

CHIA YOUYEE VANG

Fly Until You Die: An Oral History of Hmong Pilots in the Vietnam War.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 232 pages.

CHIA YOUYEE VANG WITH PAO YANG

Prisoner of Wars: A Hmong Fighter Pilot's Story of Escaping Death and Confronting Life.

Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2021. 168 pages.

Nearly fifty years after the end of the Vietnam War, scholarship on Hmong participation in the US secret war in Laos remains woefully incomplete. Historian Chia Youyee Vang's two recently published books, *Fly Until You Die: An Oral History of Hmong Pilots in the Vietnam War* and *Prisoner of Wars: A Hmong Fighter Pilot's Story of Escaping Death and Confronting Life*, address the gap in Hmong experiences in the context of US imperial excursions and Lao communist torture camps from 1964 to 1975. While it is now widely known that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited Hmong proxy soldiers to fight its imperial war in Laos, the United States Air Force's covert operation Project Water Pump remains shrouded in mystery, even more so when it comes to Hmong pilots' experiences in its T-28 pilot training program. Vang explicates this history through more than forty oral histories with surviving pilots and their families. The most compelling intervention of both monographs is the narrating of history from the ground up, through the words and lived realities of Hmong fighter pilots at the front lines of life and death.

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Fly Until You Die begins with the origins of Hmong involvement in the US secret war and the now well-narrated history of Bill Lair's recruitment of Hmong to become proxy soldiers. The history picks up more intensely in chapter 2, showcasing the classed dimensions of how Hmong boys and men were selected for pilot training. English language skills were paramount to becoming pilots in Project Water Pump. Trainees joined the pilot training program because of a need for money, a longing to make history, or a desire to avoid being soldiers on the ground. Yet one thing is clear: the intentions of trainees, the selection criteria, and the reasons for why the pilot training program were instituted were contradictory and chaotic, processes for which even Vang's interviewees held few answers. It is evident early in the monograph that a neatly packaged history of Project Water Pump would be impossible to document.

Pilot training periods lasted only six months to one year due to a combination of war haste and quick rotations of and discrimination from American and Lao instructor pilots. Remarkably, the pilot trainees were able to learn enough English to complete ground school, navigate complex T-28 instruction manuals, and communicate with their instructor pilots in the air while also overcoming motion sickness and mastering the different tactical maneuvers of the aircraft itself. The chaotic and inconsistent training by instructor pilots resulted in some pilot trainee deaths. Additionally, takeoff and landing on the now infamous Long Cheng dirt airstrip with faulty T-28 aircrafts that had been rejected in Vietnam became a dangerous ordeal in and of itself. These dynamics clearly demonstrate how expendable Hmong lives were during the war. Yet Captains Shua Moua, Tou Vang, Yia Kha, Ya Lee, and Pao Yang all successfully flew solo missions after the short training periods. Despite the odds, pilots such as Lue Lee flew over five thousand sorties, more than almost any other aviator in history.

One of Vang's most compelling contributions in *Fly Until You Die* highlights pilots' relationship to the Hmong military leader General Vang Pao (GVP). GVP's favoritism determined which pilots flew missions and his nepotism ensured that pilots with close clan relations were sent adequate rescue missions when their planes were shot down. As in the case of prisoner of war Captain Pao Yang, the protagonist in *Prisoner of Wars*, his lack of clan ties to GVP meant there were no serious rescue efforts to look

for him once his plane was shot down close to Vietnamese enemy territory on June 10, 1972. Vang casts serious doubt on GVP's legacy as a virtuous figure who "brought" Hmong to the West. Thus, pilots navigated intra-ethnic politics with military leadership as much as they did with their American and Lao instructor pilots. Vang's critical contribution lies in her ability to highlight the multifaceted power relations that pilots navigated with a host of parties in order to earn their wages and stay alive.

Vang also interviewed wives of former pilots. Chapter 5 details the lives of widows whose husbands died in battle. This is a welcome addition to the book, considering that the lives of women are all but absent from Hmong war histories. Women who were once wealthy wives became destitute and were ostracized when their pilot husbands died in battle. Yet this chapter left me wondering why the widows never blamed the Americans or the CIA for their husbands' deaths. Their efforts to pursue justice were never fully explored. Rather, their grief is situated within the intimate sphere of their husbands' families as they attempted to make sense of the losses they experienced. Vang is committed to documenting the complexities of Hmong women's wartime experiences, as evident in her co-edited volume *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), so it is surprising that the chapter on widowhood in *Fly Until You Die*, being only twelve pages, is not very substantial. Yet Vang's work on the gendered dimensions of war thus far provides opportunities for scholars to expand oral histories with Hmong women about their wartime experiences.

Likewise, chapter 6 reveals the emotions that other pilots felt upon learning about the deaths of their fellow pilots. The small number of pilots meant that any loss greatly compromised military operations. Major Sue Vang's story is particularly heartbreaking. It was not until years later that his son, Toufong Vang, discovered that Major Sue Vang had earned a Distinguished Flying Cross for being a pilot. The chapter, however, would have been more powerful if Vang had been able to detail the day-to-day relationships that pilots had with each other. How did pilots model ethics with each other? What kinds of brotherhood or friendships existed alongside their roles as pilots? How did pilots make sense of the unjust deaths of their comrades in a gravely unjust war? Digging deeper into these micro relations

of pilots' intimate and social lives would have enriched Vang's larger narratives of loss, grief, remembrance, and the quest for justice.

GVP secretly fled Long Cheng in the aftermath of the April 30, 1975, takeover of Sài Gòn, but prior to the May 10, 1975, airlifts at Long Cheng. The Long Cheng airlifts were chaotic scenes, which Vang wrote about in her first monograph *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (University of Illinois Press, 2010). Pilots were prioritized in Hmong refugee resettlement to the United States. Despite this, pilots felt a deep sense of betrayal by GVP, mostly because of his secret departure, but also because of his later insistence that the remaining pilots return to Laos to continue fighting the war while he himself lived safely in exile. Captain Pao Yang, for example, was captured and imprisoned by the Pathet Lao for three years until he was able to escape to Pha Lai and subsequently to Nong Khai in 1978.

The incredible hardships that Hmong refugees experienced once they resettled in the United States in the post-1975 refugee resettlement period are now common stories. Vang exposes some cold hard truths about refugee adversity, including the actions of well-meaning sponsors who often did not have the knowledge to fully assist refugees. Pilots who were once revered as masters of the sky had to begin new lives as low-wage blue-collar laborers making two to three dollars per hour in the United States. At times, Vang frames the pilots' involvement in Project Water Pump as opportunities to earn money and gain status in their villages. Yet it is now clear that these "opportunities" were only temporary. The shift in the pilots' status from "pilot" to "refugee" after the end of the Vietnam War underscores how the United States and GVP did not intend to enrich Hmong people's lives, only to exploit them.

Scholarship in critical refugee studies has forcefully critiqued US imperialism in Southeast Asia and has shown that the United States is both a location of violence and a place of refuge. In line with this scholarship, many former pilots indict the US government for never fulfilling its promises of "taking care" of Hmong proxy soldiers in the aftermath of the war. Pilots who were maimed or acquired disabilities as a result of their wartime injuries were abandoned by GVP and the Americans alike. Yet, despite the failed promises of the US imperial state, pilots were also grateful to be

resettled in the United States. Some of the pilots' gratefulness perpetuates US imperial benevolence and the narrative of the "good refugee" that is now widely critiqued in critical refugee studies scholarship. However, Vang ensures the reader that this supposed gratefulness does not mean the pilot refugees' lives are good, only better. In fact, Captain Kou Xiong explicitly states, "America has not done what it had promised to do" (170). *Fly Until You Die* concludes abruptly, with Vang rushing the concluding chapters of the pilots' lives in the United States. Regardless, the extensive quotes from pilots throughout the book humanizes the lives of those who carried Project Water Pump.

Adding to the scholarship of Hmong pilots and their experiences, *Prisoner of Wars* zeroes in on the experiences of Project Water Pump Captain Pao Yang, whose T-28D aircraft was shot down by enemy fire near Thai Dia Choua on June 10, 1972. The conceptual framing of the book is a tragic and complicated love story between Yang and his two wives. Yang's marriage to his first wife Ong Moua was violently shattered when Yang's aircraft was shot down in 1972. Yet Vang does not fully capture the intricacies of their life together, which would have made this book a truly compelling "love story," partly due to Yang's and Ong's short marriage and their hesitance to reveal the full details of this portion of their lives. The missing details of their intimate life suggest that the "what ifs" and "what could have beens" that constitute Hmong people's lives are perhaps the greatest tragedy of all.

Prisoner of Wars contributes to scholarship on Hmong war experiences more compellingly starting in chapter 6 when Yang is captured by Vietnamese enemies and taken to Nam Kien prison camp in Nonghet, Xiengkhouang Province, near the Vietnamese-Lao border. Like American prisoners of war who endured torture, starvation, and reeducation, Yang's experiences included discrimination from Lao guards, eating expired rice, defecating in his dwelling, being forced to stand in one position for hours, illness, and watching other prisoners die. By the end of December 1975, Yang and other prisoners were sent to destroy the buildings at Long Cheng. Being forced to demolish the place that he once called home was the most torturous element for Yang.

Yang's love story becomes most painful in chapter 7. When his Vietnamese captors enabled him to work more freely in Phonsavan and neighboring Hmong villages, Yang learned from a surviving aunt, Kou Lai, that Ong and his family had escaped Laos. Still living under the precarious conditions of not being a prisoner yet not free and not knowing whether he will ever reunite with Ong, Yang met and married his second wife Ena Moua. Yang's life soon took a dramatic turn. Unbeknownst to Ena, Yang and several family members speedily concocted their escape from Laos, eventually fleeing Phonsavan to Pha Lai, to Thang Khai, to the Lao-Thai border where they crossed the dangerous Mekong River on inflatable tubes and bamboo poles, and ultimately to the Nong Khai refugee camp. Yang reunited with his mother and son in Nong Khai—although tragically Ong had remarried and resettled in the United States with her new husband. However, like *Fly Until You Die*, Vang rushes the end of *Prisoner of Wars* without fully explicating the complexities that undergird Yang's, Ong's, and Ena's love story. Nonetheless, Vang invites the reader to sense the turbulent emotions that underscored Hmong realities during the war and postwar periods.

Vang's monographs strategically enact critical interventions by exposing the macro histories of Project Water Pump while extracting the micro experiences of Captain Yang to highlight the impacts of war on Hmong people's everyday lives. Thus, Yang's biography in *Prisoner of Wars* complements the histories and narratives presented in *Fly Until You Die*. Vang's scholarship also highlights the unique transnational dimensions of Hmong studies—a field that is still marginal in the academy, but nonetheless contributes greatly to our understanding of transnationalism within Asian American studies, American studies, and historical studies. Just as for Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians, the afterlives of American militarized violence continue to inform the contemporary experiences of Hmong refugees in the United States. For example, the ongoing efforts of refugee soldiers to gain recognition for their war contributions continue to go unnoticed, except for a few legislative successes to erect statues and gain burial rights in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Additionally, President Donald Trump's negotiations with Laos to deport Hmong living in the United States in 2020, and actual deportations of Vietnamese, Lao,

and Cambodian refugees since at least the early 2000s, have revealed ongoing uneven temporalities that undergird the war's past in the contemporary lives of Southeast Asian Americans. In sum, both monographs capture Vang's mastery of oral history methodologies and the ethical sensibilities she employs in collaborating with her interlocutors to expand Vietnam War studies scholarship. Most importantly, she observes the call within critical refugee studies to center the narratives and humanity of refugee subjects themselves in histories of war, loss, and rebirth.

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