

A massive Powerball win draws attention to a little-known immigrant culture in the U.S.

By Claire Rush and Gene Johnson
The Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — Cheng “Charlie” Saephan wore a broad smile and a bright blue sash emblazoned with the words “Iu-Mien USA” as he hoisted an oversized check for \$1.3 billion above his head.

The 46-year-old immigrant’s luck in winning an enormous Powerball jackpot in Oregon in April — a lump sum payment of \$422 million after taxes, which he and his wife will split with a friend — has changed his life. It also raised awareness about Iu Mien people, a southeast Asian ethnic group with origins in China, many of whose members fled from Laos to Thailand and then settled in the U.S. following the Vietnam War.

“I am born in Laos, but I am not Laotian,” Saephan told a news conference in late April at Oregon Lottery headquarters, where his identity as one of the jackpot’s winners was revealed. “I am Iu Mien.”

During the Vietnam War, the CIA and U.S. military recruited Iu Mien in neighboring Laos, many of them subsistence farmers, to engage in guerrilla warfare and to provide intelligence and surveillance to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail that the North Vietnamese used to send troops and weapons through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam.

After the conflict as well as the Laotian civil war, when the U.S.-backed government of Laos fell in 1975, they fled by the thousands to avoid reprisals from the new Communist government, escaping by foot through the jungle and then across the Mekong River into Thailand, according to a history posted on the website of Iu Mien Community Services in Sacramento, California. More than 70% of the Iu Mien population in Laos left and many wound up in refugee camps in Thailand.

Ramen in Japan is more than just a bowl of noodles

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Some insist a bowl of ramen is not complete without a slice of narutomaki, a whitefish cake with a pink spiral pattern.

Unusual varieties include coffee ramen and ramen topped with ice cream or pineapple.

Jiro-style ramen, named for a legendary restaurant in Tokyo, features mounds of vegetable toppings, huge steak-like barbecued pork, and pungent, grated garlic seeped in a fatty pork-based stock.

“Impact is important. So the pork has to be big so it’s truly memorable,” said Kota Kobayashi, who serves Jiro-style ramen at his chain, “Ore No Ikiru Michi,” which translates to, “The way I live my life.”

Kobayashi is a former professional baseball player for the Yokohama Bay Stars, and played with the minor league Cleveland Guardians before switching to his ramen business.

“When I quit baseball, I chose ramen as my way of life,” he said with a smile.

He can wax philosophical about ramen. One cultural difference he has observed is that Americans tend to leave the noodles and drink all the soup, while the Japanese mostly do the opposite.

And taste is only part of what makes good ramen. One must also offer entertainment, Kobayashi said.

At his restaurants, the chopsticks are tucked in a box on a shelf, so first-time visitors ask where they are. Repeat customers go straight to that box. Kobayashi calls out, “Welcome back,” making the customers feel a connection, even if he doesn’t remember a thing about them.

Dee-Ann Durbin contributed to this story from Detroit.



Thousands of the refugees were allowed to come to the U.S., with the first waves arriving in the late 1970s and most settling along the west coast. The culture had rich traditions of storytelling, basketry, embroidery, and jewelry-making, but many initially had difficulty adjusting to western life due to cultural and language differences as well as a lack of formal education.

There are now tens of thousands of Iu Mien — pronounced “yoo MEE’-en” — in the U.S., with many attending universities or starting businesses. Many have converted to Christianity from traditional animist religions. There is a sizeable Iu Mien community in Portland and its suburbs, with a Buddhist temple and Baptist church, active social organization, and businesses and restaurants.

Cayle Tern, president of the Iu Mien Association of Oregon, arrived in Portland with his family in 1980, when he was 3 years old. He is now running for City Council. Saephan’s Powerball win is

significant for other Iu Mien, he said.

“It means so much because all of us came with so little,” Tern said. “I take pride in seeing our members of the community advance and flourish, and I just feel so good for him.”

Saephan, 46, said he was born in Laos and moved to Thailand in 1987, before immigrating to the U.S. in 1994. He graduated from high school in 1996 and has lived in Portland for 30 years. He worked as a machinist for an aerospace company.

He said at the press conference at the Oregon Lottery that he has had cancer for eight years and had his latest chemotherapy treatment the previous week.

“I will be able to provide for my family and my health,” he said, adding that he’d “find a good doctor for myself.”

Saephan, who has two young children, said that as a cancer patient, he wondered, “How am I going to have time to spend all of this money? How long will I live?”

He said he and his 37-year-old wife,

LUCKY NUMBERS. Cheng “Charlie” Saephan holds a display check above his head at Oregon Lottery headquarters in Salem after speaking during a news conference where it was revealed that he was one of the winners of the \$1.3 billion Powerball jackpot. (AP Photo/Jenny Kane)

Duanpen, are taking half the money, and the rest is going to a friend, Laiza Chao, 55, of the Portland suburb of Milwaukie. Chao had chipped in \$100 to buy a batch of tickets with them.

Chao, was on her way to work when Saephan called her with the news: “You don’t have to go anymore,” he said.

In the weeks leading up to the drawing, he wrote out numbers for the game on a piece of paper and slept with it under his pillow, he said. He prayed that he would win, saying, “I need some help — I don’t want to die yet unless I have done something for my family first.”

The winning Powerball ticket was sold in early April at a Plaid Pantry convenience store in Portland, ending a winless streak that had stretched more than three months. The Oregon Lottery said it had to go through a security and vetting process before announcing the identity of the person who came forward to claim the prize.

Under Oregon law, with few exceptions, lottery players cannot remain anonymous. Winners have a year to claim the top prize.

The jackpot had a cash value of \$621 million before taxes if the winner chose to take a lump sum rather than an annuity paid over 30 years, with an immediate payout followed by 29 annual installments. The prize is subject to federal taxes and state taxes in Oregon.

The \$1.3 billion prize is the fourth largest Powerball jackpot in history, and the eighth largest among U.S. jackpot games, according to the Oregon Lottery.

The biggest U.S. lottery jackpot won was \$2.04 billion in California in 2022.

Johnson reported from Seattle.

San Francisco mayor announces the city will receive pandas from China

BEIJING (AP) — San Francisco is the latest U.S. city preparing to receive a pair of pandas from China, in a continuation of Beijing’s famed “panda diplomacy.”

San Francisco mayor London Breed announced the panda loan in Beijing last month, alongside officials from the China Wildlife Conservation Association, or CWCA. It will be San Francisco’s first time hosting the beloved animals long-term — the result of a yearlong advocacy campaign, Breed said.

San Diego previously announced it was receiving two pandas back in February.

China is home to the only natural habitat for pandas and owns most of the black-and-white bears in the world. Beijing loans the animals to other countries as a tool for diplomacy and wildlife conservation.

“San Francisco is absolutely thrilled to be welcoming giant pandas to the San Francisco Zoo,” Breed said after signing a letter of intent for international cooperation on giant panda conservation.

Breed said the city had been working with its Chinese and Asian communities to advocate for the pandas for almost a year leading up to an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders’ meeting in San Francisco last November, during which the U.S. and Chinese presidents met.

CWCA secretary general Wu Minglu said the association will work with San Francisco officials to prepare for the pandas’ arrival and to ensure the technical standards for their conservation.

“We look forward to a pair of giant pandas being in San Francisco in 2025,” he said.

When San Diego broke the news in February that it would receive a pair of pandas, it was the first time in more than two decades that China had agreed to send

pandas to the United States.

Only four giant pandas are currently in the U.S., all at the zoo in Atlanta. China in recent years has not renewed loan agreements at zoos in Washington, D.C., and Memphis, Tennessee, sparking fears it was ending its historic panda diplomacy with western nations due to geopolitical tensions.

The black-and-white bears have been a symbol of U.S.-China friendship ever since Beijing gifted a pair of pandas to the

National Zoo in Washington, D.C., in 1972, ahead of the normalization of bilateral relations. China later loaned pandas to zoos to help breed cubs and boost the population.

Washington and Beijing have boosted diplomatic exchanges in recent months, in an effort to ease escalating tensions. But frictions remain on trade, national security, and the countries’ diverging stances on conflicts such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war.

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