

Review of *Immigrant Agency: Hmong American Movements and The Politics of Racialized Incorporation* by Yang Lor, *Hmong Studies Journal*, Volume 24 (2022): 1-7.

Review of *Immigrant Agency: Hmong American Movements and The Politics of Racialized Incorporation* by Yang Sao Xiong, Rutgers University Press, 2022.

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Abstract

This article provides a book review of *Immigrant Agency: Hmong American Movements and The Politics of Racialized Incorporation* by Yang Sao Xiong.

Keywords: Hmong American, Politics, Racialization, Social Movements

Yang Sao Xiong, Ph.D., is a sociologist and a leading expert on the experiences of Hmong Americans. With wide-ranging interests and expertise, he has published on poverty in the Hmong American community, the educational experiences of K-12 Hmong American students, immigrant adaptation, and Hmong American political engagement. Currently a faculty in the Department of Anthropology at California State University, Fresno, Xiong's first book *Immigrant Agency: Hmong American Movements and The Politics of Racialized Incorporation* is a welcomed addition to the growing number of books by Hmong American scholars about their own community. In *Immigrant Agency*, Xiong draws upon his analysis of multiple Hmong American social movements to make key contributions to the literature on immigrant political incorporation. Arguing against the dominant narrative that states (i.e. governments) are the ones

that incorporate immigrants into their society and political process, Xiong asserts that it was the initiative and sustained movements of Hmong Americans that led to their political engagement and political accomplishments. While these movements were successful in many aspects, Xiong contends that they did not significantly alter how Hmong Americans are perceived in this country. Hmong Americans continue to be racialized as different and therefore not fully American.

Xiong's argument regarding the political incorporation of Hmong Americans is based on his analysis of how Hmong Americans mobilized in the face of three distinct crises. Drawing upon interviews, observations, primary and secondary research sources, Xiong examines Hmong American response to welfare reform, their fight for naturalization, and their struggle to incorporate Hmong history into the public school curriculum. Common to all three social movements, Xiong finds, is a powerful narrative, internalized by Hmong Americans, that promotes ethnic solidarity, mobilizes ethnic collective action, and garners the support of institutional and state allies in their quest to seek political accommodations and resources. As part of this narrative, Hmong Americans believed they were abandoned and betrayed by the U.S. government in the aftermath of the Secret War in Laos and that the U.S. government bears an ongoing responsibility for their plight in this country.

In chapter 3, Xiong shows that in response to the 1996 welfare reform legislation that imposed restrictions on the eligibility of benefits for non-citizens, Hmong Americans responded individually and collectively. Several Hmong elders committed suicide, while Hmong organizations mobilized their diverse constituents, which included professionals, students, elders, and veterans, to protest and to work with legal aid organizations to campaign for benefits restoration. Combined with the publicity generated from the suicides and their lobbying efforts,

Hmong Americans successfully mobilized to get the U.S. government to exempt Hmong non-citizens from the eligibility restrictions. A key strategy in this campaign was in how Hmong Americans distinguished themselves from other immigrants to make the case for their exemption. Xiong writes, “Hmong activists and ordinary individuals draw directly on the narrative of the Secret War and their military service to the United States to construct Hmong as a former American ally deserving of special treatment” (74). This distinction was necessary and critical to the success of the movement to restore benefits to Hmong elders. However, Xiong argues that by referring to Hmong as a highland tribe, the state “still perceives Hmong as a peculiar, primitive, and potentially suspect group of people. Such stereotypes undermine Hmong’s political standing” (81).

Unlike the movement for the restoration of welfare benefits which was spurred by a political threat, the movement for citizenship, the focus of chapter 4, stemmed from the belief that Hmong who served in the Secret War in Laos deserved U.S. veteran recognition and benefits given their sacrifices as a former U.S. ally. Though legislation was initially introduced in 1990 to exempt Hmong veterans from naturalization requirements, it was not until the year 2000 when it was passed and signed into law. The Hmong Naturalization Act of 2000 granted, for a limited time, language and civic knowledge accommodations to Hmong veterans who served in the Secret War. Initial efforts were not successful as critical lawmakers suggested that the U.S. government no longer owed Hmong any special considerations because the U.S. had resettled Hmong refugees. Others argued that offering naturalization accommodations would dilute naturalization standards and cheapen American citizenship. Despite these initial setbacks, Hmong American lobbying efforts persisted and they eventually succeeded. In his analysis of the

success of this movement, Xiong writes, “Hmong Americans’ state allies utilized this military service frame as well as amplified the notion of national honor in order to briefly remind federal policymakers about the United States’ broader political-military interest in the world” (86).

Xiong shows that Hmong Americans’ narrative of Hmong sacrifices and of the U.S.

government’s ongoing obligation to Hmong Americans was highlighted by sympathetic lawmakers who connected naturalization accommodations to that of maintaining national honor through the fulfillment of promises made to a former U.S. ally.

In chapter 5, Xiong shows that the movement to incorporate Hmong history in the public school curriculum started as a response to a series of Hmong youth suicides in Fresno County, California. The media portrayed the suicides as the result of cultural conflicts between parents and their children, but “Hmong social actors reframed teenage suicide as a different problem (lack of curricular representation in schools) and then used a completely new frame—military service—to mobilize ethnic solidarity, activate institutional and state allies, and motivate state action on that new social problem” (104). Xiong finds that Hmong professionals from the non-profit, social services, and educational sectors came together to push for the introduction of the bill in the California State Legislature. This group then mobilized support for the bill within the Hmong community and reframed the teenage suicides as one that resulted from the lack of representation in the school curriculum. While the legislation was ultimately signed into law, its original intent of teaching Hmong history was replaced with a curriculum about Southeast Asians. This change was due to political infighting within the Hmong community as well as what Xiong refers to as the state’s racialization of Hmong in equating them with Southeast Asians.

Overall, *Immigrant Agency* does an excellent job of demonstrating how Hmong Americans, despite their limited political and economic resources, were able to win concessions from federal and state governments. Xiong convincingly shows how political opportunities and threats mobilized Hmong Americans to work together with institutional and state allies to demand political accommodations and resources. A key strength of Xiong's analysis is his emphasis on the agency of Hmong Americans—it was their initiative that started these movements, their mobilization that rallied support, and their framing of the issues that won over even critical lawmakers. Another strength is Xiong's identification of a common thread across all three social movements that helped bring about their successes. In each of the movements, Xiong shows that Hmong American movement leaders strategically chose to frame these issues in a way that distinguished Hmong as worthy of special consideration. Xiong's focus on Hmong Americans' narrative of Hmong sacrifices and of the U.S. government's ongoing obligation to Hmong Americans showed just how powerful this narrative was in mobilizing the Hmong community to view these crises and political threats as opportunities to assert their rights as a former ally of the U.S.

Next, I offer a couple of commentaries regarding the implications of the research in this book for understanding social movements. First, in Xiong's analysis of the movement to include Hmong history in the educational curriculum, he largely attributed the change in the final bill that replaced Hmong history with Southeast Asian history to that of the state's racialization of Hmong. While this a well-supported claim, focusing primarily on the state's action represents a missed opportunity to extricate how internal strife within a social movement can undermine its intended objectives. To be fair, Xiong does discuss how opposition to the initial bill initially

came from within the Hmong community from a group who represented a non-dominant dialect. However, by focusing most of the attention on the state's action in the final analysis, this important conflict within the Hmong community remains under-theorized as a potential obstacle for social movements in general.

Second, the three social movements analyzed in this book were considered successful, albeit with some limitations. Hmong Americans were able to get legislation enacted that allowed them to receive political accommodations and resources. As one thinks about what makes social movements succeed and fail, it is important to reflect on the conditions and strategies that affect those outcomes. Are the social movements in this research unique or can they offer a blueprint for future Hmong American social movements? The movements in this book are unique but they can still provide valuable lessons. They are unique in that the demands of these social movements did not involve those in power having to give up power or any costly economic or financial arrangements. Other social movements might face stiffer resistance if they seek changes in the power structure or if they require substantially high resource accommodations. The movements in this book also offer valuable lessons as well because they show that Hmong Americans have a powerful narrative of their people that can mobilize the community and garner the support of outsiders. Just as important, the success of these social movements make evident that in order to win over the opposition, Hmong Americans must frame their grievances in ways that align with or tugs at the values of those who may initially doubt them.

In conclusion, *Immigrant Agency* is an empirically grounded and theoretically illuminating text. *Immigrant Agency* highlights the agency of an immigrant group in the political

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incorporation process and identifies the conditions and strategies that facilitate their success.

This is a text for academics who study social movements and immigrant political incorporation,

Hmong Studies researchers, and anyone interested in Hmong American experiences. As he has

done before with his previous publications, Yang Sao Xiong has once again provided an

insightful analysis of the experiences of Hmong Americans.