

**Rethinking the Lives, Experiences and Behaviors of Hmong Women in Regard to their Ability to Achieve Empowerment and Agency and Finding Happiness. Review of *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women* by Kao-Ly Yang, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 19(2)(2018): 1-7.**

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**Review of**

**Vang, C.Y., Nibbs, F., Vang, M. (Eds), *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, 2016, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 348 p.**

**By**

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**Abstract**

This article consists of a book review of *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, a scholarly work focused on both the historical and contemporary experiences of Hmong women as well as Hmong LGBTQ.

**Keywords:** Hmong, Women, LGBT, Queer

In reading the title of the book "*Claiming Place. On the Agency of Hmong Women*", a question immediately arises: will the studies look into the complementarity of traditional social roles or take a more engaged turn toward the question of gender equality? Indeed, this book primarily focuses on Hmong women, living in the United States, with one article on those in Thailand. Their lives, experiences and behaviors are examined by thirteen researchers, including three men and ten women. Of these thirteen people, nine are of Hmong origin. The basic data for these studies comes from interviews, surveys, or observations, and cultural products like films or art works. Throughout the articles there emerges a trend in the data analysis and interpretation: instead of distancing themselves from their research subjects, all authors intentionally used the first person. The voices "narrating" the data interpretation processes accompany the deconstruction of realities and their converging construction in theoretical findings. Bruce Thao and Kong Pha included data from their own experiences in their queer study, Leena Her and Ma Vang took in consideration the importance of indigenous theories of knowledge. Prasit Leepreecha, Faith Nibbs, and Louisa Schein respectively incorporated globalizing dimensions in term of human rights conventions, the virtual world and transnationality. All authors engaged in a critical approach where they cross examined their topic(s) in relation to contemporary

theoretical frameworks such as colonialism, genders, nation, race, sexuality, etc. In Hmong Studies, the ethnographical approach has been prevalent in most research work during the twentieth century. Such new and cross-topical approaches combining or interacting with traditional fields (ethnology, anthropology, sociology, history, or phenomenology) with the new ones (queer, gender studies, ...) to deconstruct realities may contribute to illuminate the Hmong (diasporic) communities undergoing changes. This approach surely serves to renovate Hmong Studies. Nevertheless, the auto-ethnographic approach utilized by indigenous scholars to self-analyze and incorporate their personal experiences or social realities and emotions into their research, even if renovating, requires an external data body that is at the same time reliable and accurate to support the construction of theoretical perspectives. Such an approach is found in Bruce Thao's study in which he also conducted a survey with 142 informants. While it may still be unclear, researchers of this book need to explicitly differentiate and surely recognize the various representations of knowledge in terms of 1) the informant's knowledge or indigenous views collected in the basic data, 2) the researcher's own experiences or points of view that may influence his or her study, and 3) the findings, the results of the analyses of the data. In other words, this book offers an epistemological scope, certainly renovating, even if unusual and questioning.

All in all, the studies revisit the agency of Hmong women through their marginalized or sidelined status (widow, divorcee, and LGBTQ), or in unusual or outside the norm situations (first nurse, minor wife, second wife, artist, cyber woman). The last section on Gender and Sexuality which encompasses works by three authors, Louisa Schein, Bruce Thao and Kong Pha, included both genders. The historical period addressed in the compilation's articles ranges from the 1930's to the present. Diverse are therefore the themes as shown below:

- The ideological perception of Hmong by non-Hmong researchers (Leena Her)
- The feminist point of view on war history (Ma Vang)
- The impact of war on women's economic roles (Chia Youyee Vang)
- The wedding alliance utilized by women for power (Mai Na M. Lee)
- Changes of women's social roles in the United States (Julie Keown & Ka Vang)
- The socio-spiritual reintegration of divorcees into their native family in Thailand (Prasit Leepreecha)
- The empowerment women through the internet (Faith Nibbs)
- The place of textiles in the construction of hmongness and cultural agency (Geraldine Craig)
- The perception of female agency through the film industry (Aline Lo)
- The representations of sexuality and erotics (Louisa Schein)
- Homosexuality in a patriarchal society (Bruce Thao)

- The Hmong queer (Kong Pha)

To better situate the diversity of the topics, the book is divided into four sections: 1. History and Knowledge Formation, 2. Social Organization, Kinship, and Politics, 3. Art and Media, and 4. Gender and Sexuality. In the introduction are addressed the gendered roles of women in a patriarchal society and their agency toward their lives and social groups. This theme forms the central focus of discussion throughout the book. With the diversity of issues addressed, these studies provide a new cartography of research themes, some of which, such as gender equality or homosexuality, although unusual, emerge in broad daylight to reinterpret Hmong contemporary society. Effectively, social roles are to be reviewed and readjusted according to new theoretical paradigms such as gender studies, queer studies, or simply the need for a more critical and interdisciplinary approach, while also less ethnographic. In addition, the editors emphasize the relevance of their respective theoretical orientations, and the reliability of basic data and methodological approaches based more on ethnology.

The first article by Leena N. Her examines the construction of ethnographic narratives where she questions the perception of others (non-Hmong researchers) on the Hmong. She takes a critical approach to reviewing previous work of non-Hmong researchers, especially published materials from Nancy Donnelly, Pranee Liamputtong Rice and Patricia Symonds, all three anthropologists who studied Hmong women, gendered roles, and cosmology in the 1990's, respectively in the United States, Australia and Thailand. Until today, their work has influenced Hmong Studies and the perception of Hmong women. While looking at their personal path and trying to grasp their ideological backgrounds, Leena Her makes clear their limitations as non-Hmong researchers, who might lack in-depth knowledge of the contexts in which Hmong culture is produced.

Similarly, in Ma Vang' article as in Leena Her's one, the issue of re-writing or re-interpreting previous work or findings remains central. For the author, the way stories are told are personal and will be reinterpreted afterwards. Ma Vang emphasizes the idea of self-representation in the stories that interviewees tell. Consideration must be given to "subjectivity" in the story telling sequence, otherwise one needs to pay attention to the peculiarities in the informant's narration and making of war accounts. Of the twenty informants mentioned in her article, five are women. The challenge that Ma Vang has experienced while collecting war stories with these five women leads her to label their behaviors "ethnological refusal". She states that it is necessary to re-chronicle the history of Southeast Asia because it is important to take into account the feminine and/or feminist perspective. Women would see history differently. They would remember events, other than the ones men would. Women would recall different historical events that they would arrange

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without analyzing them or interpreting them according to for example, a “model of war” chronicle.

From the interviews of two nurses, Choua Thao, the first Hmong female nurse, and Diana Quill, both of whom served during the Secret War in Laos in the sixties, Chia Youyee Vang analyzes the transformations of women's roles. She claims that the social roles would have already started to change before the Hmong women come to live in the United States after 1975, at the end of the Secret War. War remains a factor in the transformation of these women's social and economic status.

Relying on the history of marriages among the Hmong notables in Laos, Mai Na M. Lee demonstrates that some women had exerted indirect power in the Hmong community. Of the three great leaders of the 20th century, Kiatong Lobliayao, Touby Lyfoung and Vang Pao, marriages of alliance were used to legitimate the husbands' political authority, and to empower their influence. The daughters of these leaders, even when only becoming a lesser wife, married for political reasons.

Julie Keown-Bomar and Ka Vang followed six women in Minnesota and Wisconsin for a study where they focus on their decision-making in education, marriage, divorce and leadership. The findings show that these six women exert agency to negotiate their place (s) in a patriarchal and patrilineal society. Their lifestyle, even if more acculturated due to total immersion in the American Mainstream society, does not prevent them from continuing to feel a belonging to Hmong traditions with their cultural values, to maintain strong family ties, and to receive support from their community.

Prasit Leeprecha reports a case study where a group of divorced women from *The Network of Hmong Women*, seeks to change the misperception of divorced women by the Hmong community in Thailand. Between the years 2000 and 2010, the dialogue established between a team of researchers from the University of Chiang Mai, Thailand, *The Network of Hmong Women* and the leaders of the Hmong community led to a possible solution to ritually reintegrate divorced women within their native families. Effectively, being a divorcee means that a woman is socially marginalized; due to socio-cultural stigmas, their native lineage cannot socially and spiritually accept them. Often, these rejections and sexual abuses take place due to their social status as divorcees. While classifying the various rites of passage in the Hmong culture, this team identified a ritual called "Phum" that has the appropriate function of serving to reintegrate people into their native families. The practice of this rite allows divorcees to socially and spiritually return to the group of souls of their birth family after a divorce. In consequence, being socially re-known as a new member at the spiritual level, they can again benefit from the social support of their native family and be respected as full members. This case study shows that traditional cultures possess spaces and

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structures that can be readjusted or adapted in order to resolve modern issues without devaluing their socio-symbolic efficiency, and to comply to globalized societies with new demands including human rights conventions.

Faith Nibbs is interested in the influence of the media on the agency of women belonging to the "generation 1.5", e.g. born in Asia and raised in the United States and the second generation. She reviews their uses of the internet and social media such as the blog, Youtube or Facebook in relation with their capacity to act within their community. In order to save face and feel safe, they use anonymity to address sensitive issues that they could not comfortably and openly talk about. Such practices help them to make their voices heard and to allow them to discover their agency to transform their lives and their society through the dialogues they establish with other anonymous internet users, which increases their sense of legitimacy to express themselves on sensitive issues.

Geraldine Craig focuses on the empowering relationship that Hmong people have with their traditional textiles *paj ntaub*, whether they are traditional clothing, figurative embroidery invented during the refugee camp period of 1975 in Thailand or modern creations by young generations of female Hmong American artists like Maikue Vang and Nonmala Xiong. This Hmong art, enshrined on wearable clothes embroidered with socio-political, cosmological and ritual symbols, is intended more for "optical pleasure" than "contemplative pleasure". Perceived as one of the most empowering activities for women in a traditional setting as well as for educated female artists in the United States, the making of these works of art perpetuates cultural agency and promotes hmongness.

In the analysis of the Hmong American movie "Nyab Siab Zoo" (The Good-Hearted Daughter-in-law) by Abel Vang in 2009, Aline Lo questions the importance of agency that the director gave to the main female character, Nyab Seng. The plot stages a perfect figure of the virtuous widow refusing to marry because of her filial piety toward her mother-in-law. In fact, according to Lo, the film does not emphasize women's agency, but rather the idea of a homeland longed for by the Hmong diasporic community --Homeland here embodied by the symbolic figure of a widow with her virtue, submission and selflessness. In comparing three secondary female roles (a counselor, a confident, and a herbalist), Aline Lo concludes that the cinematographic world remains a space of opportunities parallel to the reality of the Hmong American women's world, and therefore it still offers possibility and inspiration for women to rethink about their social roles and possible agency.

Based mainly on films produced by the American Hmong diaspora, Louisa Schein highlights the plurality of the notion of sexuality in Hmong

diasporic contexts. She engages a dynamic analysis to seize the ideological intertwining between monogamy, arranged marriage, transnational and intergenerational sexual relationships, homosexuality, sexual culture and their subjective representations. Men's sexuality is visibly more depicted in films than that of women, which would translate an intention of the filmmakers to erotize Homeland women. As for women's sexuality, it would appear less nonnormative, but recurrently associated with the usual representation of the exotic victim and sexualized object. Sexuality, whether defined as sexual acts or fantasies, takes source in the imaginary of people, and escapes to the normativity, especially for a diasporic people whose culture is in movement and in contact with other racial groups that dominate by their culture or representations. Furthermore, the author makes clear that sexuality is closely linked to political identity.

In analyzing data from a survey and interviews conducted in the Hmong LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer) movement, Bruce Thao points out the obvious lack of published studies within this academic field. The results of the survey confirm that their struggles linked to their sexual orientations are also overlapped by the specificity of Hmong patriarchal society. Because of the difference in cultural expectations, each gender experiences differently discrimination and acceptance. The sexual orientation of lesbian, bisexual and queer Hmong women, even if perceived as personally deviant, would be less "dangerous" because it is understood, among other things, as a result of the lack of sexual attractiveness to men. By contrast, gay, bisexual and queer Hmong men confront high social expectations, and in consequence experience "fear, guilt and anxiety" of not being able to match the Hmong image of masculinity. Despite these multiple challenges, Thao describes how the Hmong LGBTQ community took initiative to create some LGBTQ activist organizations include SOY (Shades Of Yellow) to advocate for recognition.

In the final article, Kong Pha approaches his study on queerness with the concept of autoethnography where he reflects upon his own feelings and emotions pertaining to queer people while exploring the discourses of identity in relationship with a Hmong culture in flux. While reviewing the normative social practices of marriages (early, arranged, intergenerational or transnational marriages, polygyny and a high birthrate), and non-normative practices (forced marriages), Kong Pha categorizes the Hmong sexuality as involving a form of "hyperheterosexuality". Sexuality, governing social and community dynamics, would remain the central parameter to understand the identity of the Hmong people, whether this issue is viewed from the standpoint of the Hmong or Mainstream society. Because of the hyperheterosexual nature of Hmong society, homosexuality would have no place. Claiming being queer leads to a stepping out of the normative views of family or culture, and so to

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critically redefine the relationship between identity and culture at large while recognizing the compatible coexistence of multiple identities.

Throughout these fertile and liberal studies that essentially explore the specificity, contingent transformation, modern adaptation, continuity or discontinuity, and mutation of gendered roles and women's agency, *Claiming Place* poses a rich thematic base for Hmong women critical studies as clearly specified by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials in her *Afterword*. Without a doubt, approaching Hmong women issues through the margins is a strategic way to get to the core of the current issue as far as most Hmong women are concerned. They have reached a crossroad where the dream is slowly and surely shifting to the action to transform the Hmong community in the United States and elsewhere. Surely, younger generations of scholars, educated in a globalized world with a strong sense of inclusiveness and an undying desire to preserve and adapt at the same time their cultural heritage, will claim more gender equality for more freedom of thought and expression, and to meet their own wish of happiness and sense of belonging to a plural identity.

### **Author Bio**

Kao-Ly Yang is a French anthropologist specialized in Hmong language, culture and literature. She obtained in 1999, a Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Aix-en-Provence I, France, and in 1993, a Master of Philosophy in Sciences of Languages, General Linguistics and Didactics of French at the University of Montpellier III, France. From 2000 to 2003, she worked as a post-graduate researcher then assistant researcher at the University of California-San Francisco. She currently serves as the coordinator of the Hmong Program at the California State University, Fresno, where she contributed to create a Hmong minor in 2016. For more info about Kao-Ly Yang, feel free to visit her website: <https://www.hmongcontemporaryissues.com/kao-ly-yang>