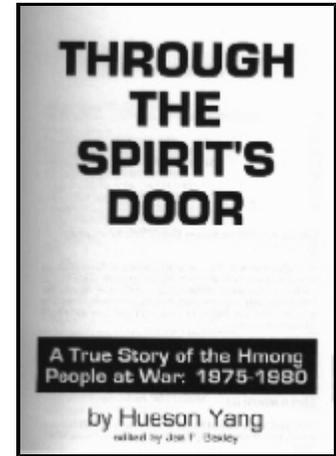


Through the Spirit's Door: A True Story of the Hmong People at War, 1975-1980.

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(Reviewer)



Hueson Yang (edited by Jon F. Baxley). *Through the Spirit's Door: A True Story of the Hmong People at War, 1975-1980*. HYCO International, 1993. (HYCO International, 1201 West Arbrook #109-977, Arlington, Texas 76015, USA.)

[1]

Hmong written narrative is in its early stages. Writers often need to relate their own stories before moving on to purely fictional works, and this apparently is true of Hmong writers. {1} We are seeing an increasing number of autobiographical accounts by Hmong refugees who now live in the West but who write about their lives in Laos and Thailand and their struggles during the Vietnam War. {2}

[2]

Through the Spirit's Door: A True Story of the Hmong People at War: 1975-1980, by Hueson Yang, is an example of such trail-blazing autobiographical work. This is an important

book in two respects. First it is a significant contribution to Hmong written narrative. Second, *Through the Spirit's Door* provides a rare view of a time when dramatic changes were taking place in Laos. I have encountered no other work which covers the same events with such thoroughness. As a reader I am most familiar with the Hmong experience in Laos in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, the Hmong experience in Thailand and resettlement in the West. The lives of those Hmong supporting Vang Pao who would not or could not leave Laos in the initial exodus or in subsequent migrations remains a hazy and obscure part of the overall picture. *Through the Spirit's Door* helps to fill this significant void. [\[3\]](#)

[3]

Through the Spirit's Door centers on the experiences of 14-year-old Thai Yang after the Pathet Lao came to power in 1975. His family is living near Long Chieng when the increasing disappearances and murders of Hmong who were allied with the defeated Royal Lao Government confirms the portents of those who warned of Communist retributions.

[4]

Although he is the youngest son, when his father leaves the family to hide in the jungles Thai assumes a role of greater respect and responsibility. Thai has received more schooling than is the norm in rural Laos. His education places him in more danger since the Pathet Lao target the educated for "reeducation."

[5]

The death of his younger sister in a massacre cements Thai's decision to join a fledgling Hmong resistance movement. Joined by other men from his village and their families, Thai lives a precarious existence over the next three years of near constant movement through the jungle and under constant threat of the Pathet Lao.

[6]

Thai becomes the "yerhlao," or leader of the group. A few times Thai and his men are able to inflict damage on their enemy. However, as time passes the chances of achieving safety, let alone victory, become remote. Thai and a handful of men undergo Pathet Lao ambushes, the killing or capturing of family members, and starvation while they search fruitlessly for information about loved ones held prisoner by the Pathet Lao. Finally, Thai and two others cross the Mekong River to the relative safety and serenity of Thailand.

[7]

As I read this narrative I found myself pulled in two distinct directions. On the one hand I was grateful and happy to have an account of the lives of ordinary Hmong people and to gain insight into post-1975 Laos. In contrast to sweeping accounts of historical events that gloss over the impact of war on humanity, here was a story of common people confronted by uncommon circumstances.

[8]

A countervailing reaction, nevertheless, gained particular force towards the latter stage of the narrative. I found myself questioning the veracity of this "True Story of the Hmong People at War" and wondering how much was real life, how much was *inspired* by actual events, and how much was pure fiction (an interesting problem given my opening comments).

[9]

In particular, there is an extended episode where Thai and his comrades lose track of their families and venture into Vientiane in search of information about their whereabouts. The idea of thinking that one can find information about a few dozen people in North Central Laos by searching at random in a city of tens of thousands is hard to believe. Indeed there must have been incredible faith in Pathet Lao record keeping. Then there is the coincidence of overhearing a soldier in a cafe describing an event which might provide a

clue. Such a plot strikes me as more appropriate for a gothic novel than a "true" account from memory.

[10]

What's more, while in Vientiane Thai encounters a waitress with the very Hmong name of Nou Hang (p. 282). Nou Hang is a waitress at a cafe and apparantly the sole means of support for herself and her parents. However, on these meager wages Nou Hang owns a car, a rare consumer item at the time. Furthermore, despite her Hmong name, it appears that Nou Hang is Lao. These inconsistencies do create some doubt and frustration in the mind of the reader.

[11]

This confusion is in part the result of the phrase "True Story" in the book's subtitle. If *Through the Spirit's Door* were presented as fiction based on fact, I would be less concerned about these inconsistencies. However, the "True Story" phrase suggests that this is an autobiographical work and therefore subject to a certain scrutiny by readers. For example, we are told of a notebook in which Thai records events and information included in the story. In crossing the Mekong, however, this notebook is lost. How then are specific details from the notebook recovered for inclusion in the narrative?

[12]

Similarly, the main character, who presumably is also the third-person narrator in the book, can not realistically be aware of certain information. For example, in a later chapter the narrator states that one of his companions, left behind after an ambush, has killed a specific number of Pathet Lao before dying himself. If no one from the original party went back or witnessed the event, how was this information made known to the narrator?

[13]

A final criticism is the need for more thorough editing as there are numerous typographical errors in the book. These errors are a noticeable distraction in what otherwise is a very readable book.

[14]

Lest the above statements suggest otherwise, *Through the Spirit's Door* is engrossing reading. Although it could be improved, it still is recommended reading for anyone interested in the history of the Hmong people.

Notes

{1} I do not want to suggest that writers who are from ethnic minority groups can only write about themselves and their groups nor that writings by persons who are ethnic minorities should be viewed as expressions representing the entire group. [Return to text](#)

{2} Another example is *Trails Through the Mists* written by Houa Vue Moua and Barbara Rolland (©1994, ISBN 0-9646047-0-1, 2520 Beverly Hills Drive, Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54701). Also several oral history collections have been published in recent years, notably *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* edited by Sucheng Chan (© 1994, ISBN 1-56639-163-6, Temple University Press) and *Hmong Lives: From Laos to La Crosse / Hmoob Neej: Tuaj Los Tsuas Rau La Crosse* (Wendy Mattison et al., © 1994, Pump House Regional Center for the Arts, 119 King St., La Crosse, WI 54601; ISBN ?). [Return to text](#)

{3} I should add here that the stories of the many Hmong who supported the Pathet Lao during and after the war remain to be heard. For obvious reasons these accounts are likely to remain unknown to those of us in the West. [Return to text](#)