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Writing 101: Asian American Narratives

11 December 2022

From Laos to America: The Legacy of Chue Yang and His Family

“My earliest memory is of my family working with other Hmong families, trying to navigate life in the States. While they are trying to think about how to get housing, how to get social services, and how to get their kids in school, they’re also dealing with weddings and funerals, and babies being born, and helping people back home. It’s very layered up, but they’re also precious memories for me because I saw all of us come together and live in a community.”¹

1. Chue Yang, A Captain of the “Secret Army”

In 1942, just years before the end of World War II, my aunt’s father, Chue Yang, was born in Laos, a country that had been his family’s home since his grandfather’s, or possibly even his great-grandfather’s, lifetime. Chue Yang was Hmong, an ethnic minority in Laos.

In the years following World War II, the United States made its way into countries of Southeast Asia, including Laos, to enact its “aggressive anticommunist foreign policy” (Lee 314). Less than a decade after the war ended, the passing of the Geneva Agreement of 1954 led to France’s withdrawal from North Vietnam and Laos; however, the United States refused to sign this agreement. Instead, the U.S. forces stationed themselves in Thailand, South Vietnam, and Laos, supplying “military advisors and funds to enlarge their armies to combat communist insurgency” (Quincy 171). By the 1960’s, the United States was heavily engaged in a long, deadly, and divisive fight against North Vietnamese communist forces—the Vietnam War. Although the United States hoped to further establish their military presence in Laos, they signed

the Geneva Agreement of 1962, which called for foreign troops to withdraw from Laos, preventing the United States from further military intervention; hence, the Central Intelligence Agency turned to the Hmong people to fight on America's behalf (Lee 318).

Unbeknownst to the American public eye, the United States formed a "Secret Army" of Hmong soldiers led by General Vang Pao against the Laotian communist party Pathet Lao, which was backed by communist North Vietnam (Quincy 171, 174). A young man in his twenties, Chue Yang was one of the brave soldiers of the "Secret Army." My aunt said, "At the time, most mainstream Americans didn't even know that America was involved, and they certainly didn't even know about Laos." Accustomed to living on mountainous terrain, the Hmong were perfectly suited for this kind of war; according to my aunt, "The Americans didn't really know how to fight jungle warfare ... They didn't really have an understanding of the geography or topography, so they really needed indigenous peoples to help them."

Chue Yang served as a captain during the war. My aunt recalls her father describing two tasks he performed. One of his tasks was helping navigate airplanes and pushing out supplies to people from behind the planes. Another task of his was cremating soldiers and ensuring that their families received pictures and remains. According to my aunt, "He thought the most important job that he's ever had was to ensure that everyone received a proper burial and cremation."

2. The Escape from Laos to America

As the United States began withdrawing from Southeast Asia, communist forces within the region began to take over national rule. In 1975, after the Fall of Saigon, the Vietnam War came to an end, and Laos eventually fell under the rule of the communist party Pathet Lao, which "targeted the Hmong as former allies of the United States" (Lee 322). Thus, after all the devastation that the Hmong people faced during the war, including the death of a quarter of their

enlisted soldiers and the casualty of 50,000 civilians (Lee 317, 319), the Hmong remained unsafe in Laos. A statement in the Pathet Lao paper *Khao Xane Pathet Lao* revealed the impending genocide against Hmong people: “It is necessary to extirpate, down to the root, the ‘Hmong’ minority” (qtd. in Quincy 208). For this reason, the Hmong people, including Chue Yang, his wife, and his two children, were forced to flee Laos for Thailand.

My aunt’s family was part of the “first wave” of Hmong refugees who left Laos, but my aunt, who was not born yet, is unsure how her family made their escape. In 1975, the American forces airlifted General Vang Pao and around 2,500 of his officers and their families from the Long Cheng air base to Thailand (Lee 322). It is possible that my aunt’s family left Laos this way, as her father held an important position in the military. However, many other Hmong had to “tackle the arduous trek to the Mekong and across to Thailand ... Only half survived the journey” (Lee 331). It is also possible that my aunt’s family made this dangerous trip; my aunt recalls hearing stories from her older siblings, who said they remember “fleeing in the middle of the night across the river.” It was in Thailand during the year 1976 that my aunt, Thy Yang, was born. Since my aunt’s father was a highly ranked soldier with direct ties to the United States military, their family was sent from Thailand to the United States rather quickly; my aunt said, “We didn’t have to spend years in the camps waiting to be processed, waiting for permission to come to the United States ... We didn’t have the years of being in limbo like many other refugees ... Our time there was very limited.” In 1977, after being sponsored by a church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, my aunt’s family settled there and began their life in America.

3. The Challenges of Life in America

The “geographic dispersal” of Hmong refugees within the United States was required to “minimize the growing public backlash against refugees” (Lee 324). As my aunt described, “At

the time, the policy was to spread all the Hmong around the U.S. so that the community does not get overwhelmed ... So we ended up in Florida, and there were no other Hmong families.”

However, many Hmong resettled elsewhere to be with family and other Hmong people “as a form of survival in a new land” (Lee 342). This is what my aunt and her family chose to do. My aunt said, “Even though our sponsors were very good to us, the Hmong people are very clan-oriented, so as soon as they found where other Hmong families were, that’s where we moved.”

From Florida, my aunt’s family moved to Texas, where some of their extended family lived, and they eventually resettled in Kansas City, Kansas in 1980, where there was a much larger Hmong community. Her family has stayed in Kansas City ever since, surrounded by a Hmong community to support them. My aunt went on to state, “All of my upbringing, all of my schooling, was done in Kansas City, and it was done with lots and lots of cousins and uncles and aunts ... [We were] a family-oriented culture.” After her family came to the United States, my aunt’s three younger siblings were born. Despite their early exposure to American culture, my aunt and her siblings retained their Hmong culture. As my aunt stated, “We did Hmong cultural things at home, and then we went off and did all the American things. My Hmong is as strong as my English.”

In addition to enduring geographic dispersal and resettlement within America, Hmong refugees faced many other challenges as they began their lives in the States. Hmong adults who settled in America from 1975-1980 “brought low average levels of educational attainment and English language fluency” (Carroll 8). My aunt recalls memories of her childhood in which she translated for her father during his job interviews and medical appointments to help overcome the language barrier. Furthermore, the skills that these Hmong adults possessed were “superbly adapted to their lives in Laos, but ... not so valuable in the U.S. labor market”; hence, the jobs

that they found “required low skill levels and paid low wages” (Carroll 12). Such was the case with my aunt’s parents, who took up low-wage jobs, unable to fulfill their full potential. Moreover, during the year 1980, the median income of Hmong households was nearly \$30,000 less than the median income of all U.S. households (Carroll 2). Although her family had little money, my aunt said, “We had a roof over our heads, we never were hungry, we never lacked clothes or a car. It’s comparing your life to what you see on TV. Now that I’m in my forties and interact with some of my white or African American friends, I understood that they had the same shame and insecurity about being poor. But because we always associated white people with what we saw on TV, there was that division [due to] the influence of the media. Looking back, we were very lucky, and we never felt like, ‘Oh gosh, it’s so hard and terrible.’” My aunt went on to describe how her family had been “targeted because of [their] race” and had been “subject to hate crimes.” My aunt recalls her family’s property being “destroyed or stolen.” She stated, “Even though we lived in a low-income neighborhood, no other families had those experiences. We were the only Asian family. Even the police stated it was possibly racially motivated.” But my aunt said that although her family faced difficulties such as language barriers, financial struggles, and racial antagonism, these circumstances have taught her to be resilient and resourceful and to appreciate everything she has.

Among members of society who were non-Hmong, my aunt’s parents did not have many friends. They were never invited to people’s homes and were “invisible”—they were seen as the typical “hard-working refugees.” But their family established a close-knit community with their fellow Hmong people. My aunt described how her family felt highly regarded, appreciated, and included within their Hmong community: “We all went to the same church. We had picnics. We had parties and celebrated babies and graduations.” My aunt explained how these circumstances

have shown her how “a job doesn’t define who you are” and that “when you come home, you can still be fulfilled, and people can still respect you.”

While my aunt’s father spent his life in America working hard to care for his children, he also advocated for and sent money to his people back home. He tried to help many Hmong people escape from Laos and Thailand and immigrate to the United States. My aunt’s father also spent much of his life being politically active, fighting for recognition from the Americans for all the contributions of the Hmong people during the Vietnam War. He advocated for the building of a Hmong and Lao memorial at Arlington National Cemetery and for the passage of the Hmong Veteran’s Service Recognition Act. He passed away on January 1, 2018. Interestingly, my aunt, who has always been very close to her father, currently works at a military college. She said, “I feel like this is the closest I could ever be in following his footsteps. I’m very proud to give back to the military community in this way.”

4. Open-Mindedness and Breaking with Hmong Conventions

My aunt mentioned how fortunate she was to have a father who was very open-minded. Despite the insular nature of Hmong culture, my aunt’s father never discouraged her from interacting with people outside their race during her childhood. Even as an adult, he gave her the freedom to marry an Indian man, my uncle. This is rather unconventional, as the Hmong often embraced “traditional family roles with men clearly in charge” and cultural expectations that caused “Hmong girls who marry outside of their race [to be] generally ostracized” (Quincy 223). My aunt stated, “The fact that my father let me marry an Indian man shows how he never put limitations on what I could do, which is not always something that is common in the Hmong culture. It is still very male-oriented, so for him to allow his daughter to pursue anything she wanted is very special to me.” Coincidentally, when my aunt was born, her father named her

“Thy,” which is the way Thais fondly referred to the Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi—although it was an unconventional name for a Hmong girl, it foreshadowed my aunt’s marriage to an Indian man. The name my aunt’s father chose for her revealed the hope and love he had for his newborn daughter’s future. My aunt said, “The first thing he could have done was to name his child, and to name her with all this luck and aspiration is something I will always carry with me.”

5. A Story of Displacement, Resilience, Community, and Adaptation

My aunt’s story reveals the far-reaching effects of the U.S. military intervention in Laos during the “Secret War.” From the extensive persecution and displacement they suffered after the war, to the language barriers, poverty, and racism they faced in America, Hmong refugees like my aunt’s family endured many challenges. Yet, my aunt’s story shows how Hmong refugees remained resilient as they rebuilt their lives in America. As a family- and clan-oriented culture, they created new Hmong communities and relied on their fellow Hmong for comfort and support. While my aunt’s story shows how many Hmong Americans have worked hard to preserve their Hmong culture, it also shows how they have navigated and integrated into American society and have even intermarried with other groups, which is how my aunt became a part of my family. And like my aunt, many Hmong Americans today hold professional jobs, despite the socioeconomic obstacles their parents may have faced. As my aunt stated, “Because the Hmong people don’t have their own country, they always had to adapt to their adopted country. They would always maintain their Hmong history, language, and values ... but they can also be successful with navigating American society ... For example, we now have Hmong politicians, businesspeople, educators, lawyers, and doctors ... My cousin is a state senator in Minnesota ... So within a very short generation, we’ve already been able to accomplish a lot.”

Notes

¹Information about the Yang family was obtained from interviews with Thy Yang conducted by Thulsy Krishnan on November 23, 2022, and on December 8, 2022.

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