

Review of *Prisoner of Wars: A Hmong Fighter Pilot's Story of Escaping Death and Confronting Life* by Chia Youyee Vang with Pao Yang, Retired Captain, U.S. Secret War in Laos; Temple University Press, 2021

by

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Abstract

This article provides a book review of *Prisoner of Wars: A Hmong Fighter Pilot's Story of Escaping Death and Confronting Life* by Chia Youyee Vang.

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Chia Youyee Vang has done it again. A tenured history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, she has made a career documenting the wartime history and subsequent exile of Hmong, who now live on all continents in the world except for Africa and Antarctica.

Her 2010 book *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, is a scholarly classic. She's written extensively on the empowerment of Hmong women and Hmong children. In 2019 she published *Fly Until You Die*, an oral history of Hmong pilots during the Vietnam War era, and in 2021 she published a spinoff of that project, *Prisoner of Wars*, the life story of one especially noteworthy pilot, Pao Yang. With tact and grace, Prof. Vang named Pao Yang as her co-author, even though she did all the writing.

Her aim is clear. As she puts it, “Despite the vast literature on the Vietnam war, no other similar work ... critically explores in-depth a Hmong veteran’s experiences before, during, and after the war. The existing literature tends to focus on the perspective of high ranking officers, and they are generally celebratory.”

She chose instead as her subject (and nominal coauthor) an ordinary man who led an extraordinary life. Growing up in unremarkable rural poverty in northern Laos with no wealth or connections, Pao Yang became a combat pilot in the later years of the war because it was the best opportunity available to him. He knew the risk was great. He married and started a family anyway. He was shot down by enemy gunfire and was never rescued by his own side, a failure that forever embittered him. He was taken prisoner, and didn’t escape from Laos until years after the war was supposed to have ended, only to find that his wife, believing him dead, had married another man. (He’d remarried, too, in postwar Laos, supposing that his first wife was dead.) He came to the U.S. as a refugee, bounced from job to job and place to place, unreconciled with his original family and unreconciled to his new environment. “Although he found freedom, trauma became an integral part of his life.”

The author’s insight that trauma is key to the Hmong war survivor experience frees her from either having to celebrate the war deeds of “great” men, or alternatively tearing those leaders down for their limitations. It also frees her from the tedious orthodoxy of writing from either the political right or the political left. At her best, she writes with an originality, a clarity, and a moral force that is impossible to refute. As she puts it, about the Laotian Hmong, “Centuries of displacement in search of a permanent place to settle thrust them into the fold of global political and military confrontations. Once entangled, they could no longer choose to be uninvolved. Like a fish who took the bait, the Hmong in Laos who sided with pro-American

forces during the Vietnam War could not break free. They risked their lives because they believed then that they were on the right side of history under the wings of the great U.S. nation. Defeat was unimaginable, so they allowed their men and boys to transform from hill farmers to America's foot soldiers in a war that was decided by the political calculations of politicians on the other side of the globe. In the immediate postwar moment, they hoped to wake up from this nightmare, but they soon realized that this was not an option. It was, in fact, tragic reality."

She is neither a glorifier or a cynic, but a realist. (What a relief!) Her assessment, basically, is that during the war ordinary Hmong were put in dangerous roles that were for the benefit of others, and that once they came to the U.S. many of the first generation, Pao Yang included, were transplants that failed to thrive. As a result, Pao Yang's story has more in common with his generation of Hmong in America than if he had been a high-achieving exception – a brilliant scholar, an Olympic medalist, or a poker player who won millions of dollars, the kinds of overachievers that get the most attention in the mainstream press.

Another of Prof. Vang's advantages is that she is, as she puts it, a "co-ethnic with similar migration experiences." No language barrier separated her from the people at the center of her story, and she is able to convey what they went through matter-of-factly, without breaking stride and without trying to describe ordinary Hmong cultural norms as anything out of the ordinary.

For example, when Pao was off on his bombing missions, his family could not concentrate on anything until they knew he had safely returned to base. Why, exactly, was that, and how was it any different from the concerns of mainstream American pilots and their worried families? Each day, Pao says, his mother "would burn incense and place them on the altar outside of the house to ask for the ancestor's spirits to watch over me and to make sure I returned. Each day I when I took off, my family was not motivated to do anything. No smiles on their faces. My

mother could not even sew. She just sat at the doorstep waiting to see if her son would return. When I did return then my family could smile again.” Pao’s original wife, Ong, who was interviewed extensively for this book, added, “I worried about him excessively, but I never told him. I never talked about it to the elders. I kept it all inside. The elders said not to ask any questions. No harsh words ...” As Vang puts it, “Thousand year-old beliefs warn Hmong about the danger of openly discussing their innermost feelings with anyone. She [Ong] had been taught that if evil spirits heard family members express fear for Pao, they may negatively interfere with his path. As a result, she kept her thoughts to herself.”

To Westerners, Hmong of the wartime generation seemed stoic by nature. That was my impression on first meeting Hmong war veterans, on a visit to the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand in 1980. Courteous, yes, but completely without the need to smile and ingratiate themselves to strangers, which was the dominant outward mannerism of lowland Lao in the nearby refugee camp at Nong Khai. I didn’t know and still don’t know any white Westerner who could have explained the inner reasons for the stoicism as simply and matter-of-factly as Chia Youyee Vang. And I don’t know of any white Westerner who could have woven into a narrative all the traditional social and religious ceremonies of Pao Yang’s life – the well-wishing *bacis*, the *hu plig* calling of the soul offerings, and the *ua neeb* interventions in the spirit world by shamans in trances – without making either more of them or less of them than they deserve. My hat is off to Prof. Vang for the easy authority with which she writes about her subject.

The story at the core of *Prisoner of Wars* is simply and beautifully written, and makes a significant contribution to the literature of the Laos war and its aftermath. Having said that, if the goal of publishing is to put a deserving story in as many hands as possible, I’m not convinced this book has been published, or edited, as well as it deserves.

A tough, confident book editor might have asked Prof. Vang to cut as unnecessary distraction her multi-page, highly academic introduction of her book as a work of oral history. (Most readers would say that if there is a genre to which this book belongs, it's biography. The quotes from Pao Yang and his two wives are woven seamlessly into the story, in the same typeface and without change in the layouts as Vang's skillful and lively contextual summations.) For marketing reasons, a savvy publisher might have asked her to call Pao Yang a "combat" pilot rather than a "fighter" pilot in her subtitle. (To mainstream American aviation and military buffs, a "fighter" pilot can only mean one who tries to shoot down enemy planes, as opposed to attacking enemy ground troops as Pao Yang did; the distinction is fundamental to warfare, and to get this wrong needlessly puts the book's credibility at risk with a whole category of potential book-buyers.) And there are a number of small errors that that could have been caught by a diligent fact-checker when the book was in manuscript, such as characterizing the stout, stubby-winged propeller-driven T-28 planes of the kind Pao Yang flew as junk aircraft. During the Laos war, American pilots gave T-28s high marks for reliability and ease of maneuverability; and in the U.S. today a surprisingly large number of T-28s are still being flown recreationally and beautifully maintained. Poor maintenance of the Royal Lao Air Force's wartime T-28s was the real root cause of some of Pao Yang's frustrations.

I would also like to have seen Prof. Vang make more of Thailand's role in this story. *Prisoner of Wars* frames the Laos war largely in terms of the U.S. vs. the North Vietnamese; and it is true that large numbers of U.S. ground troops were sent to South Vietnam in 1965, and that North Vietnam became more aggressive in Laos the same year. The Hmong part of the Laos war portrayed in the book, however, began in early 1961 with Thailand as a major participant. The

Thais were determined to mount a “forward defense” of their own country from communism, by fighting outside their own borders in Laos, and this had many consequences.

The effort to train Hmong pilots, for example, did not truly begin with the U.S. Air Force’s Operation Waterpump, as this book maintains. It began early with the Thai special operations force known as the Paru (for Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit), which had been organized by the the CIA’s Bill Lair and worked closely with him. Gen. Vang Pao, the Hmong commander, pushed hard to get Hmong pilots. The U.S. government was opposed, so Lair did a quiet end run without asking permission from his superiors. A Thai Paru named Somboon had already become a pilot. Lair scavenged a couple of disassembled two-seater Piper Cubs in a CIA warehouse on Okinawa, and arranged for Somboon to set up a covert, off-the-books flight school in a dirt airstrip outside of Nong Khai, Thailand. Vang Pao handpicked twelve literate Hmong for this flight school. After a year of this secret training the two most capable pilots (one of them Lee Lue) entered Waterpump with a head start over their classmates, few of whom had ever flown before. This careful, patient preparation involving the Thais led directly to Pao Yang and other Hmong becoming Royal Lao Airforce pilots. The Thais have a remarkable talent for blending into the cultural landscape and avoiding attention, but they were everywhere in northern Laos, on Vang Pao’s staff, sending reinforcements to Long Cheng when it was under enemy attack, and running the refugee camps when the war was over. They were partners in the war effort, not just American sidekicks.

But these quibbles about framing the historical context and the lack of adequate support from her publisher cannot detract from Chia Youyee Vang’s achievement. She is highly talented and experienced, one of the best writing about the Hmong saga today. She deserves a bigger, more sophisticated national publishing house, one that could challenge her more, help her take

her manuscripts to the next level, and sell her books to a national readership. I am looking forward to her next book, whatever it might be. And I believe that *Prisoners of Wars* would make the kind of movie that is long overdue, where American military operations in distant corners of the world totally upend the lives of indigenous people, and the main protagonist eventually becomes an American citizen himself.

[Roger Warner is the author of *Shooting At The Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos*, winner of the book-of-the-year award from the Overseas Press Club. He wrote about the wartime Hmong pilot program for *Smithsonian Air & Space Magazine*. Currently he is producing an updated version of his photodocumentary book, *Out of Laos*, which focuses on the Hmong experience during and after the Laos war.]