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# The Xiong Family: A Documentary Photo Essay

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Focusing on a Hmong family I've known over the years, I decided last fall to begin documenting their daily lives at home. The Xiong family, consisting of a father, mother, and their twelve children, live in an apartment on Chicago's northside.

When I began photographing them the oldest child was 16 years old and the youngest just 3 months. With such a big family each child has certain responsibilities. For example, Nkauj Iab, age 9, is in charge of bringing out the folding chairs and putting them away before and after each meal. Elizabeth, the oldest, 17 now, is in charge of cooking dinner each night and holding down the fort while her mother is away working the second-shift. Poj Laim, age 10, sweeps up the rice that falls on the floor after each meal. The older sons help their dad work on the apartment buildings that he owns. And, of course, everyone chips in to take care of the youngest two members of the Xiong family, Honey, age 2, and Yeng Meng, just 1 year old. In fact, sometimes I find myself putting down my camera to watch over one of the young ones.

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## **Xiong Hu talks about the naming of his children:**

' ' I'm Xiong Hu. I've been living in Chicago since 1979, that's when I got my first daughter called Nkauj Ntsuab Elizabeth (age 17). That means, Nkauj Ntsuab, the most beautiful girl according to the Hmong. And Elizabeth, I named her with the English name Elizabeth after Queen Elizabeth because she's the most powerful of the ladies at this time.

'The second daughter I call Maiv Tshiab (age 16). Maiv Tshiab, that means Michelle. It translates as the new, the very new girl.

'And the third child called Genghis Khan (age 15). I named him after the emperor of Mongolia, Genghis Khan.

'The fourth child, I named him Saub (age 14). That means God, the first God. He's in heaven, so he knows everything about the earth. No matter what you do or how you do you always ask Saub. He knows ahead of time.

'Then the fifth child, I named her Kab Nqos Vias (age 13). That means the insect that sings very nice - very nice voice (type of locust). So I named her after that insect.

'And then the sixth one I call Siv Yis (age 12). Siv Yis, that means the shaman or the Saviour. According to the Hmong history, he's the first shaman.

'Then after Siv Yis I got another daughter named Poj Laim (age 10). That means the thunder or lightning. Very fast like the lightning or thunder, so I call her Poj Laim.

'Then after Poj Laim I got another daughter I call Nkauj Iab (age 9), that means Eve, the first woman born to earth, like Adam and Eve.

'After Nkauj Iab I got two other daughters, a set of twins, but they passed away after three hours.

'Then after that I got another daughter. My wife and I went to China in 1989. My wife got pregnant from China so I named this daughter the Little China Doll or the Hmong name I call her Nkauj Suav (age 6).

'After Nkauj Suav I got a boy. I named him Muv or Xub Muv (age 5). Muv means the bee. The whole name together, Xub Muv, means beehive, like lots of bees together because I have a lot of children together just like a beehive.

'After Muv I got another daughter. I call her Zib (age 2), that means Honey. The honey from the bee.

'Then after Honey I got another boy I call Yeng Meng (age 1)

or Caesar. Named after an ancient warrior from China that they call Yeng Meng or Yu Meng. I named him after that because my uncle Xiong Xeng was fond of this name for quite some time. He wanted to give this name to one of his children but he got 8 daughters and never get a son! So he asked me before he died of cancer to name one of my sons after this name. So I gave this name to my youngest son Yeng Meng.'

### Viewing the photos:

Two methods are available for viewing this photo essay. One can click on any preview photo below to go to the full size photo with its own screen. One can also start at the [beginning](#) and take a virtual "walking tour" as if one were at a gallery.

All photos are scanned from the original black and white prints at 75 dpi in 256 grays. There is a loss of quality when using most WWW browsers. For best viewing, use [Netscape Navigator 3.0](#) or newer.

### The Xiong Family



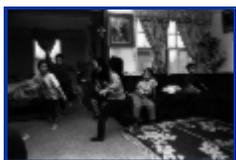
Xub Muv on back porch.  
'Xub Muv' means 'beehive.'



Saub pets his rabbit while his uncles prepare a sacrificial pig.



Kab Nqos Vias blowing bubbles for sisters Honey (left) and Nkauj Iab (middle).



Nkauj Iab and Xub Muv playing with cousins.



Saub comforting Honey.



Cousins from Oshkosh, WI come for a visit. They're watching a Chinese movie dubbed in Hmong language.



Xiong Chuhu, the father, ties strings of blessing on his parents' wrists while other relatives wait their turn.



Saub examines his haircut in the mirror while brothers and sister look on.



'Elizabeth' with portrait of her mother. Her father named her after Queen Elizabeth



Easter Sunday. Elizabeth teaches sisters and cousins how to make Easter eggs.



Honey (on right) and cousin Kadu playing Kung Fu together.



Genghis Khan and Saub playing Super Nintendo video game as siblings look on.



Siv Yis holding Hmong crossbow. 'Siv Yis' is the first shaman in Hmong folklore.



Maiv Tshiab (Michelle) with photo I took of her 11 years ago.

**Joe Davy** has worked with the Hmong for over 16 years studying their language and culture. He has a B.A. degree in cultural anthropology and worked in Hmong refugee camps in Thailand for 3 years. Presently he works as a free-lance documentary photographer and resides in Chicago. Those interested in seeing more of his work or commenting on his work may contact him via e-mail at: [JM-DAVY@neiu.edu](mailto:JM-DAVY@neiu.edu)

[\[return to top of page\]](#)