

NHIA YER YANG

Interviewer; Linda Rossi
Translator; May Herr

The following interview took place in Nhia Yer Yang's home at 62 St. Mary's Ave. S.E., Minneapolis, Minnesota on November 15, 1991.

1. *When did you come to the U.S.?*

I came to the United States February 22, 1980.

2. *How old were you when you came and how old are you now?*

I don't know how to read and write, but as I remember right now I'm 60 and I don't know how old I was when I came. (possibly 49)

3. *From where did you come?*

I came from Laos to Thailand in 1975 and I stayed in Thailand until 1980 and then I came to the United States. I came straight from Thailand to Minneapolis. When I first come, I live over in north Minneapolis for eight months and then I moved to this house and I've been living here, since then. I have been here 10 years.

4. *Who sponsored your emigration?*

There was an American sponsor and a Mr. Herr ma, my cousin.(May's Uncle)

5. *Do you still have contact with your sponsors?*

I haven't had any contact with my American sponsors since I came. I went on AFDC, and then they never contacted me and I never contacted them. I still contact my cousin.

6. *How many of your family members came with you?*

Seven people.

7. *How many of your family have joined you since you arrived?*

I had a son-in-law and daughter and some relatives, like six or seven families join me.

8. *Have you studied English? Where? For how long?*

When I came I study for one year at the church in Minneapolis. At that time Herr Man was teaching. Then when I moved to this house I go to the American Indian center for some English classes until 1984. My son Che Lee have a car accident and he died and then I stopped going.

9. *Who in your family speaks English best?*

My son Pau and my son Pane. I had five sons and a daughter when I came.

10. What was your occupation before you came here?

I want to talk about that. When I was still young with my parents, I worked as a farmer. In 1953 when the French came and lived in our country I was a soldier. In 1954 I became the mayor of a city. The city is called cau ho. I watch over the people and I'm also a soldier at that time. I would like to talk more about my work and what I have accomplished.

I was a soldier and a mayor until 1960 when the American people came. They bring us weapons to help us fight the communists. In my job as a leader over the soldiers, I had to choose a group, each group of the soldiers. Like when the government want more soldiers, I have to choose them. I'm the one that arrange everything and give them the soldiers. I was elected three times to be Mayor. I had control of the weapon center and I also work with the people, watching the people as a mayor in this country does.

Within my family when I was a soldier, three of my family member has died and six or seven of my soldier die. I was notorized as a mayor, you can see the symbol, this one was pretty long. I was promoted to governor. (At this point, Nhia Yer showed me documents brought over from Laos). My job didn't involve anything with the economics. We really don't have any money to look after. We don't have any economic problems because the whole village are farmers. We raise our own animals and we have our own farms. I'm the judge if we have any problem. They come to me and I help them solve their problems. When I was a soldier, I pay the money to the soldier like the government would pay him. As a soldier, they give them rice every month and I have to control this for their families.

In 1955 I became a shaman. I help the people with their spirits. Because there was no hospital and they sick they come to me and everything. I am basically the healing doctor in the village. The difference when I was still back in Laos is we have our own homes and we can do whatever we want.

We can make the noises, we can do what ever we want, but in the United States it is not our own home, so we can not do what we want. That is the difference. Whatever the people have problem with I will help them in any way I can. It deals with the holy spirit. If a person is really sick now and he came for help I will perform a song and the spirit will tell me that this person's spirit is not living with him or her anymore. I will ask the spirit, "If that's the case then what can I do to get his spirit back?" It's like an angel will tell me, "In order for you to get better you will have to butcher a chicken, a pig, or a cow, to exchange your spirit." Usually I butcher a chicken or cow and I exchange it and then the person get better. It's not so much different, like finding a live chicken or a pig because there's a lot of farms. I go and buy it and bring it home. Before I do that I talk to my nearest neighbors and tell them, "today I'm going to do this, and there's going to be a lot of noise and please be patient with me for today." The tradition does continue except for the neighbors. There's a lot of people coming in and out when you do something like that. It's like a party, so you have to tell the neighbors before you do this. For the past two years I've been doing it a lot, like on Saturday and Sunday three times. Now I'm really busy so I just do it once a week.

I'm not working at all now. I'm on social security. I mostly go and visit relatives so I'm very busy. Sometimes at school, or the community center, they call me to go and play an instrument for the children and teach them. I also tell the Hmong culture to American students so they understand about our children better. At the funeral sometimes people come and ask me to play. The reason that we play it is not simple. There is a song you have to play for the person that died, for his soul. We believe like Christianity, that the person's soul go to heaven or hell. I will play a song to direct that person to go and look for his ancestors and the people that have died before him. You go to this gate, and you get a paper, in order to go and see your ancestors. The songs involved are like a direction so the soul can go back to the ancestors. You play the same song to everyone.

I would like to explain how I became a shaman. When I was young I was kind of sick. I did not grow, so they go and ask a fortune teller and the fortune teller say, " You have some spirit, a shaman spirit." People came and they set up a table. I will sit like this in front of the table and then I will start to dance and shake and dance. You have to do that a couple of times, maybe three or four times.

There is a different language in order for you to talk to the spirit. The spirit will come into your head and you know how to talk to them. It will be the same as talking in tongues.

One thing that's involved as a shaman is I help people that are infertile, and cannot have any children. They even go to see the doctor and they cannot have any children because of the infertility. They will come to me and ask for help. I will perform the dance and ask the spirit to give them children. They have children after they came to me. I've seen a few people like that. If you don't have any son, you only have daughters, you can come and ask me to give you a son. I will perform and they will have a son after that. (May adds, "This is a true story because my brother and sister-in-law have five daughters, they don't have any son. They came for help and he help them and now they have four sons.") As a shaman, it involves healing people and helping people to have children. Since I've been to the states for 10 years I've helped more than twenty couples have children or to have daughter or son.

It's not a matter of getting a fee. When they come to me for help I don't tell them that for me to help, you have to give me this much money. If I only do healing, some people give me money. Whatever they have they give to me and I'll take whatever they have, like twenty or thirty dollars. If I help them to have a child they usually call me and I go to their house and give the baby a name. They give me a gift of \$200.00 or \$300.00. It's not like a contract where, if you become pregnant then you have to give me this much. When they have a child they so happy they give me a gift and I take whatever.

As a shaman I don't have any problem with my own spirituality within this culture. The only time I'm in touch with the spirit is when somebody comes for help then that's where my mind will be, to get in touch with the spirit. If no one has any problem in my family I'm fine spiritually. I don't have any problem with separating from myself, or separating from the person I'm helping. Only when people come will I get in touch with the spirit. I don't have any stress from it.

There was a celebration in 1985, when an American guy came to me for help because he had a ringing in his ear and he cannot hear. He explain the situation to me and I say, "Ok, I'll ask the spirit to help you."

After I perform the shaman dances, he went home for a month and he come back and he say he doesn't have any ringing in the ear. He's so happy he bought some gun powder and bring it to me as a gift. There was another situation where an American woman was having rashes on her arms and her skin and everything. She's been going to the doctors and they give her cream and they give her everything and her skin looks worse everytime she go to the doctors. She heard about the American guy's story and she call me for help. I did not perform the shaman dance, but I know how to make magic. I gave her some magic water and she wash her arms with it and the rash go away. She was very happy about this.

As a shaman I will be glad to help anyone. It doesn't matter what color they are; white, black, Hispanic. If infertile, I will help and if they are sick I will help, whatever they need. I mentioned that for example the Christianity. They don't have a lot of respect for the spiritual belief of a shaman. If the Hmong get sick they go to see a doctor, but first they pray and then they go to see a doctor. The people who believe in the spiritual, they come and get help from me. Whatever I can do. If they don't get better, eventually they will go to see a doctor, but they usually start with the shaman. There's a lot of problems with the surgery. They don't want to have the surgery so they come to me.

I also want to add that I have accomplished many things. I can perform the funeral songs when somebody dies and the marriage song when two people get married. I can make all the equipment that you work with in the house like the knives and spoons and can make instruments. I know a lot of things about our history and culture and if you want to ask anything you can come and ask me. My father know how to do that. I will usually go into the blacksmiths store and help him set the fire and watch him do everything and eventually learn everything. I ask for funding from the state and we set up a shop in an American woman's garage and we work on her property. So I just go there, because everything is set up in her garage. There also was a movie made of me when I go to the shop. Channel 11 and 5 they video me and there was also a movie in the Science Museum of St. Paul about it.

11. How does your life now compare to what you anticipated?

I feel it's really hard for me. It makes me really sad. In my country we have our own home, we don't have to pay for the bills and we don't have to pay for the gasoline and everything. Here you have to pay for everything. Everything involves money and I don't have money, so it makes it really hard for me. There is a lot of food in this country to eat, but everything involves money. I get money from social security, but it doesn't cover everything, so it makes it really hard for me.

12. What has been the most difficult part of your adjustment here?

After you come into my home and transcribe this, I hope the government would understand where this puts me as a shaman. It makes it really hard. I don't have a home. I hope that this will help me. You will print this and people will read about me, and will help me, and I will get a home, so I can help other people. It is most difficult for me, I cannot adapt to this, the house is not my own. I cannot continue the traditional spiritual, to be "in touch". It is really hard, but hopefully in the future I can have my own home. If I have to move and I'm in touch with the spirit and it lives in that home, I have to ask the spirit to leave. Hopefully, one day I will have a steady place and won't have to move around so much. I thank you, that you come here and help me, even though I don't speak English. A lot of Americans have helped me before and I'm really happy about that.

**13. *What has been the easiest part of your adjustment here?
(Does it feel more or less safe here, after surviving the war?)***

As for the question of crime, after being a soldier in the war, I'm not so worried about that. If you have a good home and have protective doors and windows I'm not so afraid. But if they do come in I know how to protect myself because I was in the war.

14. *What do you wish most for your future here?*

The thing I wish most for my future here is a home. Hopefully, the government will give me a home and I can do everything the same. Whatever I want to do and not worry about the neighbors. I would like it to be close in the cities with my family. I don't want to be isolated. If like we have a party I will want to butcher a cow or a pig. I will want every relative to come over and eat it with us. If the food is all gone after we eat, we don't care, even if it is \$300.00 to \$400.00, as long as everybody is happy and everybody gets something to eat. I don't care if it is a farm, as long as I don't have to live in the projects.

15. *How does that compare to your previous wishes for the future?*

If I was still in my country at this time, the thing I would really wish for, is to become a leader of the people, and have my own farm, and have my own animals. If I want to eat meat I butcher it. I don't have to go to the store and buy it. In this country you have to buy everything at the store and it's not fresh anymore. This is what I would wish for if I was still a young person.

16. *What grades in school have your children reached?*

I have two sons that graduate from high school and they are now working for the family. I have one son that graduate from a four year college. I have a younger son that is still in high school who is fifteen. I had one son that died. The older son work as a salesman in the auto, he sells cars and is also a travel agent. Another is doing some wiring, one is working for the city housing department, painting. The son that graduated from college was in electrical. I'm happy my sons have grown up and they're helping me. They have accomplished a lot and I'm really happy.

17. *Who do you talk to when you need advice?*

If I need advice I ask my brother. If I'm really worried there's a committee. They come and bring a bus and take all the elderly people, like 60 to 70 years and they go to a park

for a picnic. This really relieves some of the stress. I do not drive, but the bus comes and picks me up and takes me places.

20. *Have you had any problems with laws in this country? Specifically, marriage, welfare regulations, divorce.*

In this country it's so different, it makes my heart ache. If there's something wrong with a marriage, the wife, she will call the police and they come and they arrest the husband. They don't ask any questions before they arrest him. They just put the handcuffs on him and take him away. Americans say until proven innocent. It makes me really sad because in my country it's really different. If the husband and wife beat each other up, we won't call the police, because the relatives will come into the house and talk and ask before we do anything. Here the police just came and the husband doesn't know what's going on. They just arrest him and take him to jail. This makes it really hard and I don't like it, if it is for me to judge.

I understand that for American people the distance they live from one another, you have to depend on the police to help you. As for our people, I hope in the future the police will listen to the story before arresting him. The family will have to talk before doing anything, and if we can't resolve the problem then we will call the law. But otherwise, if the wife call, they cannot just come and arrest the husband. Hopefully this will help and the law will be more generous in the future.

21. *What kinds of changes have you made in the food you eat?*

It hasn't changed a lot. The older people don't like the American food. We eat our own food, because our food makes us full for a long time. We don't get hungry so often as when we eat American food. They only eat a piece of bread and it doesn't last so long. We eat the rice and the meats and it gives us more strength and it lasts a long time. I like to eat the the French bread and a round Hawaiian bread, because I can eat them with my coffee.

22. *Has your family had any problems relating to teenage marriage?*

No, we haven't had any problems.

23. *What makes a good wife/husband for you?*

(Nhia yer commented earlier that he is married) If I was looking for a wife, I'd look for a wife that had long hair not punk like hair. The hair doesn't stick up. The face and the teeth. I look at the teeth, are they well developed? I measure that, the hair and everything together. I will figure that if I marry a person like that, then we will have a really good life. Whatever we'll be doing, like go into business we will make profit. So, I look for a wife with those qualities. If I'm looking for a wife I will go into the girl's house and visit and look at the way she walk and the way she talk to me, so if we were to marry, are we going to have any problems, will we be compatible? (I married my first wife from 1950-1971 and lost that wife. She died. I married my second wife four months later, the people they tell me to remarry, so she can help me get my life together. We've been married twenty years.)

24. How do you feel about the changes regarding respect for parents/elders and responsibilities for young people?

In this country the house is so small. I have a lot of sons, and right after they get married and have their own children, they have to move out. In my country it doesn't matter how many sons I have. We will live together when we get married. As to the respect, I think my children respect me. They have a lot of respect for me and they love me. They come and visit me and buy food for me to eat, if I don't have enough food. I'm not so worried about my sons, my older son has been married. I'm a little bit more worried about my teenage son. I don't know what he will grow up to be. Will he become a good person or not? Because there's a lot of crimes right now I'm a little worried about him. My oldest son was seventeen when we moved to the states, the others were fifteen, thirteen, twelve, and the youngest was four.

25. What, if any experiences have you had with discrimination?

I have experienced a lot of discrimination or secret discrimination. The people that are discriminating against me are the ones that don't understand where I come from and who I am. But a lot of people have been generous and they like me. I would say, because I don't have a country, I live in the United States, and if I'll be good then they'll be good to me. I don't have a lot of problems, but I do have some discrimination.

Do you have anything you would like to add to this history?

I would like to say for the next generation of my people, that hopefully in the future when their children grow up, they will learn more about their people. Where they come from and who they are. Do not become like American people. Do not become so comfortable and adapt their form in the states. They're American, but they have to remember where their ancestors came from. Learn to respect your parents more. Hopefully, we will have a lot of help and more and more of our people become political and help our own, so we don't get so lost in this country. I hope this will become like a story and our people will understand and keep our culture and customs alive. I am thankful the American people are helping by doing this to keep it alive.