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Ma Vang takes readers through an engaging and poignant analysis of Hmong refugee history, knowledge, and memory from the 1960s to the present. Working through traditional archival files as well as the “refugee archive” of Hmong refugee histories, their families, and their traditions, Vang details both the knowable and unknowable about the human, cultural, and legislative legacies of the US “secret war” in Laos and the Hmong experience during and after the war. Vang is an assistant professor of critical race and ethnic studies at the University of California, Merced.

In *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*, Vang outlines a methodology for “how to write about things we do not know” because these items are “missing from the ‘official’ archives or delayed in transmission” (p. 24). Her work builds on the idea that not only people but history itself can be fugitive as it “eludes traditional archiving” (p. 4). Because so much of the United States and Hmong story includes the US “secret war,” secrecy is an important element of this work. However, unlike some works that primarily focus on uncovering details of the war, Vang looks to understand how secrecy itself can be knowledge and how refugees, by their very existence and through their histories, challenge traditional US narratives of war and empire (pp. 7-8). Vang draws from many other scholars to build her approach to refugees, secrecy, and movement, including the work of feminist, Black, and Indigenous scholars. Using this theoretical framing she can engage with Indigenous ways of knowing compared to imperial methods and archives.

To reveal the history of Hmong refugees, Vang covers a variety of topics and modalities including the role of secrecy as knowledge, redacted archival documents, legislation, public sentiment about famous Hmong figure General Vang Pao, and cultural representations of Hmong in memoirs and movies. In chapter 1, Vang examines the relationship between the Hmong and the CIA, or more broadly official US efforts during the secret war and the Cold War. As she details, the very existence of Hmong soldiers reveals that this “secret” US war was inherently un-secret for those fighting. Because the official US narrative was that this war did not occur, Hmong history became “unthinkable history” that challenged state secrets (p. 37). Vang next turns her attention to state secrets and US policies toward Laos. Chapter 2’s greatest strength comes from Vang’s in-depth discussion of
how she engaged with the archive and specifically the “missing things” from official records (p. 59).

In chapter 3, Vang examines the US Naturalization Act of 1997 through both legal and personal histories. By focusing on the US legal efforts, Vang can examine how approaching this topic from a US perspective demonstrates a desire to remove any US imperial legacies of the war by making Hmong citizens. In chapter 4, Vang analyzes the US treatment of General Vang Pao, who was a major US ally during the secret war but later was arrested in 2007 for buying weapons to overthrow the government of Laos (p. 117). Through the story of Pao, she analyzes when such actions are allowed, such as by the CIA in Laos in the 1960s, and when they are decried (p. 133). In chapter 5, Vang turns to popular culture and the figure of the refugee grandmother in film and memoir. Through fictionalized works, Vang can trace the idea that refugee narratives show the continuing process of relocation and memory, rather than marking the end of the story. In her epilogue, Vang looks to poetry and geography to demonstrate how all these missing and refugee histories have a deep connection to refugee places, both physical and spiritual.

As she notes in the work, this is not a book that will serve as a basic history of the secret war or the process of refugees leaving Laos and coming to the US. Other scholars have detailed the history of US, CIA, and covert actions in Laos and the stories of Hmong refugees.[1] With her focus that centers Hmong experiences and the challenges of secrecy, Vang’s book will be interesting for those wanting to understand more about Hmong and Laotian history and the legacies of the US military project in Southeast Asia. As her work focuses on methodology, critical theoretical approaches, and the importance of reassessing many traditional approaches, this book will be thought-provoking for many readers, especially those questioning how to approach the silences of the archive. Because her work covers several decades and topics, Vang can only cover some topics briefly. Readers may find a few topics leave them wanting more. But this is not a problem; rather, it is an opportunity for either Vang or others to continue to investigate these essential, secret yet knowable histories.

Note

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