

Journal of Southeast Asian Language Teaching



A refereed journal of the Council of Teachers of Southeast Asian Languages

ISSN 1932 3611

Journal of Southeast Asian Language Teaching
Volume 12, No. 2, Fall 2006

Folk Stories of the Hmong: People of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. By Norma J. Livo and Dia Cha. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited. 1991. 135 pp.

With the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the United States experienced a large influx of refugees and immigrants. Among these new settlers were the Hmong, an upland people of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Like all refugees, they left behind nearly all their material possessions but brought with them a rich cultural heritage, much of it expressed in song, poetry, folktales, and traditional lore. But now that heritage is in danger of disappearing as the Hmong become more and more acculturated and as they find less and less time to pass on their heritage to their descendants. As an elderly man relates in Livo and Cha's *Folk Stories of the Hmong*, "The Hmong dream only at night. Artists need time to dream all day, too, and we have not had that time" (p.ix). Spoken and unspoken attitudes such as this helped spur co-author Dia Cha to collect, record, and interpret her culture's folktales and the stories told on the traditional needlework storycloths. Her collaboration with Norma J. Livo resulted in this book, *Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam*, which the two co-authors state

...is an effort to collect and make available folk stories of the Hmong people, both to Americans who seek to understand the culture of their newest countrymen and to English-speaking Hmong children who might not otherwise have access to the stories and traditions of their people (p.x).

The first part of the book is devoted to a thumbnail sketch of the Hmong and their culture. Besides a short history of the Hmong, the co-authors include a section on traditional beliefs and customs as well as a section on Hmong folk arts. The discussion of the beliefs and customs is particularly welcome, for it clarifies and highlights references and incidents that occur in many of the folktales. In a similar manner, the section on Hmong folk arts enables the reader to appreciate the significance of the clothing, jewelry, and storycloths that play such an important role in the lives of the

Hmong. Complementing the folk art section is a series of spectacular photographs by Michael Mancarella. Along with the photographs are graphic reproductions of the designs that appear on the storycloths.

Following the introduction are the folktales, which the authors have divided into three general sections: Folk Stories – In the Beginning; How/Why Folk Stories; and Folk Stories of Love, Magic, and Fun. Here readers will find stories that occur in almost all cultures. In the section, “In the Beginning,” there are stories of the creation, the flood, the origin of rice and seeds, and the origin of shamans. The How/Why Stories outline why animals cannot talk, why birds cannot talk, why Hmong live in mountains, and so on. Longer stories in the section Love, Magic, and Fun describe the importance of magic and the relationship that exists between the Hmong and the natural world.

The book concludes with a bibliography that includes video productions as well as scholarly, popular, and journalistic articles on the Hmong and their culture.

Four very general pictures appear in this collection. First, the stories provide a depiction of the traditional life of the Hmong – their livelihood as farmers and their relationship with the world. Second, closely aligned with the traditional lifestyle is the outline of the hierarchical relationships that exist among individuals and the relationship between the individual and the society as a whole. Third, the stories describe important customs and traditions such as cloth weaving and storycloth production. Finally, a whole series of beliefs, magical, and otherwise, emerge. Complementing and building upon one another, these folktales create an intriguing and enlightening picture of the Hmong. Whether read for entertainment, for specific cultural background, or for general knowledge, these stories are a treasure house of information. In their attempt to provide insight into the Hmong culture and way of life, the authors have succeeded admirably. They should be commended for their efforts.

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Note: Two items prepared by Cha and Livo to complement the book reviewed above are *Teaching with Folk Stories of the Hmong: An Activity Book* (2000) and an audio cassette, *Folk Stories of the Hmong: Audio Tales from the Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam* (2004). The book reviewed here, as well as both of these complementary materials, can be found at www.amazon.com

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