the Hmong population in Wisconsin, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I get the feeling that I'm unfortunately not the only one in that boat. So can you speak a little bit about the visibility of the Hmong population here in Wisconsin and if you think it's been kind of positive attention when it does happen, or what's kind of the vibe that you get being in the state?

Tom Chang

Yeah, definitely. So I think, like, generally speaking, the Hmong population in Wisconsin, I should say, it is definitely more than other areas in the nation. But you got states like California or Minnesota, the Carolinas, like they have a great Hmong population as well. But in Wisconsin, specifically, just from like, personal experience, it seems like we're more located in bigger cities. So like Milwaukee, Madison, I'm from Sheboygan, Green Bay, and then the Fox Valley area, then through to like, La Crosse and Eau Claire, there's like Hmong populations there as well. But outside of like, those cities, I honestly don't really know. Or don't really, I haven't met a Hmong person to say, Oh, I'm from this part of Wisconsin where I've never heard of it before. Yeah. So yeah, like, honestly right from Green Bay, down to like, Milwaukee, maybe a bit past like, I've met Hmong people from there, again, like Fond du Lac, Madison, Fox Valley area. So yeah, I think we're more just centralized around those cities and not anywhere else, really.

Claire Darmstadter

And if I understand correctly, you used to work as an educational assistant for Hmong students, can you just kind of talk a little bit about this role, what entails, and why it might be an attractive opportunity for individuals who speak more than one language, but don't necessarily want to be like a front of the classroom first grade teacher?

Tom Chang

Yeah, definitely. So I was at a middle school. And so I worked with sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, and my role there was kind of a dual position. The first, the first thing I would do of course, I would be in a classroom, I would be helping students. And yes, while the role was considered like, you know, Hmong like, TA, or educational assistant, I was helping all students like no matter who they are, but it was, I was mainly there to hope for any sort of clarifications, or assessment is a big deal. So like, if students need more time that I could work with them more one-on-one. Sometimes they're just more comfortable working one on one with someone from their community, that might be very true for minority students. And also, the second portion of my role there I did a lot of like, translation and interpretation. And this was interesting, because when you translate things from English into Hmong, there's never, I mean, I shouldn't say never, but there, it's hard to get a very direct translation or interpretation. Like, typically speaking, I noticed when you speak to, like, older folks in the Hmong community, they kind of, they don't give you a direct answer. They talk in circles, they talk in circles to try to deliver some sort of message or lesson, whereas in English is very direct, you can make X and Y statements, and then get straight to the point. But Hmong doesn't always function that way. So when you are trying to interpret, when you're trying to translate, you really do need like maybe 10 words in Hmong just to describe one word in English. And sometimes we don't have a word in Hmong to describe what we're, yeah, we don't have a word. That's a direct translation, like a word such as program in English, we don't really have that our best way to like to deliver what a program might entail would be to say something along lines of *it's something designed to help you know this person or that person and this sort of respect.*

Claire Darmstadter

And do you feel like you had the opportunity to develop your Hmong abilities in a formalized setting where you're learning kind of how to translate things? Or was it more like you acquired it at home or growing up in your community and it was just kind of like, figure it out, you got to get a way to translate this between English.

Tom Chang

Yeah, definitely learning Hmong always occurred at home, there's really no, like, no standardized way that you would learn it in school. So of course, you know, you speak with your parents, your family, that's what you will learn Hmong. But for me like, like going back to this idea of like, we don't have very specific terms for anything that's based in mathematics or science. So when I started my role as a TA, I had to do a bit of learning, like, how do you go around describing like, circumference, right? How do I go about explaining to a parent, like what a school schedule will look like for their children based on what grade they're in. So like all of these different, conceptual ideas that we're so used to, you know, in English terms like they don't, they don't really exist in Hmong. So sometimes you just have to really create what's best for you, and what's going to fit your schema and also how the parents and families can understand that the best. And I think it's also important to note that, just because I can read and write Hmong, that doesn't mean that the children's parents could do the same. So like, you know while we can speak it, there was never a guarantee if I were to send a letter or permission slip home in Hmong that the parents could actually read it. So I found that verbal communication was much more valuable, although like, having things all in a written form was helpful as well.

Claire Darmstadter

And I also know that you said, you grew up in a city different from Madison, you've also experienced Madison, as well as other cities in the state going to college and different things. So can you kind of talk about any similarities or differences between being in these different areas? Or is one city more hospitable to Hmong speakers than another. I know, like Madison kind of has like this DLI Hmong immersion program, but that's kind of new. So can you kind of compare the areas you've been in Wisconsin?

Tom Chang

Yeah, I'm from, from being in Sheboygan for 27 years, I think, because it's such a smaller place. There's maybe like 50,000-55,000 people there. When of people we just generally know of each other a little bit more. And in terms of just the type of work that families are in. Yeah, like right around Sheboygan, there's a lot of factories, so you can expect that, you know, x, y, z children that their parents might work, first shift at this factory, maybe one parent work second shift at a different factory. So because of that, you can kind of anticipate if I'm going to call home, I might be able to reach mom or dad, right. And then you sort of build these relationships, just knowing that like, if I'm going to call home to this student, because maybe they didn't show up in class or they're having like, technical troubles, especially now, like during pandemic teaching. Like, these are the kinds of things that I would just use to make sure that I can contact the parents at a time but best for them. But like, because everyone knows each other so much. Because it's almost easier to get around from one school to another. They say, oh, hey, like, we have an interpreter who works at one of two high schools. And then like that interpreter might be able to contact the three middle schools there. So like in terms of just sheer population and size, it almost seems a bit more manageable, and maybe even easier to get your lines of communication through. And then here in Madison, I mean, it's such a bigger city. I don't know how many schools there are, but I'm sure there's more than there are in Sheboygan, and everything is a bit more spread out. Okay, anyways, moving on. Um, yeah, the city and how it's laid out because here there's this idea of like, oh, like UW-Madison and what UW stands for as an institution of higher education. Whereas in Sheboygan, like outside of high school, a lot of folks and a lot of my friends, we move out to different cities to pursue education. So while we have to leave home, our home is not always so far and here in Madison, if you're born here, and you have the chance to go to UW then that you don't have to go anywhere. So and like that the idea of family might be a lot closer and also just the idea of being at a bigger school like, conceptually, what are these, what are these things that I can use to, to chase my ambition, all the different available resources, they seem more like readily available here only because the place is so big, and there's so many different schools and so many people you can talk to you. And where I think Sheboygan is like once you get your hands on all of your resources, and maybe you've exhausted every option, but you're still not getting the answer that you might be looking for. That's when things begin to get a bit tricky. I feel. I think I think size is a big factor, like relative distance between you and family, and also understanding that I might need to leave home in order to pursue schooling. That's a really, really big thing that kind of shoots us out the door when we're ready for it.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and so I had the opportunity to read Hmong Wisconsin, and that's a fantastic book, I really recommend it to other people, because it's just really approachable. And I think it was a really broad overview and, you know, really important for people in Wisconsin to understand, but there's not many other texts that I know that speak specifically about Hmong speakers in Wisconsin, or just in general, are there any like books or resources you could recommend that people could check out?

Tom Chang

Yes, I am a huge fan of a book, titled The Late Homecomer, the author is Kao Kalia Yang. She's also written I believe it's called The Song Poet. That's a memoir. She's also written a children's book, I forget the title. But I know she has a children's book as well. But I absolutely love The Late Homecomer really, because it captures his sense of like an unedited and unwritten history that she begins with her parents and how her parents met and how they have such a small intimate wedding in the middle of the jungle because they were, you know, running away from persecution. And, you know, that the safest place next to Laos was Thailand, so a lot of Hmong families, you know, needed to cross the Mekong River, needed to go to Thailand, and there they became refugees. So she was able to capture the journey from Laos, to Thailand, to the United States, where she ultimately grew up and went to school and pursued college as well. And through all of that, she was still able to maintain the narrative of what family means and her relationship with her parents and her grandma as well and the rest of her siblings. So like, when I first read this book, I just can't believe it took me this many years to read it. And I feel like this is a text that, like everybody should just read. There's so much value, so much knowledge and wisdom, based in folklore, based on philosophy and belief. And again, it's a part of history that isn't really taught in books. It's a part of history that nobody really knows about, unless you either grew up in the Hmong community, you've heard of Hmong people, or like you just, you know, you have Hmong friends, and you become good friends, and they, they share these things with you. And oftentimes, a lot of the older folks, they may not be willing to share in such great detail due to things like emotional trauma. A lot of folks may have seen things that no five year olds just see, should ever see because of warfare, persecution, starvation. And there's all sorts of like, all sorts of unimaginable things that people have gone through and Kao Kalia Yang and was able to put that into words that I think anybody can read and simply just understand.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I will for sure, leave links down to the books and her other works as well because I think people would really enjoy that. So finally, in celebration of multilingualism, can you give me one reason if you can boil it down to one, why speaking more than one language is a superpower as we tell kids, and you can answer in English, in Hmong, in a mix of the two, whatever works best for you?

Tom Chang

Yes, I would like to give my answer in English because I think if I did Hmong, it might take like three days. But, the way I see it, we use language as a form and as a method to reflect what we

know of in this world and, and ultimately, that becomes a form of truth. So we could say things in one language about television, and the colors that it produces and the sound that it makes and what it allows you to do, and, you know, the entertainment that it provides, we can say that in English, that's one mode of understanding, but we can say it in a different language, whether it is Hmong, Spanish, German, whatever language that may be, suddenly your knowledge, it becomes twofold, right? And in doing so, suddenly you have in a sense, you have double the knowledge of a monolingual person. And your way of expression just might grow exponentially. This, I think this will translate into any sort of form of communication, whether it's art, writing, singing, again, like it doesn't matter. But the more times you can explain and re-explain the same thing, but in different languages and forms then I think that the greater it is in which we can develop a deeper understanding of what that thing truly is.

Claire Darmstadter

Most definitely. Well, thank you so much. So well said, I really appreciate you chatting with me and I wish you all the best as you pursue your PhD.

Tom Chang

Thank you so much. It's not very often that I get to share my own thoughts and feelings about the Hmong language and what it means to be a person from this community, but I truly appreciate it, definitely is it this is a rare opportunity. Thank you for reaching out.