

# A penchant for survival

*Editor's Note: Pang and Xue spoke through Jue Vue, Xue's brother who has lived in the U.S. since the spring of 1978, and until recently was a bilingual technician for the Indochinese Education Program at WCC.*

By: Elaine Whitfield Sharp

Pang has the details of the death of his son, Kau, and his family written in a small, tattered mission-school exercise book, a book he has carried with him from his jungle hideout in Laos to a refugee camp in Thailand. Finally, on July 23, it came 9,000 miles with him to Ann Arbor.

Pang's cousin witnessed the killing and, afraid his mental message would die with him, wrote the details in the book for Pang.

In 1978, Kua, 22, his wife Yang Lue, 25, and their two children Mai Thai, 3, and 10 year old Thor, were riddled with the communist Pathet Lao bullets trying to escape from Laos to Thailand at Bon Dorn just west of the Laotian capitol of Vientiane.

As one of the defiant Hmong mountain tribespeople who fought against the Pathet Lao under General Vang Pao, Kua was one of the thousands of victims of a vicious mop-up operation by the communist group when it gained control of Laos in 1975.

Pang says one day he hopes to show the book and tell the story in person to Vang Pao, who now lives in Montana. But Pang knows that not even the good

general, as the collaborator with the U.S. was fondly known in Laos by the Hmong, can bring back his son Kua.

## A lifestyle changes

PANG CANNOT say precisely how many years he lived in the settlement in the hills of Khammouan Province in the lowlands of southern Laos, for the Hmong follow seasons only.

The movements of the moon and the monsoon- such as the rainy season from April to May – heralded the time for rice planting. At harvest time the elderly and feeble kept company with the chickens, pigs, goats, cattle, and buffalo, while all able-bodied family members brought in the harvest.

Opium, the Hmong cash crop, supplemented the peasants' income bringing them up to subsistence level - a safe plateau with no riches to risk or changes to contemplate. Life, like the imperturbable flow of the mighty Mekong, was slow, steady and seemingly endless.

In 1961, that meandering lifestyle began changing course. The Pathet Lao became threateningly strong to the western-aligned Royal Lao Government. Determined the communist elements would have no successful peasant revolutionary vanguard here, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency trained and bankrolled its own peasant resistance, the fearsome Hmong guerilla Armee Clandestine.

RUGGED INDEPENDENT folk, the Hmong wanted little to do with communism. Opium crops belonged to the grower, not the government, they contended. Culture was a family, not a national affair. They foresaw the attempts to create a socialist state, the camps in which at 60,000 Laotians were being 'reeducated' in by 1980.

So this time it wasn't for the harvest that thousands, like Pang, left their wives and children with the feeble and elderly in 1961 and 62. It was for training in Vang Pao's army, just for a time, just in case.

Pang returned home in 1965. Then Kua, when he was old enough went to serve under General Pao too. When the Pathet Lao dealt the final coup de grace to the Royal Laotian Government in 1975 and when the CIA pulled out its 'militarily advisors', the Hmong fled to the jungles with worn-out weapons, families and fear.

PANG RECALLED that time:

"In 1975 the communist soldiers took all the important people (of the Royal Lao Government) away to North Vietnam – but actually they just killed them – and all the people were afraid so they ran to the jungle."

The Hmong house, with its wood walls and sunlight streaming through many cracks onto the sleeping platform, a cooking fire and altar for the Tlan (or spirits), was a far cry from the new squalor of the jungle. With 1,000 others Pang and Xiong and their two boys, Dang and Thang, made do with the shelter of large leaves and depressions in the earth.

"The women and children - we would leave them safe in a ravine and go off to fight the communists. All the time they would chase us, following our paths into the jungle, killing us when they found us," Pang recalled.

The dense jungle dominating Laos yielded only jungle potatoes (yams), roots and tree bark which even the rigor of a bamboo steamer couldn't soften enough for the children to eat.

"Many children died," Pang explained.

"THEN (1979) Xiong ate a poisonous root. She swelled up for a long time and when it went down.....she died."

Many people died of unusual symptoms in the jungle, Pang recalled. On several occasions the Reagan Administration has accused the Soviets of using chemical warfare, in Afghanistan and now in Laos and Cambodia (Kampuchea) in 1980.

In that year, the remnant of the resistance in Laos was forced out. Pang recalls the dropping of small bombs "like hand grenades with little fire, and much smoke - bombs that killed many."

Pang and about 400 others picked up and under cover of night moved stealthily through the thick undergrowth.

Hmong guerillas working from Thai refugee camp bases and committed to escorting their countrymen to safety, linked up with Pang and his group near Mekong's bank west of Khammouan.

CLUTHCING A bamboo stick to float with - for Hmong generally cannot swim - Pang said he slipped into the coffee-

colored Mekong and began making his way across.

Pang promised to pay the guide \$175 (3,500 baht in Laotian currency) and, since he had no money, his cousin in a Thai refugee camp signed a promissory note later. Conditions at the Ban Vinai refugee camp were dangerously squalid where thousands remain even today.

“It was terrible,” Pang exclaimed. “Many people died because of sickness. There was bad water and little food. Nowhere to go to the toilet.

“All the refugees that came had parasites like ring worm and pin worm from the food and water.”

At Ban Vinai, Pang met and married Xue Vue in 1980, a pretty Hmong with long black hair, no more than a few feet tall, as common among this shorter people. Xue too had lost her husband as the couple fled the bombings of northern Laotian mountains bordering North Vietnam where they had been hiding.

“He (Ja Thor Xiong) ate a poisonous root, and he swelled up and died,” Xue said.

Early in 1982, Pang and Xue were transferred to the Phanatnikhom camp in Thai capitol of Bangkok.

“There we lived in a big ward, there were no separate rooms. But we learned to use electric lights and bathrooms,” said Pang.

A reunion is arranged

IT CAME AS good news for the Jue Vue family in Ann Arbor when they heard from an international refugee agency that sister Xue was alive with her child Bee Xiong, 12, and that she was

remarried to Pang who had two surviving sons, Vang Thang, 10, and Dang, 17.

## Refugees

The Christian Reformed Church learned of the family through Indochinese Education Program at Washtenaw Community College and brought Xue and her son, Vang Thang, 10, Pang and one of his surviving sons, Xiong Bee, 13, to Ann Arbor on July 23.

Dang, Pang’s second son had been shipped to California by another refugee relief agency, but was reunited with his family here in September.

Pang and Xue have promised to pay back the cost of air fares and other essentials to the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, added Jo Vredeveld, of Christian Reformed Church.

About 35, 000 of the estimated 350,000 Hmong who once peopled the rugged Laotian mountains are now in the U.S. Many of them have stories similar to the one Pang has written in his exercise book.

According to Mary Rumime of the WCC’s Indochinese program, about 85 Hmong live in Washtenaw Country.

Like their European predecessors, many of 3.5 million Asians that came here before 1975 came in search of a better chance, by choice and ready for a change.

But since the communist takeover of the mid-seventies, a new wave of mainly unskilled and uneducated refugees has crashed American shores.

Their greatest gift seems to be a penchant for survival.

INSIDE AND OUT, for Pang and Xue, an American day are sometimes strange and ill-fitting, like somebody else's coat or shoes.

Each morning they board the bus for the community college where they study English, the most difficult of tasks for these people whose language has no plurals and fewer verb tenses. Dang goes to Huron High School, while Vang Thang and Xiong Bee attend Angell School.

It was a cold night in November when Pang and Xue caught the bus outside a University of Michigan building where, in addition to the community college program, they study English three evenings weekly.

As the bus crawled forward, Xue pressed her nose flat against the window next to where she sat and gazed incredulously at her first snowfall.

"It looked like dandelion clocks floating on the wind," said Xue, now past the stage of carrying a travel-sickness bag on anything that moves faster than an ox.

Infatuation was short lived. At midnight Xue and Pang were wandering around North Campus, having hopped the wrong bus. Both knew no English, except rudimentary greetings. Then Pang remembered he had a piece of paper on him...did those shapes spell his address?

THE STRANGER who stopped to help Pang and Xue called the telephone number written on the slip of paper and

reached Dang whose English was accurate enough to guide the stranger with his parent's home.

To the Hmong, home with the family is a safe place to be, the center of all that's meaningful in life, much of what's worth fighting and dying for.

But this retreat offers limited escape. Reminders that they are no longer in their real home come in the form of cold days, bulky furnishings which occupy enormous pockets of space compared to the old familiar bamboo mats, and the struggle with words when someone answers the telephone.

Downstairs, in a basement apartment, live Xue's grandparents, Yeo Her Vue, 78, and Sai Pao Vue, 89 (approximate ages only). When Pang and Xue go to school, it is the grandparents, not babysitter, who take care of the children, like it used to be in the village.

"Yes, we have children in American schools, but we try to keep them as Hmong as possible. We want to learn English, but at home we speak Hmong," explained Jue, Xue's brother speaking for the whole family.

Pang and Xue and their children embrace many changes without fear.

The three-bedroom home of Pang and Xue – owned by the CRC and mostly paid for by the welfare check from the Department of Social Services (DSS) – has windows and doors, running water and electricity.

"I am very happy not to have to go to the river to get water, or to the jungle to find firewood to cook with," said Xue.

Heaps of school notebooks, signs of adaptability, occupy the outdated furniture which is tagged with cards bearing nouns like chair, table, green and yellow. The house is bare by many's standards, but then consumerism is not yet a part of Pang's and Xue's thinking, or budget.

"They are a very frugal people," observed Vredeveld.

It wasn't frugality that led Pang and Xue to hide a large bag of sugar behind the curtain on the kitchen window ledge.

Teaching Pang and Xue to can apple sauce during the fall, Vredeveld reached for the bag and dumped some of the sticky stuff in the bubbling mixture on the stove.

"They were horrified," recalled Vredeveld. "Sugar's a status symbol in Laos and there I'd dumped this gold into the pan.

Hmong honor, like sugar, is a status symbol, itself.

One of his early letters back to Thailand contained part of the money Pang owed the guide who helped him across the Mekong. "Now I only owe about 1,100 baht (\$55)," said Pang, with an accomplished grin.

Where did the money come from?

"Pang saved it from his DSS money," said Vredeveld. "Then they didn't have

enough for food that week so we (CRC) helped them. "They would rather have gone without food than break their word."

Survival in the mountains doesn't always add up to the same thing here. In spring 1981, a former Laotian paratrooper who came to Ann Arbor with his family took his own life when life here smothered him.

At least 20 Hmong have died mysteriously in their sleep in the U.S. since fleeing here, according to reports in the national news magazines. Some hint the cause may be the after effects of Soviet chemical warfare; others the stress of cultural transition.

On damp nights in some Mekong tributaries, perch of the species *Anabas Scandens* walk across dry patches in search of better puddles.

They are like Pang, Xue, and thousands more who braved the world's eleventh largest river in search of a better life. They chose a bamboo stick, because that's what helps one float.

But that stick, in Indochinese culture, is also symbol of flexibility – a symbol appropriate for this family who, in fighting forced changes of the Pathet Lao, must now become supple again to survive in the new jungle.