

**Pickford, Joel. *Soul Calling: A Photographic Journey through the Hmong Diaspora*. Heyday, Berkeley, California, 2012, 264 pp.**

**Reviewed by**

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People say a picture is worth a thousand words. This is especially true with the photographic journey in Joel Pickford's *Soul Calling*. His camera captures stunning, vivid facial expressions of Hmong refugees and poignant images from Hmong communities in the United States and Laos. In *Soul Calling*, Pickford's fascination with and passion for the Hmong culture gained him the trust he needed from recent refugees, Hmong Americans living in the U.S., and Hmong families in Laos. The colorful photographs contrast with the dilapidated apartments that parallel the lives of refugees in the U.S., while some of the glowing pictures of earlier Hmong Americans demonstrate their promising lives after fleeing Laos in 1975. Pickford's courage, curiosity, and daring adventure to the remote villages of Laos also bring back bitter memories many of us have left behind.

*Soul Calling* is divided into three photographic sections illustrating Hmong lives in multiple circumstances. The first set of pictures show the lives of the most recent Hmong refugees to arrive in the U.S. The second set of pictures contain images of some Hmong refugees who came to the U.S. shortly after the Vietnam War in 1975. The third group of photographs are of Hmong families in Laos. Through the lenses of Pickford's camera, he takes us to the homes of recent refugees in San Joaquin Valley. These photographs show some disturbing sights in their lives and living conditions.

These pictures bring back vivid memories of our refugee experiences: the fear of uncertainty (plates 3, 6) and the concealed excitements associated with a new life (8). The photographs resonate with some of our initial experiences in the U.S.: when we first set foot at airport tarmacs; our bewilderment; our parents' attempt to cook (plate 18); and a father's stare of emptiness (plate 17). Some of us might not have seen the empty lawn, the displaced shopping carts (plate 5), the filthy swimming pool (plate 7), and the graffiti dumpster (plate 6). These images seem so distant now, as if they are taken from another country. What must be going through these refugees' mind? Did they ever imagine living in the U.S. in such decrepit conditions? Would their lives be better off in the camp? Despite living in this environment, the words of a grandfather show optimism and reassurance when he says, "I wish I'd come sooner" (Pickford, p. 140).

Pickford's rich description of his chance meeting with Ju Cha, the "young Madonna," in the hospital brought back buried memories for many of us faced with culture shock, agony, and an inability to express our feelings (plate 29). The young mother's empty gestures are not because of her unwillingness to converse, but rather reflect the custom for many Hmong women. Other pictures could be interpreted in so many ways. This is

especially true with that of Neng Thao Lee (plate 74) and the emotional vigil for the teen killed in a house fire (plate 57-69).

The second set of photographs shift to the lives and leadership efforts of Hmong Americans. While many of the earlier refugees have moved away from the decaying housing projects, many are still struggling for survival. Though some have moved on and are gainfully employed, others have resorted to farming. Much research has been done on General Vang Pao, but questions often shroud his involvement during the Vietnam War. Even though Vang Pao's influence in the Hmong community has had its share of controversies, many Hmong remained unflaggingly loyal to him. In spite of Vang Pao's popularity, many of his followers felt unappreciated for what they have done for the U.S. However, Vang Pao's legacy will remain an integral part of Hmong history.

The third set of photographs take Pickford to the remote hills of Laos and hidden villages there. The author's collection of photographs from the deep jungles and friendly faces in villages will inspire curiosity about distant relatives and our parents' desire for exotic places. Pickford's persistence and interest in other family's lives will have a lasting impact on some readers.

As a Hmong reader and reviewer, it is reassuring that Pickford is willing to delve into Hmong families' lives and understand the different aspects of their culture. However, I feel compelled to point out several areas in the book where Pickford's descriptions are inaccurate. It is well understood that Pickford is not a Hmong native speaker and that he proceeded with the best intentions. I find these inaccuracies to be minor, likely the result of poor translation, and his unfamiliarity with the culture. These points are intended for clarification, not necessarily as a critique of his work.

The first discrepancy is on (page 121) when Pickford describes seeing three men using the large bong made of PVC pipe and assumed it was to be used for "smoking tobacco and opium." In my experience, the bong, or '*yeeb thooj*' is used primarily to smoke tobacco. The bottom of the bong is filled with water up to the stem that sticks out to the side of the pipe. When tobacco is placed on the stem and lighted, the smoker inhales the fume from the top. The nicotine content mixes with the water and emits a vaporized smoke. This process reduces the potency of the nicotine. The tool to smoke opium is called *teeb kub lub*.

Secondly, the *qeej* (page 127 and 223), is not to "ward off bad spirits." The *qeej*'s primary use is to guide the soul of a deceased to its birthplace. When a *qeej* player learns from his master, he is taught to move accordingly. *Qeej* players move the way they do because that's how they are taught, not to "prowl or ward off any *dab*." The drummer must know the song or notes '*ntiv*' the *qeej* musician plays. The drummer beats the drum according to the notes of the *qeej*. All *qeej* musicians know how to play the drum, but not all drummers know how to play the *qeej*.

Thirdly, the description of the elderly deaf man who displays the tubular instruments (plate 35) '*raj nplaim*.' Pickford states, "music is traditionally played for healing and spiritual purposes, not for entertainment," (p. 143). In fact, except for the *qeej*,

the instruments Pickford describes here are primarily use for courtship and entertainment. The improvisation of the medicine bottle at the end of the instrument is done to balance or stabilize the sound, it may not be accurate that the "empty prescription bottle must have worked so well that the deaf musician ingeniously decided to combine the best of Hmong and Western medicine," (p. 143). The medicine bottle somehow directs the sound and decreases its pulsation, resonating a low and muffled sound. *Qeej* musicians often use empty soda or milk jugs at the end of the bamboo reeds in a similar fashion.

The author's descriptions of polygamy and the relationships between husband and wives are accurate. However, on page 127, Pickford indicates that Toua Moua Vang married Mai, the widow of his *uncle*. In the Hmong culture, a person in a lower generation or '*phaj*' cannot marry a widow of an uncle, whose generation '*phaj*' precedes his generation. In Toua Moua's situation, he is *culturally* allowed to marry *only* a widow or divorcee who had been married to an older brother, not younger than his generation. There are, however, on certain occasions, exceptions.

Pickford's description of a 'shaman' (page 134) in reference to other roles is incorrect. For example, a shaman is someone who possesses spiritual healing power, and usually performs trances. A person who guides a soul to its birthplace and ancestors is not considered a shaman. His role is called a '*txiv qhuab ke*' or '*txiv taw kev*'. *Qhuab ke* literally translates to *path counsel or guidance*, and *taw kev* translates to *point the way*. In all traditional funerals, *txiv qhuab ke* must perform the soul guidance chants before other activities may commence.

The assumption that the early arrival families used a more authentic form of culture (page 145) than the new arrivals because of their time in Laos as opposed to those living in Thailand is inaccurate. In reality, the earlier Hmong arrivals have adapted to a more authentic form of cultural practice due to the availability of churches and local health constraints. An example of this is the concept of Hmong '*pos*' versus '*tshwm tshav*.' Hmong '*pos*' literally means 'enclosed,' in which some sub-clans must keep the corpse and casket in the home until the burial date when it is carried to the burial site. Hmong '*tshwm tshav*' means 'appear out,' in which some sub-clans will keep the corpse and casket in the home for several days until it is moved outside for additional rituals before it is carried off for burial. After the Hmong arrived in the U.S., '*tshwm tshav*' was abandoned due to local health restrictions. Today, all Hmong clans associated with '*tshwm tshav*' in the U.S. have adopted the practice of '*pos*.'

In describing Yer Lor Lee's role as a shaman (page 147), Pickford indicates Yer is a respected "*saib neeb*." The correct term should be '*txiv neeb* or *niam neeb*.' "*Saib neeb*" refers to the process of a trance or a person who watches over the shaman during the trance. '*Txiv*' means father, and '*neeb*' means the auxiliary spirit of the trance. When the words are combined, it means a 'male shaman' who performs trances. Though Yer Lor is a female, she is a trance performer, and this qualifies her as a master. More appropriately, Yer Lor, is typically a "*niam neeb*," because of her role as a female shaman. As the author says, shaman spirits may be passed from one generation to another randomly. As a male

dominant culture, this is one specialty men and women are generally *chosen* for and are considered equally qualified as practitioners.

In conclusion, Pickford's *Soul Calling* contains both photographic expressions of the Hmong Diaspora and an endless metaphoric account of Hmong American history. It serves as a useful text for the broad community and will be useful for classroom teaching. *Soul Calling's* rich artistic expression and contextual photographs provide important experience through the Hmong Diaspora so that future generations can appreciate the struggles of families went through. The book affirms the authentic historical context of the Diaspora through photographs documenting the lives of many Hmong refugees.

*Soul Calling* nicely captures some intriguing photographs. Overall, Pickford overcame the challenges of telling a story through photographs, and at the same time revealed his transformation: "The profound differences in the lives that both we and our ancestors have lived are so starkly apparent in the contrasting physiognomy of our bodies that I never fail to be awed by the miracle of the Lees' survival, our bond of friendship, and the sheer diversity of human experience" (Pickford, p. 148). The work is a testament of Pickford's dedication to capture these images, know the people, learn the culture, and endearing perseverance to understand the Hmong. The book serves as a celebration for those who are involved as well as future generations who want to familiarize themselves with the Hmong Diaspora. For that, I am truly blessed to have read and reviewed this wonderful book.

**About the Author:**

Kirk T. Lee is a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University, Portland, OR. Lee's focus area is on Hmong parent involvement in school. Lee received his M.A. in Education from California State University, Chico; CA. Lee's thesis on Hmong funerary rituals delved into many aspects of the people, cultural beliefs, ancestor worship, and funeral process. Lee is also a *qeej* player in his community.