

**Cha, Ya Po. *An Introduction to Hmong Culture*.
Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, 207 Pages.**

Reviewed by

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Employing an ‘insider’ approach to explore and discuss Hmong life-ways, culture, and traditions, Cha (2010) focuses on salient themes ranging from Hmong history, customs and values, cultural taboos and modifications, wedding and funeral ceremonies, arts and entertainment, and Hmong politics and leadership. As a practitioner of Hmong traditional religion and cultural rituals and as an educator teaching Hmong as a world language to high school students in Sacramento, California, Cha has gained much recognition within his community. As such, he possesses substantial knowledge of Hmong culture and traditions. While some scholars (Cooper, 1998; Lee and Tapp, 2008) have written extensively on Hmong life-ways, culture, and traditions, Cha’s book is somewhat distinctive in that he provides personal anecdotes as well as his own ‘insider’ perspective on the practice of Hmong culture. At 200 pages and with only eight references, Cha’s book is suitable for high school and undergraduate students as an introduction to Hmong culture and traditions compared to more traditional scholarly works including those cited above.

In the introductory chapter, Cha presents a vignette that is typically encountered by many Hmong Americans at present - the issues of the generational gap and cultural misunderstanding between the first generation and subsequent generations born in the United States. One obvious and simple solution to these complex issues involves educating Hmong students about their heritage, culture and identity. The goal of doing so is to reinforce the bond between parents and

children with the objective of providing coherence to the family. The reviewer agrees that knowledge of the Hmong language is crucial and is a central element that provides cohesion to the Hmong community. More research will be needed to understand the current generation of Hmong youths born in the United States who are increasingly monolingual in English, are more ‘Americanized’, and finding themselves simultaneously appreciating and questioning their dual identities.

Chapter 1 summarizes Hmong history dating back 5000 years. This section is unfortunately mostly lacking references for the information provided. The author does provide a timeline and detailed explanations of important events in Hmong history. For further reading on Hmong history as well as more in-depth sources, the reviewer may suggest that readers turn to Lee and Tapp (2008). Chapter 2 explores the relationships between Hmong parents and their children and describes the importance of children to Hmong culture. Cha emphasizes that the Hmong tend to have exceptionally large families with multiple generations often living under one roof. One of the reasons to have many children involves the subsequent availability of offspring to take care of parents in their old age, and to share and lessen the burden of the workload in the fields. One key factor that Cha overlooks are the high fatality rates associated with Hmong life in Southeast Asian in earlier decades. With outsider contact, airborne diseases, and a lack of vaccines, having a large family was one way to ensure that one’s children would survive into the next generation.

Traditionally, a son is preferred as he will carry on the family’s name, perform household rituals and traditions, and take responsibility for parents as they age. A daughter will typically marry into the clan of her husband and become part of her husband’s household. From a cultural and economic standpoint, the clan structure of the Hmong community may be seen to favor sons

over daughters. Nonetheless, Cha makes a legitimate argument that a daughter is perceived as just as valuable within the Hmong family as she is observed to have the capability to keep the household in order and the broader community healthy and stable. In this chapter, Cha attempts to describe the roles of each gender from both traditional and contemporary points of view.

In chapter 3, Cha explains the importance of Hmong customs and values. He begins by discussing the various values that the Hmong person should ideally acquire and possess (e.g. to be humble, modest, while showing respect to the elders, etc.). Certainly, some of these often go against American norms, especially those associated with looking directly into an elder's eyes when communicating or acting in a humble manner in many social encounters. The importance of family and kinship ties is also emphasized and Cha declares that it can be mystifying to recognize multiple generational orders associated with traditional Hmong culture. Furthermore, the function of generational orders has more to do with just establishing kinship ties as it also involves marriage practices and religious rituals. In short, this chapter covers many of the values and norms that second generation Hmong Americans may not have experienced, hence, for many readers, this section may provide useful information about traditional Hmong customs and values that were practiced in Laos.

In chapter 4, Cha introduces us to various Hmong cultural traditions including rituals, customs, beliefs, and practices. Cha explains that the Hmong are no different from other groups because they have often borrowed cultural norms and values from others. Some borrowed customs and values include the tying of yarn around the wrist, handshakes, dancing and singing competitions. Certainly, the borrowing of cultural norms and values are to be expected when one's culture is heavily influenced and dominated by others. Nonetheless, Cha notes that there are unique Hmong norms and values that have not been borrowed include the Hmong New Year,

name changes, home restrictions, and superstitious taboos. In discussing many of these norms and values, Cha provides historical as well as personal context. This is a unique approach to take in describing how customs and values are practiced traditionally and how they have changed over time.

The discussions provided in chapter 5 (Traditional Weddings), chapter 6 (Traditional Funeral Services) and chapter 7 (The Hmong Belief System) confirm Cha's vast knowledge of the Hmong culture. Each chapter is well detailed and provides substantial descriptions that readers will be able to easily comprehend. On a side note, it is actually a challenging task to translate and summarize Hmong cultural traditions into narrative descriptions, however, Cha as an insider provides detailed contextual information along with thorough descriptions of important Hmong traditions and ceremonies. While Chapter 8 touches upon the arts, Cha asserts that traditionally Hmong do not have time for the arts or entertainment given their agrarian lifestyle. Despite their agrarian way of life and struggle to survive, the reviewer contends that the arts come in different shapes, forms, and styles and do form an integral part of Hmong daily life. These expressions may involve singing while working in the fields, storytelling at night after dinner, or playing traditional instruments for spiritual and emotional purposes. Nonetheless, the reviewer does agree with Cha that while some Hmong artistic forms have borrowed elements, it is important to recognize what is distinctively 'Hmong' (including the kheng (*qeej*), and flute (*tshuab raj*)).

Chapter 9 underscores the complexities of Hmong politics and leadership. Cha notes that it is not his intent to write maliciously about the Hmong and their leaders. In affirming this, Cha is acknowledging that there have been differences and disputes throughout the Hmong community regarding politics and leadership issues. In particular, this chapter focuses more on

Cha's personal interpretation as to what makes an ideal leader and the characteristics that such an individual should possess. His arguments in this section are particularly salient given recent debates in Hmong communities about appropriate styles of Hmong leadership in the post-General Vang Pao era. Aside from the this, the reviewer concurs that in today's world, "whether they be men or women, tomorrow's leaders will have to work with an even more diverse Hmong population – politically, socially and economically" (p. 187).

In the final chapter (*Where Do We Go from Here?*), Cha argues that the Hmong must realize they no-longer live in a clan-centered society, hence, solidarity to the broader community is more important than loyalty to one's clan. This is not to say that clan memberships are no longer salient or should be devalued but rather that the Hmong will have to continue to adapt to modern society's norms and values. At certain important junctures, Hmong must make changes to their lives, even when these changes would seem to clash with their traditions. This is not to say that the Hmong should abandon their culture, rather they should engage in the opportunity to reevaluate and reassess their culture and practices. This is especially crucial in an era when many second generation Hmong Americans are wavering between dual identities.

Cha's final paragraph concludes and reaffirms his argument that the Hmong must adapt to the host societies in which they find themselves. Hmong need to remember that culture is fluid and dynamic and that traditions evolve over time and space. At best, Cha's book provides insights to the lay reader pertaining to important aspects of the Hmong culture and traditions. Many community members and students may find this work to be useful, especially as an introduction to Hmong culture. Furthermore, the author's knowledge and passion for his culture is keenly seen throughout the volume with his inclusion of personal narratives which serve to make the overall work more meaningful. While disagreeing with some of the specific

assumptions and assertions of the author, the reviewer agrees wholeheartedly that unity and equality will move the Hmong forward as opposed to division and separation.

References Cited

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About the Author:

Born in 1988 in a refugee camp in Thailand, Yeng Yang is a 1.5 generation Hmong American and is currently a second year Ph.D. student in the Culture, Language, and Literacy program in the Department of Bilingual-Bicultural Studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He received his M.A. in Asian American Studies from San Francisco State University in 2011. Yang's research interests include educational attainment, the language socialization process and other contemporary issues impacting Southeast Asian Americans, particularly Hmong Americans.

