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Book Review: Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century, Edited by Mark E. Pfeifer, Monica Chiu, and Kou Yang

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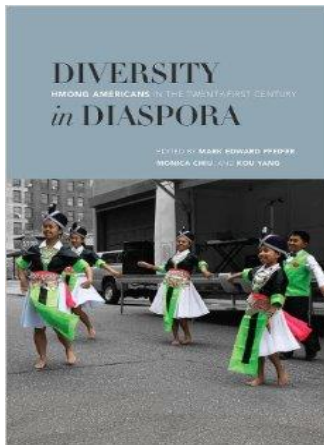
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Pfeifer, Mark Edward, Monica Chiu, and Kou Yang (Eds.). (2013). *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 296 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8248-3597-2

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In the last decade, research on Hmong in the United States has shifted from the earlier focus on Hmong refugees' struggles with social and economic adaptation (1980s-1990s) to scholarship that centers Hmong Americans as subjects who act to shape and create meaning about their past, present, and future. Mark Edward Pfeifer, Monica Chiu, and Kou Yang's edited book, *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, marks this shift in the research by presenting a collection of essays that develop as well as gesture toward new directions in Hmong American studies scholarship. In doing so, the book centralizes Hmong American perspectives and makes important contributions to expanding Hmong American studies that would engage with Asian American studies, diasporic studies, and the trajectories of United States history and

culture. *Diversity in Diaspora* traces the contemporary developments of Hmong Americans, covering a wide range of topics from socioeconomic development and political participation to gender, arts, and literature. The essays show how Hmong Americans are an integral part of U.S. society through their negotiations of social, economic, and cultural changes. Chiu suggests in the introduction that a Hmong denationalized, transnational subjectivity is that which makes the Hmong American case illuminating of the changes in Asian American studies and of the field's goals to think beyond ethnicity and nation (p. ix). Thus, the book represents both a political and intellectual project to assert Hmong scholarly and representational presence and visibility.

The twelve chapters of the volume, excluding the introduction, are divided into three thematic parts focused on social, cultural, and economic adaptation; identity, gender, and age; and Hmong arts and literature. Part I, "Hmong Social and Political Adaptation in the United States," opens with Kou Yang's historical overview of the last three decades since Hmong resettlement in the U.S. The chapter lays out the multiple resettlement, social adjustment, and political participation changes of the "American experience of the Hmong" by centering Hmong community knowledge about these processes. The rest of the chapters in this section explore in detail these issues including demographic shifts, poverty and economic challenges, political engagement, and electoral participation. Yang Sao Xiong's chapter, "An Analysis of Poverty in



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Hmong American Communities,” on the factors that contribute to a process of enduring poverty along with Hmong families’ strategies to navigate poverty and economic challenges is particularly enlightening. The essay challenges the “culture of poverty” model that assumes “Hmong American families and their children follow a vicious cycle of poverty” (p. 98). The intersections of identity, gender, and age are centralized in Part II with three essays focused on how the identity categories of gender and age can also be a lens for which to explore Hmong American experiences. Bic Ngo and Pa Nhia Lor’s chapter takes up the topic of Hmong American young men’s negotiations between their roles as students and as social, economic, and cultural contributors to the family and community, a subject that has received little investigation in the research on Hmong American youth. Dia Cha, on the other hand, examines the complexity of inequality issues faced by Hmong women within their communities. Cha claims that how women interpret their experiences facilitates redefinitions of social expectations, and these efforts are a part of women’s participation in the global processes of subject formation and economic development.

Part III, “Hmong Arts and Literature,” engages with oral and performance art along with literary texts as important tools to explore the questions of diaspora, inter-generational relations, struggles for justice, and “literary and political visibility” (p. 248). Jeremy Hein’s essay explores Hmong folklore and how these stories investigate what he calls “the double diaspora”—China and Laos—in Hmong collective memory. Nicholas Poss charts an exciting area of study by looking at Hmong American artists’ rap and poetry as art forms that promote empowerment and diasporic awareness. The author also highlights the connections that writer Mai Neng Moua and artist Tou Saiko Lee have made between *kwx txhij* (Hmong sung poetry) and rap—that they are a part of Hmong historical and contemporary oral art forms. Monica Chiu’s piece on Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* offers a refreshing exploration of how this literary text charts a dwelling at the paradoxical meaning of place as both permanent and ephemeral for diasporic Hmong. Chiu illustrates that Yang’s text concretizes the imagined and impermanence of Hmong diasporic experiences through strategies of attachments to stories, family, and spirituality. Together, the chapters in this section address the discussion in the introduction about the lack of literary and cultural analysis in Hmong American studies, a direction that the volume gestures toward. Mark Pfeifer’s final chapter maps the state of Hmong American studies, noting the prevalent areas of research and identifying gaps and emerging areas of interest. This bibliographic essay, however, might be more generative if it were a structured conclusion or epilogue that presented conceptual and methodological guides for rigor in the field.

The chapters that dealt with issues of poverty, identity and gender politics, and Hmong American art and literature were especially fruitful because they provided broader contexts and stakes for the topic of study. They also show how Hmong Americans challenge existing racialized ideas by creating alternative forms of subjectivity and belonging. In addition to the value of Xiong’s work on poverty and Hmong families’ economic strategies I mentioned earlier, the focus on identity and gender politics in the two essays by Ngo and Lor and Cha shed light on both understudied topics of Hmong American masculinity and the complexities of Hmong women’s concerns. These pieces have the potential to influence future research that would fully explore race, gender, and diaspora in Hmong American scholarship. Finally, the move toward more cultural and literary studies in Poss and Chiu’s essays bring to light the powerful work of Hmong American artists and writers who are redefining how rap, performance art, and literary texts refigure Hmong orality as knowledge transmission. Hmong American art and literature

address inter-generational tensions and help formulate possibilities for thinking and living beyond inclusion into the nation-state.

The book's stated intentions to develop and move the field of Hmong American studies beyond its retrenchment in sociological studies of refugee transitions and instead contribute to Asian American studies represents its strength in rethinking the field. Indeed, the early scholarship primarily focuses on empirical studies of Hmong refugee adaptation that reproduces Hmong racial and cultural difference in the myriad case studies that showed the "culture clash" between a Hmong "primitive" society and the "advanced" systems of U.S. institutions and national culture. Chiu claims that Hmong Americans have been held "hostage to a refugee representation" in U.S. scholarship, which has obstructed the "full incorporation" of Hmong American studies into Asian American studies. Additionally, she explains that Hmong American studies has been less robust in the subfield of Southeast Asian American studies. Although these claims describe the previous research, they overlook the emerging Hmong American scholars who are increasingly engaging in literary and cultural studies, helping to shape Southeast Asian American studies, and are making the most exciting interventions into Hmong and Asian American studies as well as to their own fields. Nonetheless, the anthology's aim to carve out a "space for Hmong Americans as primary actors in their own right and in placing Hmong American studies within the purview of Asian American studies" (p. xv) represents a "cultural compass" to guide new research (p. xiv).

Although this positioning for the book to center Hmong American perspectives and actions marks an important intellectual and political shift in Hmong American studies, this task also reflects a few of its shortcomings. First, not all of the authors' contributions critically engage with Asian American studies, refugee and immigration studies, or American culture and history. While some chapters provide analytical discussions on their subjects with new and original research, others follow a descriptive narrative that report the findings rather than explaining their meanings for Hmong American studies and broader areas of knowledge. For instance, the book explains that the "majority of the essays" are "predominantly sociological" because this is "typical of the field of Hmong American studies," but it could do more to clarify what these studies, included in the forward-thinking framework of this volume, might chart for current and future scholarly trajectories (p. xi). Furthermore, the book sets out to offer new directions and shape different contours for the field, but this goal would be helped by pushing the existing essays to engage these tasks or including a broader sample of interdisciplinary contributions. Identifying and clarifying more explicitly the contexts and stakes for their studies would broaden the implications for pertinent social and political questions rather than just for Hmong American studies.

For instance, the essays by Carolyn Wong and Steven Doherty have the potential to expand our understanding of the current political system. Wong notably illustrates how political engagement involves adapting Hmong traditions into a new society (pp. 108, 126). Doherty illuminates how Hmong American voter behavior does not always follow expected patterns of groups who have escaped war and communism, and instead is determined by their socioeconomic status (p. 140). Although it is important to track Hmong American civic engagement and political participation as well as highlight the election of several key Hmong refugees/Americans to the city and state government, it is also equally crucial to situate such studies within the broader public and scholarly discourse on the U.S. political process. This move would avoid reproducing a basic narrative about Hmong American progress that exceptionalizes the group's political activism. Perhaps positioning studies of Hmong American

political engagement within the following questions would reveal how the democratic political process functions and how historically disenfranchised groups engage with that system: What are the current debates on U.S. electoral politics and how do immigrants or people of color factor into this field? Moreover, how have Asian Americans, as a linguistically, culturally, and politically-oriented heterogeneous group (among other things), been represented in the political discourse? Finally, how does Hmong American political representation challenge certain aspects of the political system and translate to social and cultural transformations?

Second, the anthology wrestles with “Hmong Americans’ inclusion into and contributions to Asian American studies, as well as to American history, culture, and refugee, immigrant, and diasporic trajectories” (p. xii) but it does less to address the politics of “inclusion” that is often based on gendered racial difference. This ambiguous inclusionary project also elides an interrogation of U.S. empire, national culture and policies, and other formations of power. Hence, the move toward inclusion of Hmong American studies into Asian American studies follows earlier additive models of Asian American scholarship, missing the ways current research has critiqued problematic aspects of the politics of inclusion through the U.S. immigration and exclusion policies, the 1965 immigration act, the model minority myth, and cultural representations. One concern regarding an inclusion narrative is the uncritical view of U.S. exceptionalism so that the nation-state and its culture are re-affirmed as benevolent and the place of refuge for Hmong Americans. In addition, quite a few of the essays often use binary language to demarcate what is Hmong and non-Hmong, referring to the latter as the “mainstream” politics, culture, society, or practices. Rethinking the project of Hmong American studies, then, should mean changing the language and discourse in order to demystify Western-based frameworks of knowledge formation that reproduce power structures.

Diversity in Diaspora is an accessible volume for a general and academic audience in its survey of the contemporary experiences of Hmong Americans. It would also be a good companion book with more historical sources when adopted in a university classroom. The book’s shortcomings are situated within the challenges of putting together an edited volume on an area of research that has long been dominated by social scientific methods and theories beginning with Hmong in Southeast Asia to their initial resettlement in the United States and other countries. Indeed, knowledge formation is always already an incomplete project, and the volume’s possibilities lie in the new directions it opens up.

About the Author



Ma Vang is a University of California President’s Postdoctoral Fellow at UC Riverside. Her research focuses on the Hmong diaspora in the context of critical refugee studies, gender and history, US Cold War historiography, and community politics, with an emphasis on Hmong public engagements with the representational absence of their history. She has published an essay, “The Refugee Soldier: A Critique of Citizenship and Recognition in the Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 1997,” in *positions: asia critique* in its special issue on Southeast Asian American Studies. She received her Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego.



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