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June 23, 2000

Mr. Wayne Johnson  
Bureau of Refugee Programs  
1200 University Ave., Suite D  
Des Moines, Iowa 50314

Dear Wayne,

The word "refugee" always thrilled me to the heart because I've been a refugee most of my life. I felt so happy to be able to attend the town meeting, "Refugees and Immigration: Humanitarian Response and Workforce Implications," sponsored by former Ambassador Kenneth Quinn.

Born a free Tai girl in the Tai Federation (today's Northwest Vietnam) in 1953, I turned to be a refugee on my first birthday when the communist Vietnamese won the battle in Muong Theng (Dien Bien Phu) in 1954. I stayed a refugee for twenty years while I grew up in Laos. Nevertheless, being again a newborn refugee in a refugee camp in Thailand in 1975 and then in the United States until 1985 trashed me to my bones. I became a U.S. citizen in 1985. However, the unspeakable hardship that I faced was just a tiny dust comparing to my parents' suffering for leaving their hometown, their properties, their relatives, especially their beloved country. They had risked their own and their dear family's lives fleeing the communist, encountered multi difficulties in refugee camps with no resource and no adequate aid from outside, and faced numerous obscure and uncertain days. All this doomed ordeal was just for the sake of the word "freedom" -- for their children, not even for their own because they were already too old to enjoy such a luxury.

However, to hear *non-refugees*, such as former Ambassador Ken Quinn, former Governor Robert Ray and you, spoke vividly about refugees' struggling in 1975 in the refugee camps and then in Iowa touched me so deeply. You talked like everything was happening just yesterday. Your compassion and help to the refugees through various programs, especially the Refugee Task Force, did help us, the Tai Dam, more than anywhere else we received in our past refugee life. We appreciated it from the deep of our hearts. But the two names you gave "great credits" to, in your speech and on the newsletter *A Tradition of Time*: Houng Baccam and Faluang Baccam, disturbed me immensely then and thereafter.

Houng and Faluang do not deserve even a bit of credits. The successfulness and highly achievement of the Tai Dam refugees in Iowa were totally due to the great help of our sponsors and the immense efforts of the refugees ourselves. The Refugee Task Force did help at some degrees, such as finding sponsors and mainly the reunification of families, but only in the first few years. Despite their positions, their salaries, their available times, their opportunities and knowledge, Houng and Faluang seldom extend their assistance to the refugees with kindness and sincerity as they have been assigned to. Not only they distance themselves from helping the needy people by scolding or speaking harshly words, they keep away potential opportunities by not sharing educational and training programs or good job openings with Tai Dam people, unlike the Hmong and Lao. Only a handful, their immediate families and their close colleagues, benefited from their being "respectful officials."

What the Tai Dam got in our new lives in Iowa, *successful and not*, was totally from the result of our assistance to each other, from our own time, and between our own capacity. To survive, Tai Studies Center and other Tai Dam organizations such as SOTAF (Society of Thaidam-American Friendship) and Kadsan Thaidam Society have been incorporated and served our own members for this desperate purpose. Despite all difficulties, a quarter-century has successfully passed by for the Tai Dam in the United States. Every Tai Dam, except Houng-Faluang and their colleagues, deserves all of the credits.

The Tai Dam as well as Asian culture always say:..."Never say bad things about your family to other people!" On the one hand, this enlightenment has been engraved in the Tai Dam's minds and souls because we have been through all bad and worse times of our refugee life together for over 45 years. We are more than a "family" for each other, especially me. Houng is more than a first cousin for me because I lost my father when I was not even one year's old, and my only brother is still left behind in Laos. Faluang is my 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> cousin, but he was my brother's best friend and used to spend a lot of time with my family in Laos. But on the other hand, the hard way of learning of the word "freedom" on which my parents risked their own lives have pulled me out from the entrapment. It took me twenty-five years to take the courage to exercise my right, this freedom – "Speak up your mind if you think it will be helpful to you and others."

To speak up against "them" seems to me as to commit a sin. But the free life that I enjoyed for a quarter of a century in the United States and the sacrifice that my parents had endured have been weighting down terribly on me. I need to express myself to you. I strongly believe that the state and federal agencies not only waste their resources by entrusting to Mr. Houng and Faluang this noble task, they are also giving them opportunities to "withhold" the Tai Dam from advancement for a better life and a better America. Now then ever, having crossed our first and most hardship stage of our

new lives in America, we don't think we need their help on what so ever, especially when 90 percent of us are now U.S. citizens, not refugees anymore. This may be my own opinion, but I am sure that it is not too far away from other 4 or 5 thousand Tai Dam's minds. I hope my strait expression will help you to understand a little bit more about the Tai Dam and to better serve future needy refugees.

I will be more than happy to meet you and discuss further my expression at your convenience.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Siang Bacthi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Siang Bacthi

cc: Former Governor Robert Ray  
Former Ambassador Ken Quinn  
Governor Tom Vilsack