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## Review of Y. J. Thao (2006) The Mong Oral Tradition: Cultural Memory in the Absence of Written Language

Sovachana Pou

Portland State University, [spou99@hotmail.com](mailto:spou99@hotmail.com)

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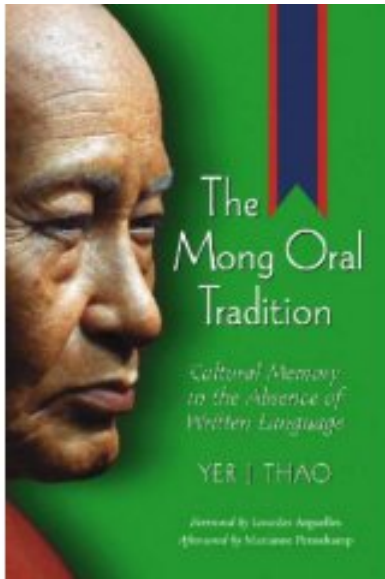
## Book Review

Thao, Y. J. (2006). *The Mong Oral Tradition: Cultural Memory in the Absence of Written Language*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers.

*Reviewed by*  
**Sovachana Pou**  
*Portland State University*

Whether you are a scholar, an educator, a student, or simply curious about different cultures, “The Mong Oral Tradition” by Professor Yer Thao is an excellent resource for learning and developing a deeper understanding of oral cultural traditions and other cultural practices.

I found this book to be a scholarly and fascinating insight into a culture barely known to outsiders. Professor Thao brings the reader into the world of the Mong. Each chapter points out the cultural clash and hardships faced by the Mong people, following their involuntary migration to America, as explored through the lives of thirteen respectful Mong elders living in California. Facing genocide and being persecuted by the Lao communists at the end of the war in Southeast Asia, the Mong had no choice but to come to America as political refugees. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) promised that the United States would find them new homes when they lost the secret war. Overnight, they left behind their traditional lifestyle, moved, and resettled into one of the most modern and literate countries in the world. Many knew little spoken or written English. They faced numerous obstacles adjusting to this strange new industrial and literate society. They did not know how to use appliances, drive, or manage strange things



that people in the United States take for granted. This book describes the profound issues that the respectful thirteen Elders encountered while preserving the Mong oral culture in every day life here. Their lives have been a struggle rather than the dreams they had expected them to be.



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In a biographical and ethnographical format, Professor Thao chronicles the Mong oral culture, society, socio-cultural settings, and oral tradition as a source of knowledge and transformation of the Mong community through the unforgettable stories of the respectful thirteen Mong Elders. He discusses in great length the Mong beliefs, rituals, customs, ancestor worship and educational experiences.

He encourages those accustomed to print culture to become more understanding and sensitive to indigenous oral traditions and culture value. In the Mong tradition, everything the next generation needs to know is passed on orally and by example.

Professor Thao's research illustrates how the Elders had to endure their new life and continue to use the oral tradition to co-exist in this modern society. Through narrative and participatory inquiries, he establishes a strong connection between the elements of the Mong culture, such as marriage customs and clan ties. In the Mong culture, kinship and clan structures define relationships. Professor Thao postulates that the American educational system is "moving in the direction of trans-disciplinary pedagogy" which must include both written and oral cultural traditions in order to equitably validate all cultures. Culture is retained and shared in different forms of "consciousness" and "modalities" and these must be identified, respected, and preserved.

Professor Thao illustrates how the Elders try to make sense of who they are, who they once were, and what values and heritage shaped them. They seriously embark on that quest, bringing along many associations with quests of their own. The maintenance of the oral tradition is the ideal way to understand their world as human beings, as well as their goals, cognitions, behavioral patterns, views, and intentions. I found that each Elder's personal recollection extended my understanding of the values of the Mong practical oral tradition. Equally important, each Elder described the harsh obstacles and adversities they face in this literate world. Their primary concern is to help the younger generation to develop and lead useful lives by having cultural integrity and identity. As one of the Elders, Mai Vang, expressed: "If the Mong younger generation lose their traditional custom and values, then they are cultureless in this country. They will become *mej yog lee-jtwg*, meaning who are you? They or them?" This traditional and unique oral language has been part of the Mong culture for hundreds of years. In this new setting, the Elders still speak Mong, celebrate Mong holidays, practice Mong religious beliefs, cook Mong foods, play Mong instruments, tell Mong stories, and conduct Mong rituals.

Throughout the book, Professor Thao discusses and gives examples of how the Mong culture is changing. An example is how the grandchildren do not believe the trials and hardships the parents and grandparents went through to survive in Laos and to get to America. He also discusses the decline of the oral culture specifically in regards to activities that are deemed important or "sacred." The modern Mong in America are faced with a confusing world full of schedules and deadlines that take them away from what the elders see as important activities. This, of course creates conflict between the generations. It is a constant struggle to keep the culture alive. The author predicts that in the future, Mong children will regret losing their culture, language and identity. This book cautions educators and Mong children about this potential loss. This is a similar crisis facing all immigrant groups living the United States. The conflicts among the Mong youth and elders can easily be seen in other minority cultures facing the pull to assimilate into the majority culture.

People across ethnic, social, and economic classes want all children living in the United States to speak English and achieve academic success, but at what cost to their self-identity, culture, heritage, and roots? If they learn English, will they lose the language they speak now?

Will they lose the culture, the tradition and the heritage they have inherited? The acculturation process contributes to the possibility of generational dissonance. What I see in the Mong community is certainly consistent with other immigrants' patterns of cultural change. Daily participation in the myriad institutions of American life makes it difficult to maintain such cultural insulation.

Another striking theme throughout the book is the Elders' educational point of view based on their oral culture and language, family ancestry and kinship. Elders use oral literature to educate children about the importance of heritage and life skills. Their insightful points of view are determined and preserved by what they learned and experienced from their noble ancestors when they were young. The book provides readers with a deeper understanding not only of the words but also of the feeling behind the words expressed by the Elders. Although most Elders believe that academic achievement leads to economic success, many also feel that American schools encourage a style of individualism that destroys the style of family collectivism. "Young women and men who are educated but don't listen to their parents' advice will not know how to begin their life," warned one of the Elders.

Through this book I have come to understand more about these brave Elders, their heroism, battles, tragedies, feelings and heartbreaks. I witness their courage to speak up for what they believe. Even though they face difficult times with the concept of American acculturation, they express their desire to live a life of service for the next Mong generation.

In summary, we have all lost something at one time or another. But what the Mong Elders are losing is irreplaceable. Elder Shoua Hang expressed: "My people came to live in the United States only twenty five years ago, and I begin to see many Mong children losing the culture already." The loss of the Mong oral tradition will create discontinuity for the next generation. As for the young Mong generation, I see it as much more of a clash of wills and beliefs in the right of the literate world to exist over the oral traditional world, as opposed to along side of, the Elders. After reading the Elders' story, I also realize they are not alone in their struggle to preserve their oral tradition. The more immigrants become Americanized, the more they discard the behaviors and values of the culture of origin. This book by Professor Thao is offered as a tool to help correct, improve, and preserve the Mong oral tradition. I want to salute the extraordinary Mong Elders for their compassion and wisdom. Professor Thao should be lauded for his efforts to bridge the gap by sharing his personal perspective. He is to be complimented for his incisive look at cultural memory in the absence of written language.

Finally, I would recommend this book to immigrants to the United States who desire to preserve and pass on their culture to the next generation. Any immigrant who is convinced they have it "made" in America should also make the point to read this book as well.

### About the Reviewer



Sovachana Pou graduated from University of Oregon with B.A. in Mathematics. After a career in business and as a National Consultant at the Ministry of Tourism in Cambodia, he changed his focus and completed Advanced TESOL (Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages) certification, specializing in teaching children English, teaching English to adults, teaching business English and teaching tourism English in 2006. As a volunteer in Cambodia in the summers of 2005, 2006, and 2007

he taught and advised teachers and monks' on education issues. He also taught Khmer literacy and culture to children. He graduated with a Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction with an ESL/Math endorsement in July 2008 from Portland State University.



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