

***Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960*, by Mai Na M. Lee. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2015. 430 pages.**

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Abstract

This article provides a book review of Mai Na M. Lee's *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960*. It highlights the contribution of the book to the historiography of the Hmong and provides a critical assessment of the dichotomous analytical framework that Lee uses to analyze the rivalry between Hmong messianic leaders and Hmong political brokers and the competition between the Ly and Lo clans for paramountcy in French Indochina.

Keywords: Hmong, Laos, French Indochina, Messianism

Most studies on the Hmong—from the earliest studies of the Hmong in Southeast Asia by Christian missionaries to studies in the 1980s and the 1990s focusing on Hmong refugees' resettlement and struggle with social and economic adaptation in America to the more critical race studies of Hmong Americans in the 2000s—are still written by non-Hmong scholars who lack proficiency in the Hmong language. In the last decade, however, a growing number of Hmong scholars have begun to research and write about their own people, culture, and history. "It is essential," wrote Hmong American writer Mai Neng Moua in her introduction to *Bamboo Among the Oaks*,¹ "for the Hmong and other communities of color to express themselves—to write our stories in our own voices and to create our own images of ourselves. When we do not, others write our stories for us, and we are in danger of accepting the images others have painted of us" (7). *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom* is an example of attempts by a growing number of Hmong scholars—that is, scholars of Hmong ancestry—to answer Moua's call to research and write their own stories or histories for themselves. Written by historian Mai Na M. Lee, an associate professor of history and Asian American studies at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom* is a welcome addition to the still limited but growing number of studies on the Hmong by Hmong scholars.

Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom explores the Hmong aspirations and their struggle for political recognition or legitimacy in French Indochina from 1850-1960. It interrogates why the

Hmong, a people who has long aspired for sovereignty, ultimately settled for autonomy and ended up allying themselves with different powers and states under French colonial rule in Indochina. Lee argues that “while the Hmong yearn for independence, the legitimacy of their leaders has rested largely on outside patronage. The desire to restore sovereignty is, therefore, the impetus behind the attraction, as well as the submission,” to the different powers and states. “The lack of clan consensus, linguistic and cultural group disparities, and geographic divisions,” however, prevented the Hmong from realizing their most cherished dream---the dream of sovereignty—and forming political unity under a king or ruler. There exists, therefore, no Hmong king in French Indochina but “only clan leaders who vie for outside legitimation.” The competition among the Hmong for outside legitimation further resulted in two types of chiefs: “the prophet or messianic leader who rejects the state and proclaims the Mandate of Heaven; and the secular political broker who, with state backing, achieves paramountcy as the supreme chief or ethnic representatives of the Hmong” (12).

To buttress her arguments, Lee divides the book into two main parts. The two chapters (Chapters 2 & 3) of Part I focus on the messianic leaders, such as Xiong Tai, Xiong Mi Chang and Vue Pa Chay, who rejected the French colonial state and claimed legitimacy instead by proclaiming the Mandate of Heaven. Xiong Tai and other Hmong prophets are also mentioned, but Mi Chang and Pa Chay are the two principal messianic leaders that Lee analyzes in this work. The secular political brokers, such as Kaitong Lo Bliya Yao, Lo Fay Dang, Ly Fong, and Touby Lyfong, are the subject of investigation in the five chapters (Chapters 4-8) that form Part II of the book. It is in this second part that Lee documents at length the rise and fall of Bliya Yao, the rise of Ly Fong, and especially the intense rivalry between Fay Dang and Touby during the Japanese occupation of Indochina and the First Indochina War.

Personally, however, I find the introduction and the first chapter most remarkable. It is in the first half of the first chapter that Lee lays out the research questions, the arguments, structure and scholarly contribution of the book and in the latter half that Lee articulates Hmong’s notions of “kingdom,” masculinity, clan relations, and ethnic identity to illustrate their aspiration for a king, the Hmong view of leadership, and Hmong clans as barriers to political unity. In Chapter 1, Lee discusses the influence of Chinese civilization on the Hmong, the Mandate of Heaven as a Hmong political ideology, the migration and earliest settlements of the Hmong in Laos, and the Hmong’s rebellions and alliances with the various ethnic groups, including the Tai, the Phuan, the Lao, Khmu, and the Vietnamese, within the political landscape of nineteenth century mainland Southeast Asia. In constructing the complicated history of the Hmong’s alliances with and rebellions against the various powers in China and Southeast Asia before the arrival of the French in the mid-nineteenth century, Lee also makes efforts to dispel myths held by certain Hmong individuals to satisfy their desire for Hmong kings in Hmong history and legitimize their ongoing quest and struggle for a Hmong kingdom or homeland. For example, Lee writes: “In the imaginations of some Hmong belonging to the Congress of World Hmong People, a political association, Vaj Ncuab Laug has been transformed into a Hmong king. One elderly Hmong man of the association had claimed on the Minnesota Hmong Radio that Vaj Ncuab Laug, of the Vang clan, was one of the first two Hmong kings who ruled over the kingdom of Xieng Khouang. The other was Yaj Tseem Ceeb of the Yang clan” (77). Vaj Ncuab Laug was,

however, not a Hmong king but the legendary Phuan ruler of Muang Phuan (Xieng Khouang) named Noi, the great-grandfather of Chao Saykham to whom Touby Lyfoung ceded the administrative control of Xieng Khouang in 1946 after the French designated it as an autonomous Hmong zone.

The rich details and new interpretations that Lee brings to previously documented events and Lee's documentation of lesser known but crucially important historical figures like Xiong Mi Chang and Lo Shong Ger (Blia Yao's nephew) mark the essential contribution of *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom* to the historiography of the Hmong. While Pa Chay has been widely documented, Lee's analysis is the first attempt to understand Pa Chay's rebellion from an indigenous or Hmong perspective. Lee concurs with the previous interpretation that Pa Chay's rebellion was a political and economic movement—a movement that arose to confront the exploitation of the Hmong by the French colonial state and its representatives—but she adds that, for the Hmong, the rebellion was also a spiritual and moral movement. Although economic exploitation drove the movement, it did not dominate the narrative dictated by Yaj Txooj Tsawb to Father Yves Betrais and transcribed and published by Betrais in 1972 from which Lee derives the Hmong perspective of Pa Chay's war from 1918 to 1921.

Lee may also be the first scholar to do an in-depth study of Mi Chang's rebellion in Ha Giang, Vietnam, from 1910 to 1912. Using interrogation records kept by the French in Paris, Lee recounts in detail how Mi Chang received his call to serve the Mandate of Heaven, formed his movement, attracted several hundred followers, and gained legitimacy by possession of various skills and abilities, including miraculous healing powers and an ability to speak multiple languages and foretell future events. Mi Chang's downfall, capture, interrogation, and imprisonment on a small island on the coast of Vietnam are also documented. More importantly, Lee is the first to conceptualize the Chinese concept of "Mandate of Heaven" as a Hmong political ideology and employ it to explain the rise and fall of both Mi Chang's and Pa Chay's rebellions. Both Mi Chang and Pa Chay, according to Lee, claimed legitimacy through the Mandate of Heaven, and both of their rebellions fell apart after they lost the Mandate of Heaven through not their own moral failure but the sins committed by their followers. In both cases, it was the violation of the moral dictates of Heaven by their followers through the wreaking of havoc and devastation on the populace, animals, and villages that precipitated the demise of both movements.

Similarly, Lee deserves much praises for her ability to use the oral history interviews that she has conducted to not only add details to but also weave a complicated narrative of the rise and fall of Kaitong Lo Blia Yao, the rise of Blia Yao's secretary, Ly Foung, and especially the acrimonious competition between Blia Yao's son, Lo Fay Dang, and Ly Foung's son, Touby Lyfoung, for paramountcy from the Japanese occupation of Indochina during World War II to the Secret War in Laos in the 1960s. For instance, according to historian Alfred McCoy, Lee's advisor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she received her Ph.D. in Southeast Asian history, Blia Yao, "in a rage," fired Ly Foung and "severed all ties with the Ly clan" immediately after the tragic death of Blia Yao's daughter and Touby's mother, Mai Lo. Lee, however, argues that Ly Foung continued to work with Blia Yao, Mai's father, until 1926, five

years after Mai's death. Ly Fong "could not easily relinquish the financial opportunities offered by his position," Lee explains. "So Ly Fong went to Blia Yao's house as usual, returning to his home in De Mua Tha only sporadically. He also continued to oversee the construction of CR7 on Blia Yao's behalf, registering and paying workers on a regular basis. Each year he accompanied Blia Yao to Xieng Khouang as before to deliver the taxes" (219-220). Ly Fong finally resigned only after Blia Yao again blocked Ly Fong's nomination to be a *tasseng* as he did in 1921, passed the medal intended for Ly Fong to his half-brother, Tsong Nou, and publically pronounced Tsong Tou, Blia Yao's son, as his replacement at a *baci* ceremony following the completion of CR7 in 1925 (221).

The overemphasis on the internal rivalry between Hmong leaders and the dichotomous framework that Lee employs to depict Hmong life in French Indochina, however, marks a shortcoming of *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom*. First, there is the dichotomy of the messianic leaders *versus* the secular political brokers, and in their rivalry, the political brokers always emerged triumphant over the messianic leaders because they had the backing of the state. Such a state-centric narrative, unfortunately, works to reify, rather than critique, the supremacy of the state as well as the French colonizers' reports of Hmong messianic leaders like Mi Chang and Pa Chay as "mad men" and their anti-colonial struggles as dangerous and illegitimate just because they derived their legitimacy from a source other than the French empire. Moreover, the rational/irrational dichotomy fails to recognize that the relationship between the prophets and the political brokers was more complementary than Lee has considered. To gain legitimacy, they needed each other as much as they were competitors to each other. Without French colonialism and Blia Yao's complicity in the exploitation of the Hmong as an instrument of the French, there would be no need for a Pa Chay or the need to claim legitimacy through the Mandate of Heaven by Pa Chay, Mi Chang, or anyone else. Conversely, without a Pa Chay to challenge the French colonizers' mandate to rule over the Hmong and claim the right of the Hmong to be a sovereign people, Blia Yao could not have gained the paramountcy and amassed the riches that he did. As Lee demonstrates, although Blia Yao had inherited some of his wealth from his father, Lo Pa Tsi, he acquired a substantial portion of his riches "from money skimmed from the budget for the construction of CR7...[and] the indemnity exacted from rebels who joined Shong Ger in 1920" (178). In the end, because of the need provided by Pa Chay and Shong Ger for a Hmong political broker to the French, Blia Yao was able to emerge "victorious and wealthier than ever after Pa Chay's rebellion" (191).

Equally a concern is the almost theatrical characterization of the Lo clan *versus* the Ly clan as represented by Lo Fay Dang and Touby Lyfong, respectively. Just as there were winners and losers in the rivalry between the political brokers and the messianic leaders, there were also good guys and bad guys in the competition for paramountcy between the Lo and Ly clans. For Lee, the hero of the rivalry was undoubtedly Touby while the villain was Fay Dang. Whatever Touby was and did, Fay Dang was and did the opposite. Touby and his brothers "studied diligently," but neither Fay Dang nor any of his brothers ever "obtained degrees of completion from the primary school" (232-233). While the Lyfong brothers studied, Fay Day and his brothers preferred gambling and "chasing birds" (234). Despite prejudice and falling victim to beriberi disease, Touby, along with his younger brother, Tougeu, embarked on further

study in Vietnam. “The brothers,” Lee writes, “left as boys; they returned as leading Hmong figures” (235). Meanwhile, the Lo brothers “squabbled over the thousands of cows, hundreds of fowl, and numerous caches of silver and gold” from their father’s estate (227) and, “[perhaps] jealous that Tsong Tou had inherited their father’s prestigious title, Fay Dang and Nhia Vu, the two brothers who had some education, did not help Tsong Tou administer the canton either” (237). As a consequence, Tsong Tou was ultimately forced to resign from his position, and by the time Fay Dang “awakened to the fact that his family had lost” the highly coveted and lucrative position to the Ly family, “it was too late.” The French had already handed over the position to Ly Fong, exacerbating the animosity that Fay Dang had for the Ly family.

As depicted by Lee, the gambling-addicted, jealous, and uneducated Fay Day was responsible for perpetuating the feud between the two clans from World War II to the Secret War in Laos in the 1960s. Following the loss of Tsong Tou’s position to the Ly family, Fay Dang took step after step to undermine Ly Fong and later his son, Touby. In an effort to retain his father’s position, Fay Dang, bypassing the French, asked Prince Phetsarath to intervene by presenting the Lao prince with a highly prized rhinoceros horn in 1936 (242-245). When that effort failed, Fay Dang took the opportunity of the French’s historic visit to Xieng Khouang in 1938 to once again undermine Ly Fong by constructing his own gate west of Nong Het to force the French to use both his gate and the gate that Ly Fong had constructed after being summoned by the French (245-6). In addition, just as Bli Yao once attempted to undermine Ly Fong by alleging to French authorities that Ly Fong was the mastermind behind Pa Chay and Shong Ger’s rebellion, the murder of Lia Nao Vang in 1921, and conspiring to “overthrow the newly appointed Tasseng Kue Joua Kao in order to take over the subdistrict of Phak Boun” (220-221), Fay Dang also furnished his own allegations to the Japanese against Touby. “Full of hatred for the French, who had cast his family aside, and perhaps jealous that Touby had been left with many possessions,” Lee states, “he [Fay Day] reported to the local Japanese administrator that Touby was planning a rebellion” (259). Consequently, Touby was detained and interrogated at Nong Het for three days.

Furthermore, according to Lee, Fay Dang was responsible—albeit indirectly—for the egregious sexual assault on the women of the Ly clan in Nong Khiaw. Fay Dang’s obsession with undermining Touby drove him to send Japanese soldiers to hunt down Touby and arrest his wife and children after Touby went into hiding in the jungle following his release. The Japanese soldiers that Fay Dang sent attacked and raped many women—young, old, maiden, daughters-in-law—of the Ly clan in Nong Khiaw while they were working in the fields. The Japanese also took Ly Mao Nao, a young girl of eleven, to Nong Het to serve as a comfort woman. “For decades,” Lee writes, “the Ly men, out of shame and fear of being stigmatized, kept what had happened to their women a secret.” As if the rape was not sinister enough, Fay Dang went on to further exhort money from the Lys by exploiting their humiliation and fear. “Just two and a half decades earlier,” Lee continues, “Bli Yao had acquired a massive fortune extorting bribes from people who had sympathized with Vue Pa Chay and joined in the anti-French struggle. Now Fay Day found it convenient to employ his father’s practices against the Ly clan.” In the end, in exchange for Fay Dang’s promise to not harass them anymore, the Lys “grudgingly paid off the extortion” (265).

Just as good always triumphs over evil in all epic dramas, in Lee's narrative, the diligent and educated Touby also emerged victorious over the malicious and scheming Fay Dang despite multiple attempts by Fay Dang to undermine him. While Fay Dang used the Japanese to hunt down Touby, Touby organized a Hmong militia to support the French during World War II. Consequently, after the war, when the Japanese were forced to leave Indochina, Touby, "the most educated Hmong in Laos, with a command of reading and speaking in Lao, French, Vietnamese, and Hmong" at the time, was recognized as "King of the Hmong" by the French. Accordingly, in 1946, the French designated Xieng Khouang as an autonomous Hmong zone and named Touby as its ruler with authorities to govern over not just the Hmong but also the Khmu, the Phuan and other ethnic minorities within the zone (279). For his assistance during the Japanese occupation of Indochina and for driving the Viet Minh from Xieng Khouang, the French also inducted Touby as Chevalier de la Légion on November 9, 1946. Finally, in 1947, Touby was knighted by King Sisavangvong as a *phya* (lord), giving him the name "Phya Damrong Ritthikay" (The Lord Whose Name Is Heard from Afar).

Because of her simplistic view of the Ly family as the victor of the Ly-Lo family feud and Touby as a visionary leader and the "great diplomat of the twentieth century," Lee either completely overlooks or trivializes—perhaps unintentionally—Touby's shortcomings and Ly Fong's own moral failure. At times, Lee seems to even justify them. For example, Mai's agonizing death from opium poisoning is interpreted as a justifiable act of vengeance against Bliia Yao as if Bliia Yao was somehow responsible for Mai's death when it was Ly Fong's beatings of Mai that made her commit suicide. The opium Mai took did not end her life immediately. It took a whole day for the opium to slowly attack Mai's system and for her to die. Yet, despite knowledge of Mai's deteriorating condition, Ly Fong, Mai's husband and Touby's father, did nothing to save her. Instead of denouncing Ly Fong for driving Mai to her death by first beating Mai twice—the second time in front of a crowd of people—and allowing her to die later, Lee seems to justify Ly Fong's action. Doing nothing to save Mai, Lee explains, was "perhaps his [Ly Fong's] final revenge on Bliia Yao for having refused to allow the French to appoint him a *tasseng*. Allowing Mai to die signaled how deeply disillusioned Ly Fong had become with Bliia Yao" (218). Similarly, the capture and beating of Lo Nhia Vue, Fay Dang's brother, to an inch of his death during his visit to Tasseng Moua Nao Tou in Phou Tha in September 1945 is seen as a justifiable act of vengeance against Fay Dang for the rape of the Ly women by Japanese soldiers in Nong Khiaw (267-271). Touby's raid of Fay Dang's village, following Nhia Vue's escape, and murder of two of Fay Dang's followers, Youachi Lor and Xiachue Yang, are mentioned but only to show how their deaths may have solidified Xiachue's clan's alliance with Fay Dang. It is not to illustrate Touby's imperfection.

Lee also trivializes the exponential growth of opiate under Touby's eight-year tenure as "the only Hmong member of the opium purchasing board" and his concomitant accumulation of riches from the opium trade in Nong Het. Before Touby came to power in 1939, an average Hmong farmer harvested less than one kilogram of raw opium a year. After 1939, however, the Hmong were growing three times their usual amount, increasing Laos' opium harvest to as much as 30 or 40 tons a year (255). Rather than faulting Touby for increasing taxes on the Hmong, which forced them to increase their opium production in order to pay their taxes, an act that

paved the way to the Hmong becoming infamous as “the Opium People of Southeast Asia” and being criticized internationally by the 1960s, Lee minimizes the role of the opium trade in Touby’s rise. She points instead to Touby’s popularity among the Hmong as a consequence of his military role against the Japanese during World War II (284).

Neither does Lee criticize Touby for his repeated refusals of appointment that ultimately resulted in the failure of the Hmong to realize their most cherished dream when he gave control of the autonomous Hmong zone to Saykham and for settling ultimately for the mere position of a deputy governor. In 1938, when both French and Phuan authorities recommended Touby for the *tasseng* position of Kheng Khoai, Touby turned down the appointment. When the French gave administrative control of the autonomous Hmong zone to Touby in 1946, he again turned it down, opting instead to cede control of the zone—that is, Xieng Khouang—to Chao Saykham, Touby’s classmate and a descendant of the Phuan ruler Noi who once ruled over the area. In October of 1946, Touby was offered the position of *chaokhoueng* (provincial governor), and he again turned it down, opting only to become the deputy governor. Rather than seeing Touby’s repeated refusals of appointment as signs of a deeply insecure man, Lee justifies Touby’s actions as signs of his great intelligence and wisdom. “Touby’s decision not to accept the appointment [in 1938] was strategically important,” Lee argues. “Completing his education would add to his status, making him competitive nationally. Touby, like Ly Fong, also knew the value of delayed gratification. In the long run, he would have it all” (249). Similarly, for Lee, Touby’s refusal to rule over Xieng Khouang in 1946 and accept the position of *chaokhoueng* was indicative of his great ability “to balance Hmong aspiration for independence and Lao interest in their own political hegemony in the nation-state,” decisions that distinguished Touby as a “visionary Hmong leader,” “an educated bureaucrat of the state in the 1940s,” and “the great Hmong diplomat of the twentieth century” (276). According to Lee, unlike Vang Pao who was willing to sacrifice Hmong lives and turn the Lao civil war in Laos into a Hmong struggle in the 1960s, Touby was more cautious. Touby “may have gauged the heavy price of autonomy by assessing the political circumstances of the time” when he was given control over Xieng Khouang. “The French and the king were offering Xieng Khouang to him,” Lee explains, “only because of the impending struggle for Laos. Accepting their offer would have meant committing the Hmong to a bloody struggle against Viet Minh incursions from the east. Although he wanted equality with the lowland Lao and was willing to cooperate just enough to obtain it, Touby did not want his people to shoulder this huge responsibility” (280).

Lee’s reluctance to take a critical view of Touby’s failures seems at odds with her persuasive thesis on the Hmong’s need and struggle for sovereignty so brilliantly articulated in the first chapter. One can only imagine what the state of the Hmong would be today—where they would live and what kind of life they would have—if Vang Pao had turned down the offer by the Americans to take up arms against the communists in the 1960s, or in what condition Hmong Americans would be today if Hmong leaders in America were offered funds to do something for struggling Hmong refugees in the 1980s and the 1990s but turned them down again and again, or even what the state of the Hmong would be in Laos is today if Lo Fay Dang, Lo Nhia Vue, Thao Tou Yang, Pany Yathotou, Tougeu Thao, and other Hmong leaders there had refused appointment after appointment in the Lao PDR government. If there is a lesson to be

learned from Hmong history since their arrival in Indochina, it is that very little was ever voluntarily given to the Hmong. The Hmong had to fight hard for what they earned, including the right to come to America, and they continue to fight for so many things they have yet to earn, including the right to basic human rights in Laos and the recognition and right to be buried at US military cemeteries as veterans of America's armed forces. When one is offered something, especially the right to autonomy or national sovereignty, one should do everything to not refuse it. By the end of World War II, millions of people around the world and thousands of Hmong had fought and died for autonomy and the dream of sovereignty. To refuse sovereignty offered it is to dishonor and desecrate the sacrifice of all those who had fought, risked their lives, and died for the right of self-determination and national sovereignty in history.

More importantly, refusing sovereignty because there were not enough Hmong who were literate and could help to govern Xieng Khouang is not indicative of a visionary leader. The Lyfoung family may have also already recognized this. That's why they have kept this "highly guarded secret" to themselves until now. A visionary leader would have seen that the Hmong could easily be taught to read and that, as John Duffy has illustrated in his recent study of the development of Hmong literacy, the Hmong were not literate because life in the mountains did not necessitate literacy or the use of writing. It was not because of the lack of desire for literacy or the absence of writing in their culture or history.² Once in power, one has better opportunity to secure the resources necessary to create schools and promote one's people's literacy. That was what Vang Pao did in the 1960s. Vang Pao took up the call to lead the Hmong people in spite of the low level of literacy among the Hmong at the time. In the 1970s, as many as 90 percent of the Hmong in many provinces in Laos still could not read and write. Once in power, Vang Pao built schools to make sure that Hmong people could learn to read and write. By the communist takeover of Laos in 1975, many Hmong had become teachers, nurses, and pilots while others had occupied a variety of civilian and military leadership positions in Laos. Yang Dao had also received a Ph.D. from France—something Touby apparently could not foresee and did not think would be possible for the Hmong in 1946.

Lee is right to observe that the lack of clan consensus has been a major barrier to Hmong unity under a ruler or a king, but that the division and competition among the Hmong for political leadership "should not be taken negatively as symptomatic of a 'Hmong cancer' of some kind" (xii). However, because Lee is so focused on the internal rivalry between the clan leaders, she misses the opportunity to confront state power and violence as well as other purveyors of oppression, including colonialism and imperialism, by failing to point out that the indirect rule of the French colonial enterprise was ultimately responsible for igniting the fire of division and competition among Hmong leaders in French Indochina. Is it possible that Lee does not want to more forcefully criticize the French because her closest informants—members of Lyfoung family—were French sympathizers and beneficiaries of French colonialism in Indochina?

Furthermore, while she has successfully demonstrated the emergence of the prophets and the secular political brokers as the consequence of the competition among different Hmong clan leaders in French Indochina, Lee has not shown how both types of leaders were "dreaming" of

the Hmong kingdom and fighting for Hmong sovereignty. It is evident that the messianic leaders were also dreaming of and struggling for Hmong sovereignty. “Mi Chang denied having independent aspirations,” Lee writes, “but he did adopt the symbols of a modern nation-state. He had a white flag, which he insisted others borrowed for their own purposes” (132). The dream of sovereignty was especially transparent in Pa Chay’s movement. Pa Chay envisioned creating a Hmong state with areas extending from Dien Bien Phu, where the capital of the Hmong kingdom was to be located, to Nong Het district of Xieng Khouang and Phongsavan provinces in northern Laos. It is much less clear, however, whether or how political brokers were also fighting for sovereignty. What Lee has shown is that the political brokers were largely seeking political recognition or legitimacy—a legitimacy not from the Hmong people but from outside sources of patronage. In this sense, the political brokers were merely instruments or, in the words of Vang Pao, “slaves” of the state who, under French colonial rule, were also often complicit in the oppression and violence against the Hmong (9 & 12).

Its shortcomings, notwithstanding, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom* is an invaluable contribution to the historiography of the Hmong. The book’s shortcomings are reflective of and situated within the challenge of doing Hmong oral history as a native researcher and a member of the Lee [Ly] clan of which Lee speaks eloquently in the preface and the difficult task of documenting the history of a people without the wide availability of written records (xii-xx). They may also be a reflection of Lee’s own sense of urgency to “save Hmong civilization.” I do not know whether Lee has “come along too late to save Hmong civilization,” given the abandonment of Hmong language and culture “unconsciously or by choice for other ways of being and thinking” among Hmong Americans and Hmong in Asia as Lee has observed, but I know *Dreams of the Hmong* has done at least two things. First, it has successfully accomplished Lee’s stated objective to write and preserve Hmong history for the Hmong. “Phau ntawv no yog peb sawv daws txoj kev npaum suav thiab txoj kev ntsaw kom Hmoob muaj keeb kwm [This book is our dream and our wish for the Hmong to have their own history],” Lee writes (xxvi). Second, *Dreams of the Hmong* has successfully demonstrated that if the Hmong should ever aspire for sovereignty and their own great civilization, they must transcend petty clan divisions and discontinue their fights against each other as they vainly seek legitimacy from states or outside patronage. Rather, they must unite and have the courage to dream and to fight for the sovereignty of their own people and their own state.

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NOTES

¹ Mai Neng Moua, *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002).

² John Duffy, *Writing From These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).