

Becoming Locals: Place-Making and the Hmong in Eau Claire, Wisconsin

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Abstract

Since they first began arriving in the United States in the late 1970's, Hmong refugees have established numerous communities across Wisconsin & Minnesota. Though immigration from Southeast Asia continues, the Hmong community is well-established as 1st and 2nd generation Hmong-Americans participate in community and local place-making. This research uses the framework developed by Nelson and Hiemstra (2008) to examine the incorporation of immigrants into the non-immigrant host community in Eau Claire County. We examine how Hmong immigrants in Wisconsin's Chippewa Valley interact with the non-immigrant host community and the extent to which the Hmong are participating in local place-making. That is, after three decades, are the Hmong becoming the host community and establishing a sense of belonging in places like Eau Claire? To help us answer this question, and to understand the relationship between the Hmong immigrants and the non-immigrant population, we investigate the socio-spatial patterns of the Hmong and how these relationships have changed over time. We draw on interviews and first-hand accounts of Hmong immigrants, census data, and public records in our effort to better understand the changing diversity of Western Wisconsin.

Methods

Our research draws from:

- Personal interviews
- Census data
- Field observation
- Museum archives

Objectives

- To determine if and how the Hmong themselves are becoming full and participatory members of the host community after three decades in the Eau Claire community.
- To use sociospatial patterns to understand the relationship between the migrant and non-migrant communities (Nelson & Hiemstra 2008).

Results

The maps in the lower left have been produced to help represent the sociospatial patterns relevant to Hmong immigrants in Eau Claire. The names associated with the 18 Hmong clans were used to obtain address listings from the Eau Claire city directories for the target years. These addresses were then geocoded (represented by the black dots) to show the distribution of Hmong residents within Eau Claire county. Because of the limited availability of census data for 1980 and 2010, these two maps simply depict the growth and expansion of the Hmong population in Eau Claire over the 30 year period. Note that the 1980 figures are quite small and limited only to Eau Claire county, but by 2010 growth has been sufficient to warrant the inclusion of Chippewa and Dunn counties as well. The data for 1990 and 2000 is confined to Eau Claire county, but has been placed in context with some of the available census figures. Unfortunately the census data for these years does not distinguish "Hmong" from "Asian," though for the purposes of this project the difference in numbers would be almost entirely negligible, and thus the terms are treated as though they are synonymous.

When comparing the 1990 map depicting overall population density of the county with its counterpart showing the Asian population density, it is clear that Hmong immigrants were settling in areas that were relatively densely populated. While this trend is still evident in the versions of these maps for 2000, it is also apparent that Hmong residents are not strictly confined to these areas as they are counted in several new census tracts on both sides of the density spectrum. This distribution is important because it necessarily leads to a high level of meaningful sociospatial interaction between the Hmong and non-Hmong populations in the city, whereas this could be avoided if migrants were confined to fringe areas. This sort of exposure helps foster mutual changes in the identities of migrant and host community alike, and is a central theme in the process of place-making and belonging (Nelson and Hiemstra, 322).

The median income maps for 1990 and 2000 indicate that meaningful economic opportunities are available and utilized by the Hmong populations in Eau Claire. The map for 1990 indicates that the vast majority of the Hmong populations were concentrated in the parts of the city with the highest concentration of low incomes; however, the 2000 map shows that a substantial number of Hmong residents had moved into higher income brackets and districts (especially to the north). It is also important to note that while the majority are still located in the lower income districts of the city, the actual value of these incomes has increased dramatically. These changes demonstrate a high level of participation in the local economy, which serves to lessen or prevent much of the backlash that is often observed towards immigrant groups that depend heavily on low wage jobs and low income housing (Nelson and Hiemstra, 328-9).

Political activity and advocacy are also identified by Nelson and Hiemstra as being important elements in the place-making process (329). In the case of Eau Claire it is clear that Hmong immigrants are active in this regard, as evident in the timeline above. In 1996, 20 years after the arrival of the first Hmong immigrant family, Eau Claire became the first in the state to have a Hmong representative on the city council when it elected Joe Bee Xiong to the position; six years later Saidang Xiong was also elected to the council. These cases, along with the selection of Kaying Xiong as principle of Locust Lane Elementary School (part of ECASD) in 1995, demonstrate that the community as a whole is willing to have Hmong residents hold positions of authority.

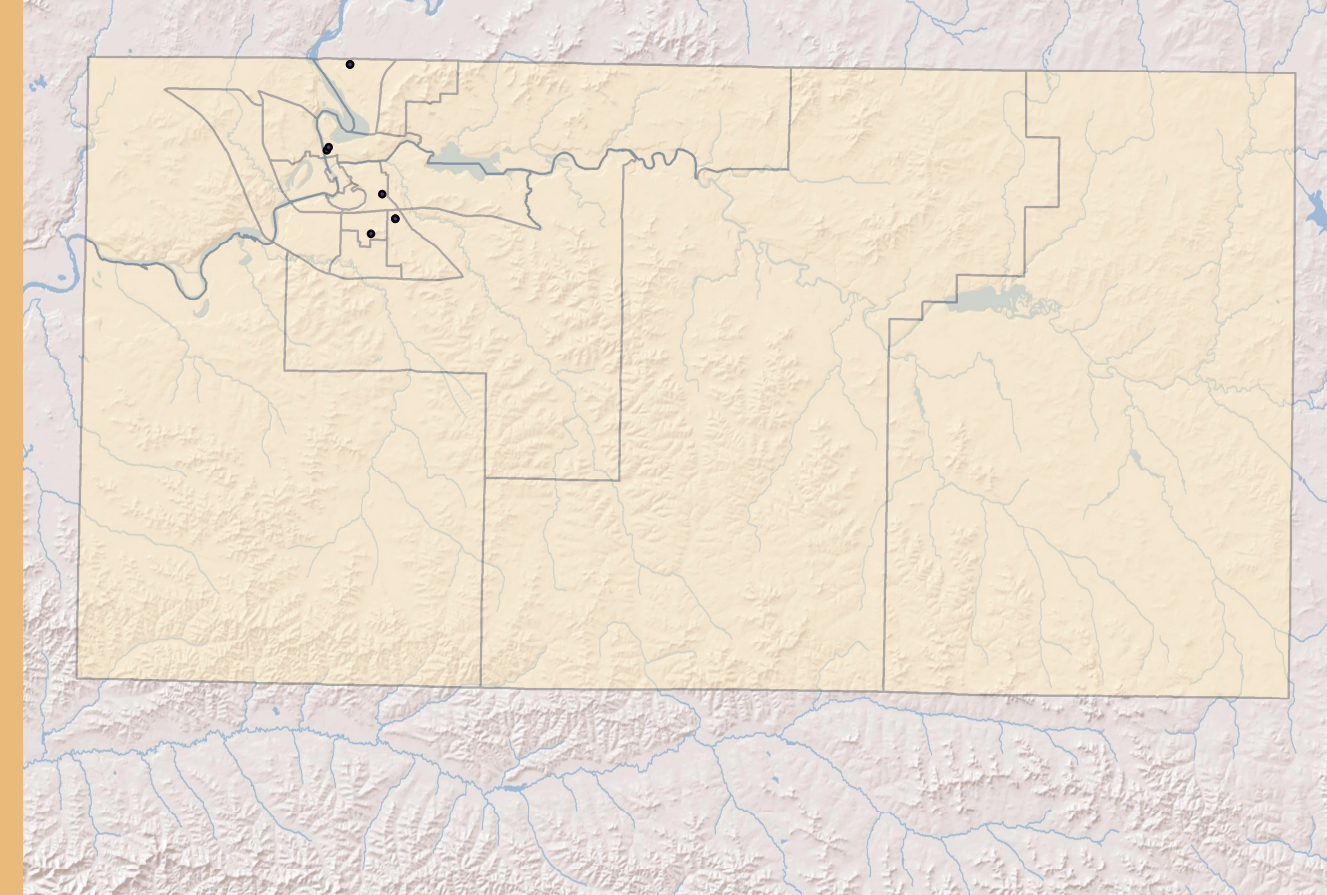
Similarly, institutional support structures offering services such as job placement, job training, and language assistance facilitate the formation of identity and belonging (Nelson and Hiemstra, 330). The establishment of the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (HMAA) in 1983 (see timeline) ensured that Hmong migrants and residents in Eau Claire would have access to these types of services. In the time since, the HMAA has expanded its program offerings and has remained an integral part of the thriving Hmong community.

Timeline

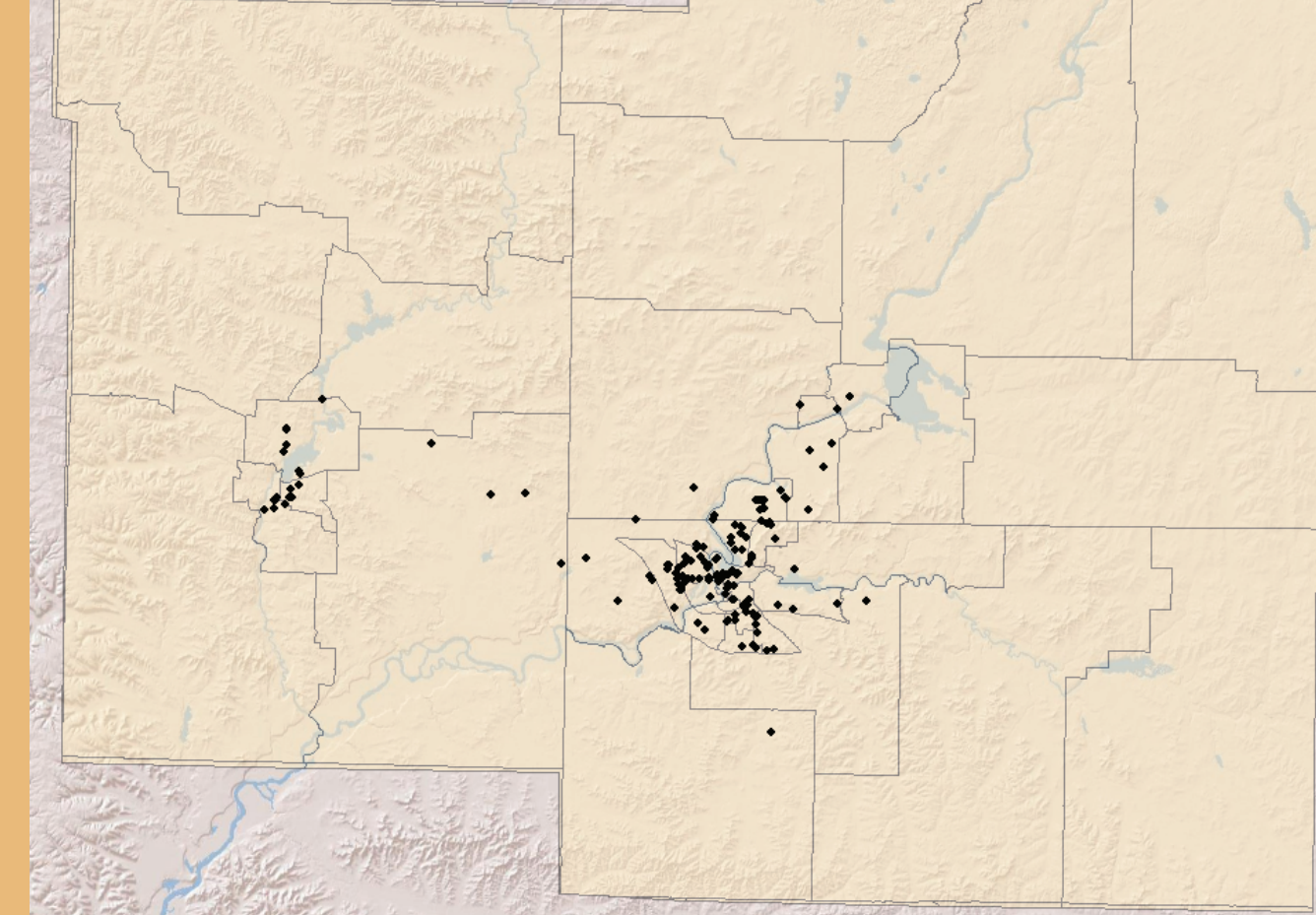
1976	1983	1989	1996	2001	2002	2005
Yong Kay Moua and family arrives in Eau Claire	HMAA was established	Ameriental Food Store opens	Joe Bee Xiong becomes 1st elected Hmong City Council Member in WI	Kaying Xiong becomes first Hmong principal in WI	Saidang Xiong elected to the Eau Claire City Council	Most recent wave of Hmong immigrants to Eau Claire, WI

Maps

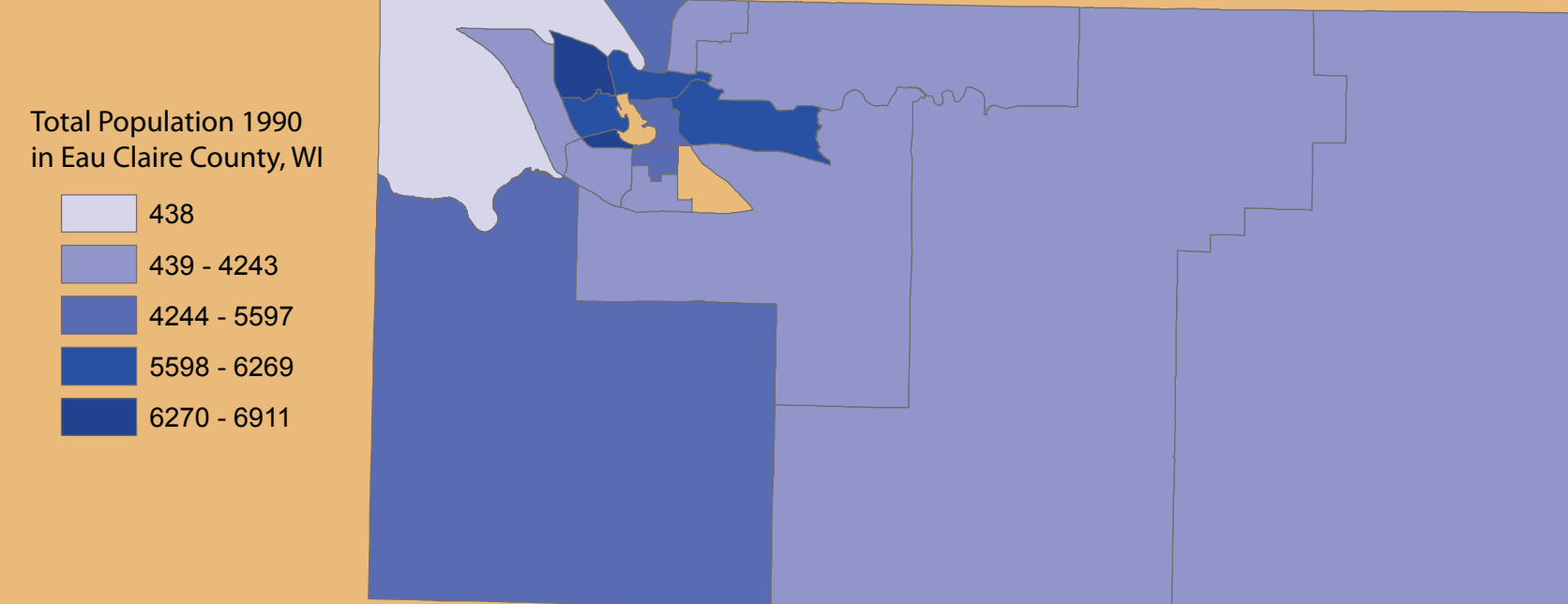
1980 Hmong Residences in Eau Claire County, WI



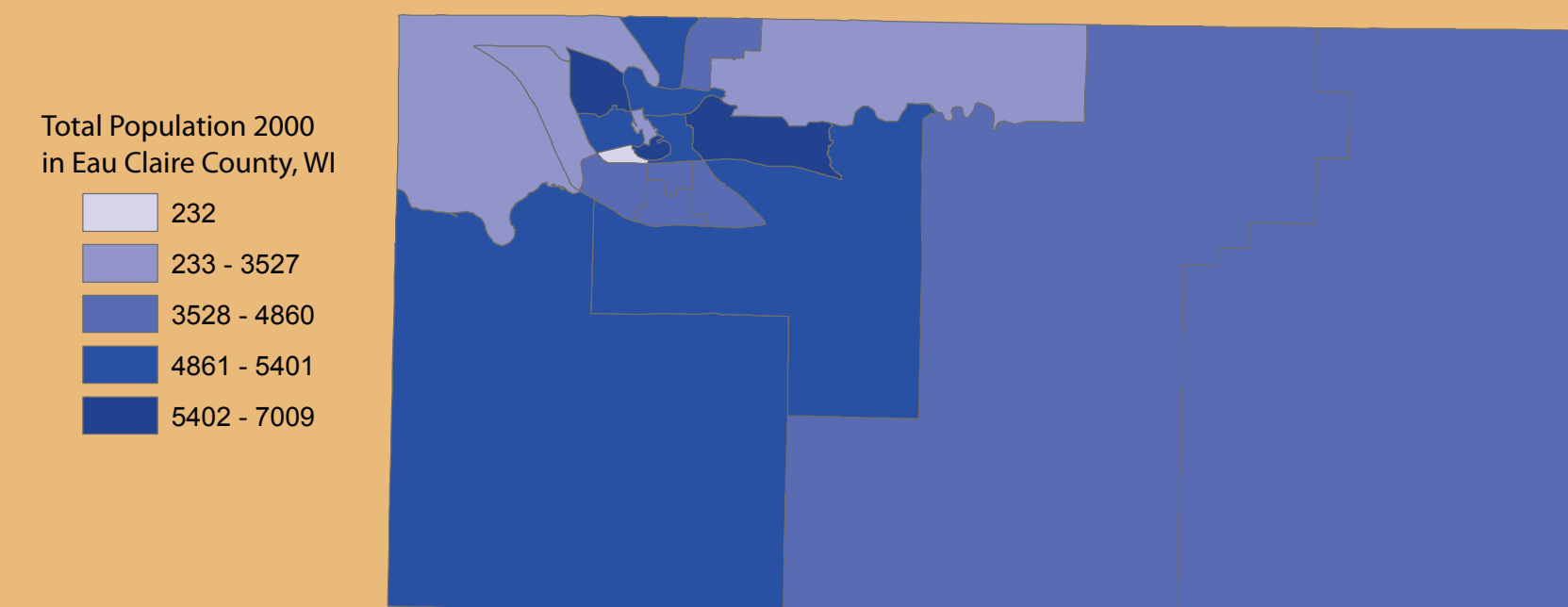
2010 Hmong Residences



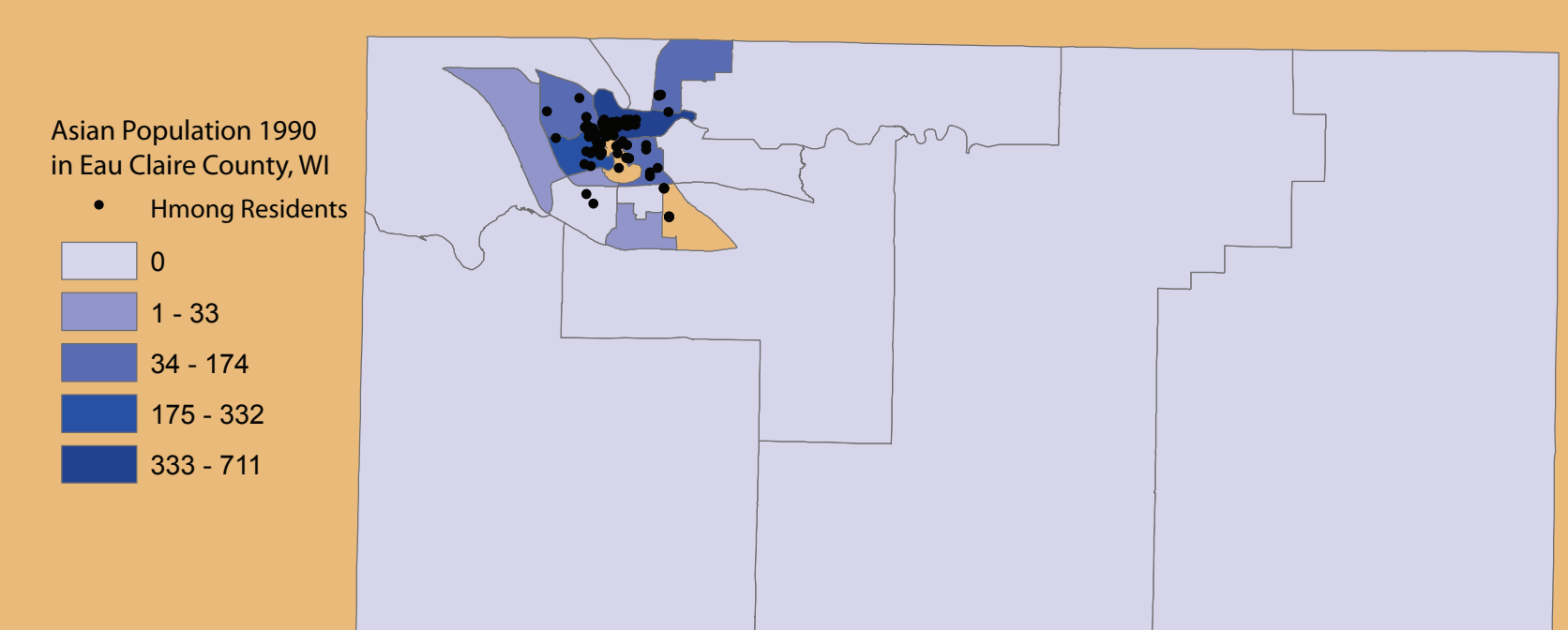
Total Population In Eau Claire County, WI -- 1990*



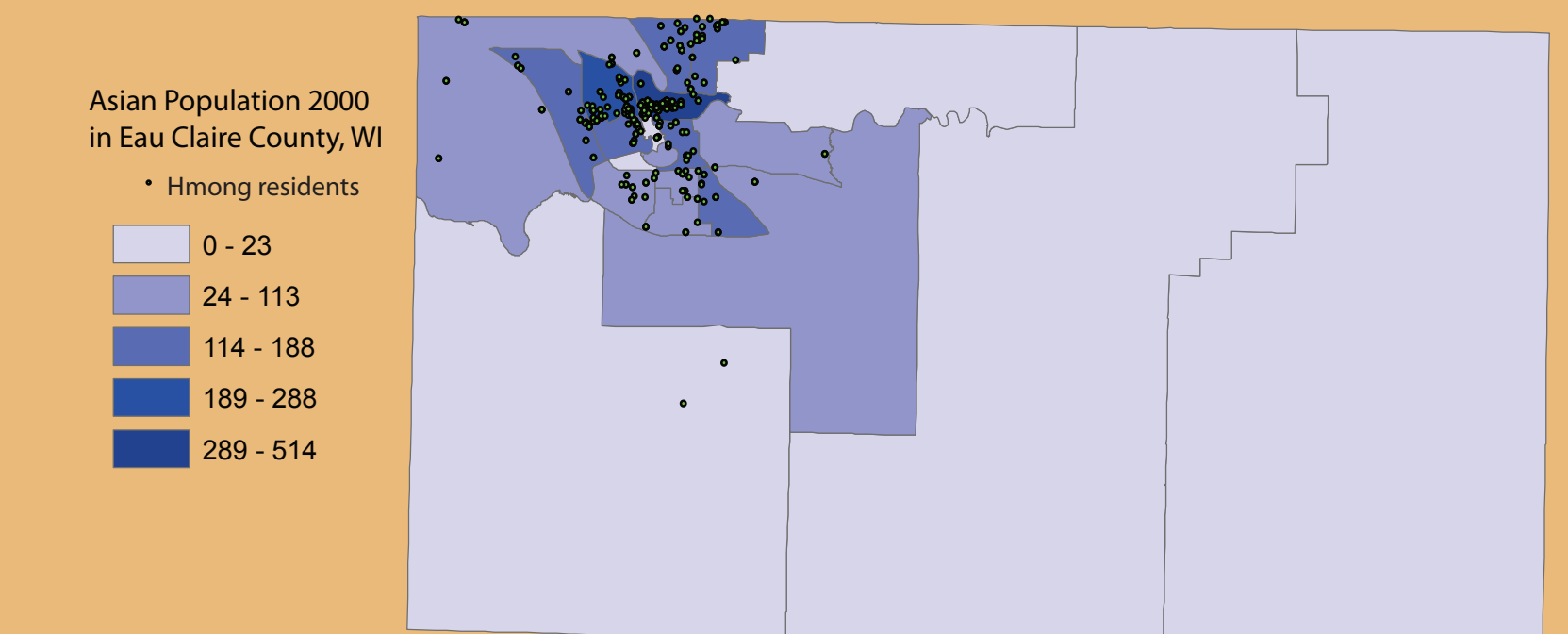
Total Population in Eau Claire County, WI -- 2000



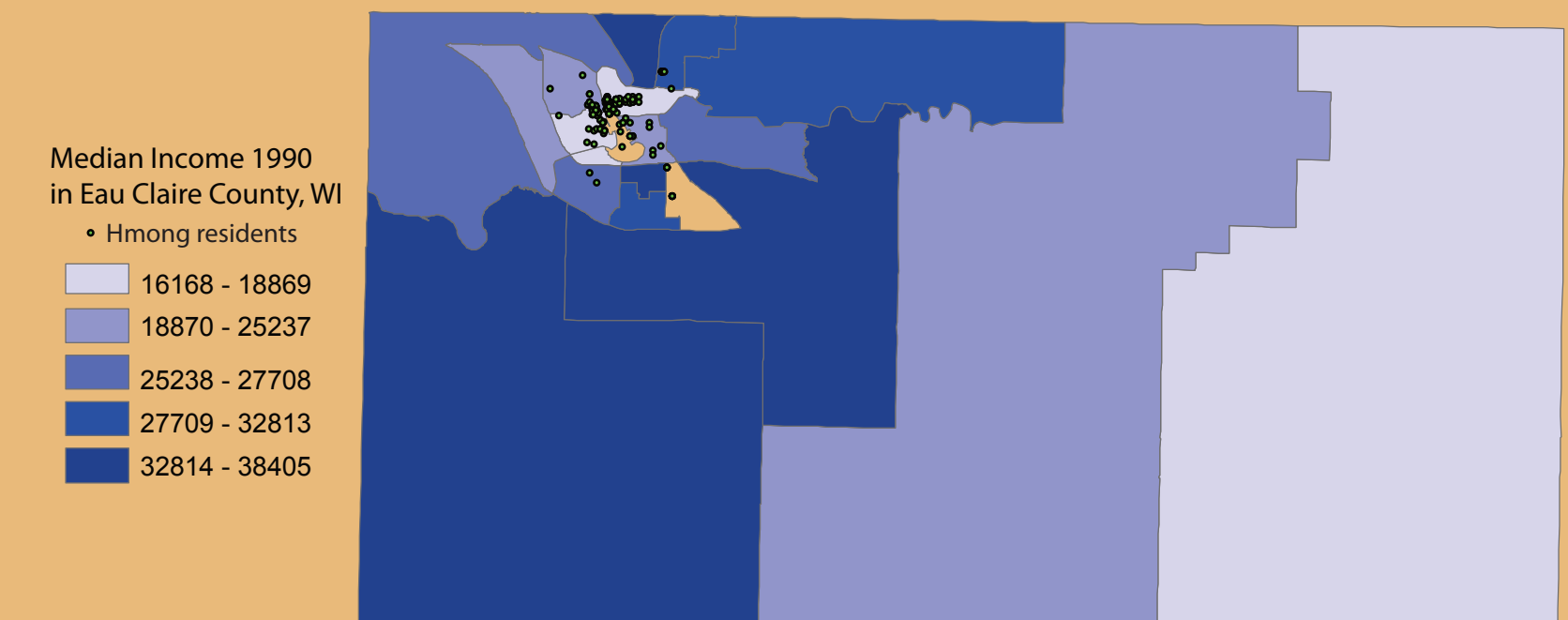
Asian Population in Eau Claire County, WI -- 1990*



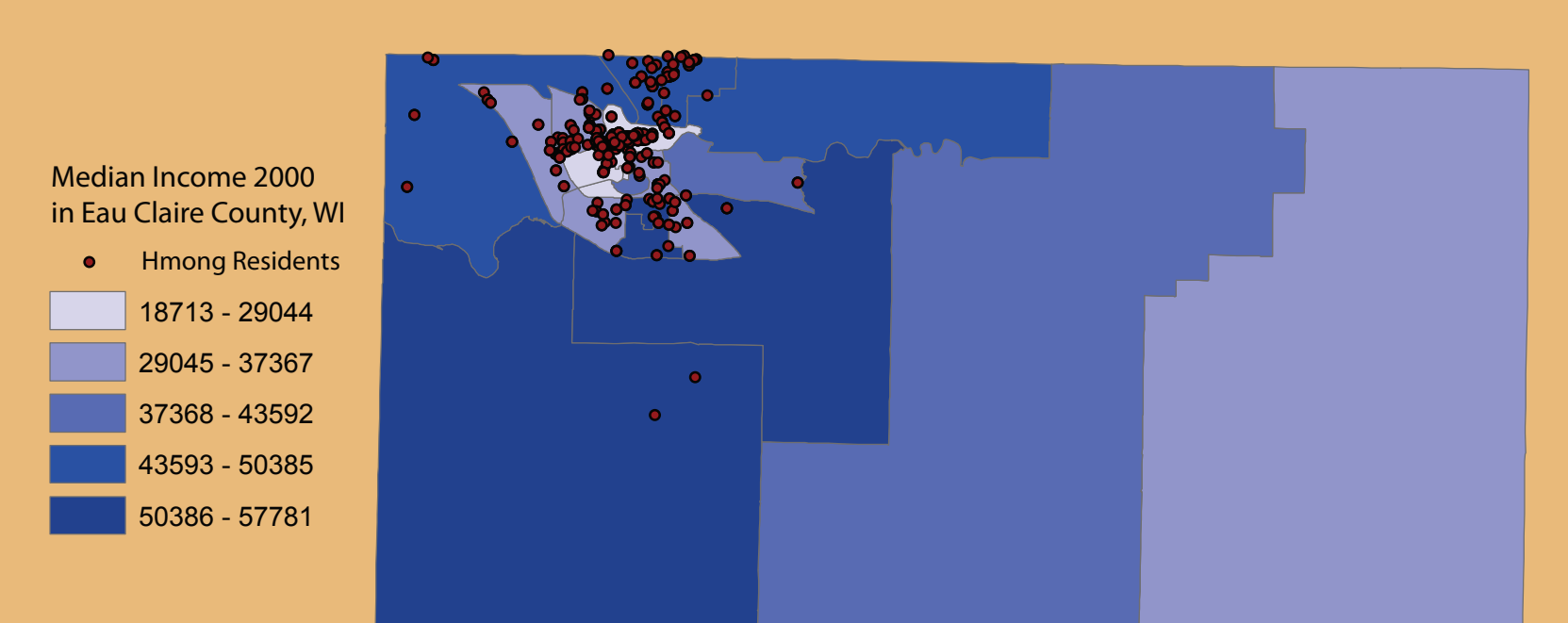
Asian Population in Eau Claire County, WI -- 2000



Median Income in Eau Claire County, WI -- 1990*



Median Income in Eau Claire County, WI -- 2000



Hmong Businesses/Church



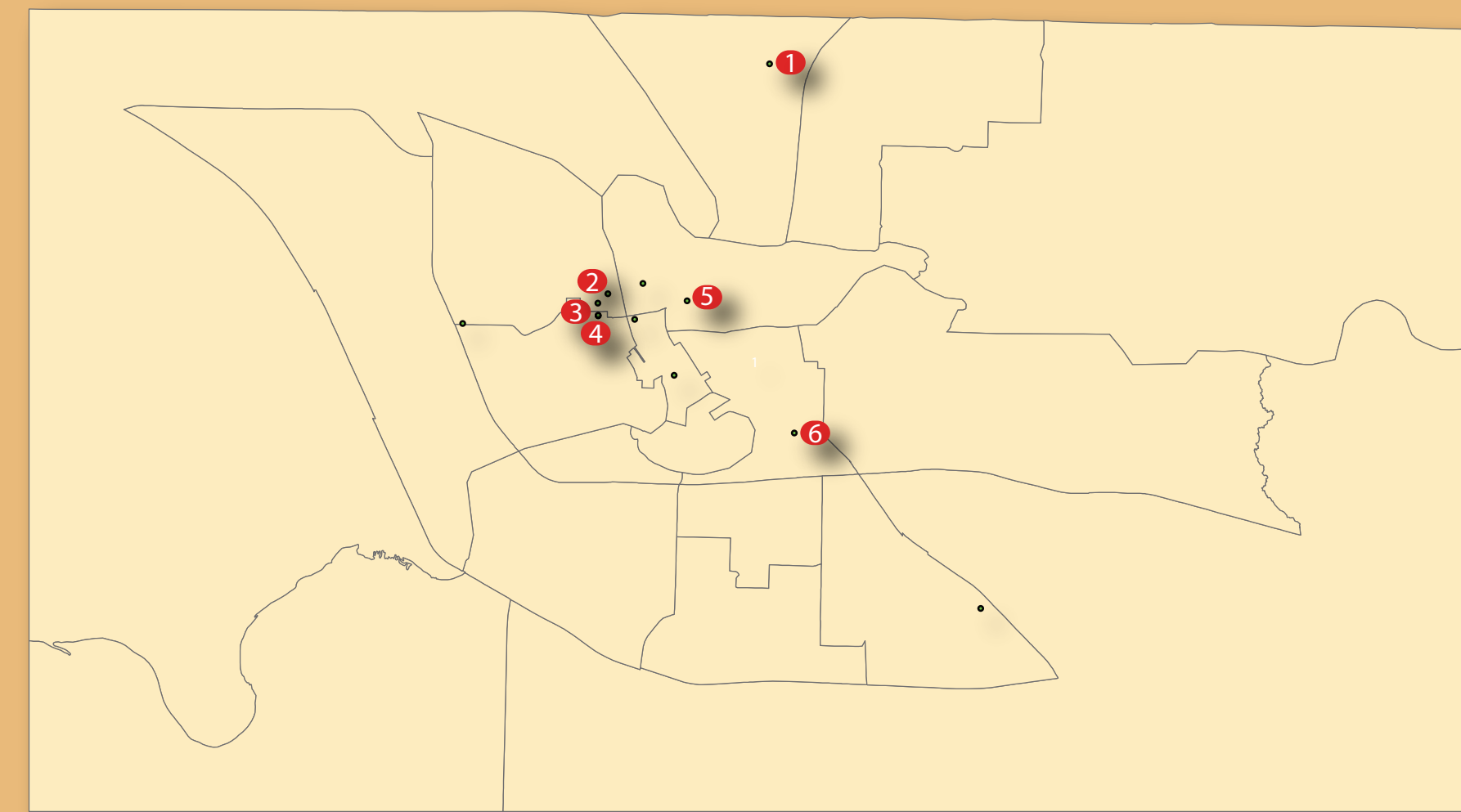
1 Asian Cafe
2121 Eddy Lane



2 First Hmong Missionary Alliance Church
1814 Bellinger Street



3 Long Cheng Market
1619 Bellinger Street



4 L'Oriental Store
1607 Bellinger Street



5 Ameriental Food Store
416 Putnam Street



6 Hmong American Insurance Services
2016 Brackett Avenue

Conclusion

Our findings support the idea that Hmong migrants have established a solid sense of place within Eau Claire county, and are continuing to cement this legacy with each new generation. Instead of creating an isolated Hmong community within Eau Claire, they have interwoven themselves into the existing community without sacrificing their own cultural identities. At the same time the non-migrant population of Eau Claire appears to have reshaped its own identity to include Hmong in its own identity. All facets of modern economic, political, and social life in Eau Claire now include Hmong influences.

Furthermore, we suspect that their place-making patterns make the Hmong distinct from other migrant groups within the area for several reasons. First, Hmong migration to Western Wisconsin predates that of other minority groups to the region. This serves to place them a generation or two ahead of more recent arrivals such as the Somali immigrants also found in this area. This facilitates their formation of identity as language barriers and cultural clashes lessen with each subsequent generation. Second, the Hmong are unique in that they do not have a distinct home state in the traditional sense. While connections to the homeland certainly exist, the lack of an official state and the nationalism often associated with it lessens one of the more prominent obstacles to establishing a new home. Third, the issue of undocumented immigration does not affect the Hmong to the extent that immigrants from nearby countries like Mexico. Whereas Latino immigrants are often faced with barriers to belonging as a result of these types of suspicions whether they migrated legally or otherwise, Hmong immigrants are rarely accused of being undocumented. This means that unlike their Latino counterparts, Hmong migrants are not viewed as a potential threat based on their means of entry. Finally, the circumstances under which the Hmong originally immigrated caused them to be viewed differently by host communities than would have been the case had they come voluntarily.

References

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- U.S. Census Bureau 2000. *Summary File 3 (Eau Claire County Tracts: P6, Race)*. http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTSUBJECTSHOWTABLES?_ts=321556891872; accessed 30 March 2011.
- U.S. Census Bureau 2000. *Summary File 3 (Eau Claire County Tracts: P53, Median Household Income)*. http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTSUBJECTSHOWTABLES?_ts=321556891872; accessed 30 March 2011.

Acknowledgements

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* The blank 1990 census tracts are due to using 2000 census tracts with 1990 data. Census tracts may change from census to census for political reasons.