

Archive | NHPRC Pai Yang 1PHWXWD59Q03HMA7XH4G1H35S8

TOM WEBER: This is MPR News. I'm Tom Weber. This year marks 40 years since the Hmong first arrived in Minnesota on the heels of the Vietnam War.

On this show, we're doing a series of programs throughout the year about the Hmong community. We had one of those shows earlier this week when we listened through the MPR archives to look back at 40 years of Hmong resettlement here in Minnesota. There was one story though in the archives that didn't quite fit that program earlier this week, but we wanted you to hear it.

21 years ago, a young woman named Pai Yang wrote a commentary for MPR about what happened when she left Minnesota and went to college at Harvard. We're going to check in with Pai Yang in just a few minutes. But first, let's listen back to what she said. And remember, this is more than two decades ago.

PAI YANG:

So there was at last sitting in lecture at my Ivy League classroom far away from Saint Paul. The professor was lecturing that day on immigration, particularly immigration from Southeast Asia. A picture of the Hmong community flashed before my eyes. Nah, she's probably never heard of Hmong before.

And to prove my point, she began the lecture with the Vietnam War. After a while, I found myself reliving my life if the war had not happened. Jeez, I would have been so miserable, but then I wouldn't have been taught any fancy Western ideas. The Hmong community would have been very different. And soon my mind dwelt on that depressing thought.

Then as if reading my mind, the professor turned the lecture to a numerous group of Southeast Asian refugees who are not experiencing any sort of success in this country. My eyes widened, and my jaws dropped. No way, but sure enough, she was referring to the Hmong.

In front of a class of 130 students, she described the Hmong as primitive and ignorant, failures compared to all the other model minorities. Some friends turned towards me. "Hey, aren't you Hmong?" I nodded absently, but my mind was already dueling with the professor.

I am Hmong. I should be up there telling my peers about the Hmong. Even though I'm thousands of miles away, I can see the disintegration of my Hmong community, and it pains me.

We still exist in numbers, but the togetherness that once bonded us is disappearing. Outsiders look at us and see what my professor saw, unsuccessful immigrants. And they look down on us for it.

When I look at the Hmong, I see the tragedy of a people whose ideals and values are being trampled on not only by non-Hmong people, but also by its own young Hmong generation. It angers me when critics point out all the bad things happening in the community. They say that we are ignorant, and I reply that they are just as ignorant of us.

We need to remember always that we are Hmong first and remember our parents sacrifice for us. I am on my own as a Hmong student here. And being Hmong and proud of it has become one of my top priorities.

I believe in the Hmong. There is a plethora of talent among the Hmong that needs to be tapped, yet I see young boys getting involved in rough crowds and emulating their ways before they are old enough to shave. I see young girls getting married at too early an age, becoming mothers even before finishing high school.

By standing idly by, too afraid to say or do anything we are depriving our community of its future. The Hmong should be a community where everyone takes the responsibility of spurring each other on toward fulfilling our capabilities. My challenge to my peers is to live up to our potential and defy how the rest of society has already defined us.

TOM WEBER: That is Pai Yang. That's a commentary that she wrote for MPR News and read here 21 years ago. Pi now lives in New York. And we called her and asked her to listen back to this piece and asked her what she thought listening back all these years later.

PAI YANG: I think most of it still holds true. I think the first thing that hit me was my voice was-- it sounded so young. [LAUGHS] I mean, that was over half a lifetime ago.

TOM WEBER: I'm curious if before you had listened back to this piece you did for MPR about 21 years ago before you listened back this week, had you remembered as searingly as you described it in the piece about being in that class with that Professor calling the Hmong people an unsuccessful set of immigrants?

PAI YANG: Absolutely. It was a sociology course, of course. And these things come up in such a type of class. And it was very jarring. And I think it was the first time I felt like I was really confronted with my identity.

TOM WEBER: Mm-hmm.

PAI YANG: When you live and grow up most of your life in the Hmong community, you're used to everyone telling you what being Hmong means and how you define yourself. And once I was out of there and confronted in this way, I had a really choose and think about my cultural identity and what it means to me and which aspects of my culture I value and which I want to carry forward in my life.

TOM WEBER: Did you ever talk to that professor? Did you ever confront him and say, hey, what are you talking about?

PAI YANG: Oh, of course, I absolutely talked to the professor. And the professor was extremely pleased to meet me. She said, this is, of course, the data does not talk to the exceptions. The data just really looks across in a very broad way. And this was some of the data at the time.

And I certainly hope the data has changed. I can't say I know exactly if the data has changed. But that was what she-- that was her feedback was she hoped I didn't feel taken aback by it.

TOM WEBER: One of the things you said in the commentary, I'll just read the direct quote, "Maybe America wasn't our dream, but it was our parents dream. And we don't realize we're breaking our parents' heart." That kind of tore at the heartstrings a little for me when I heard you say that. Now another generation or two later, how do you think that dynamic is playing out?

PAI YANG: I still think it's true. I sometimes feel like because the community tends to be fairly isolated, very inward looking, I mean, that they sometimes don't realize what's out there for them. And I think even for me, I feel like in pursuit of my own dreams, even though my parents are extremely very open minded and have always been extremely supportive, I've always felt that even in pursuit of my own dreams I constantly break their hearts.

I do that by not living closer to them. I do that by not choosing what many people have termed to me the Hmong way of life, which is getting married and having kids. And so for myself, I think, it's still true.

I definitely see in cousins and extended family that the younger generation, I think, the parents hoped more for them. And I think while they make a good life, it's not the life-- it's a similar life to what the parents had. And I think that's what the parents really want is that hope that they would have a different life.

TOM WEBER: Do you speak Hmong very much? Do you try to? What is your relationship with the Hmong language?

PAI YANG: When I talk to my parents, I obviously do. And I have family in California, and I lived in California for a while for a few years. I also have family in the Northeast. So whenever I can, I do try and go visit. It's funny, and I'm the one teaching their kids how to speak Hmong. [LAUGHS]

TOM WEBER: That's cool.

PAI YANG: So I remember I had my cousins visiting New York, and we were at the American Natural History Museum. And I was in the exhibit of Asian peoples. There was an artifact, and it was labeled Hmong artifacts. And I saw that. And I was reading that aloud, and my niece she looks at it, and she's like, What is Huh-- Hmong?

[LAUGHTER]

TOM WEBER: Wow. Wow.

PAI YANG: And I turned to her parents, I said, "She doesn't not know what she is?" And so I spent the weekend teaching them basic Hmong. And because they were learning piano, they of course, understood the tones very, very well, so.

TOM WEBER: Is that a concern of yours, especially about how younger generations of Hmong are or aren't being taught the traditions or want to learn the traditions? Is that forever going to be an issue do you think for the Hmong people here in the US?

PAI YANG: I think people-- I think preserving a language is incredibly valuable. I mean, I myself, I'm a linguaphile. And so to me, every language is valuable. Every language is important.

I've tried to self-teach myself how to read and write because I actually never took classes when I was younger. I know some parents are really trying to get their kids to retain the language and to teach them and to get them into classes. I think that's actually really, really important.

But it's just really hard when you live in a society like this in a much broader society to value it I suppose. But it's also a language that has been evolving substantially over the centuries because of the spread of the Hmong tribes. You go to China, and you hear them speak. And actually when I was in Beijing in the fall, I was at a market there and I did meet a Hmong gentleman from Guangxi province.

I saw what he was selling, and I tried to talk to him. And he could understand me a little bit, but I couldn't really understand him that well. And I knew he was speaking Hmong. We both decided. I knew what tribe he was from, but the languages have evolved separately.

And languages are living things. And so, I think, most people today speak Hmonglish. And if you go back to Laos, you go back to China the Hmong cannot understand you.

TOM WEBER: So you said back then that being Hmong and proud of it has become one of my top priorities. Is that still true these years later?

PAI YANG: Absolutely. I see my contribution as helping mentoring and helping young Hmong men and women to find their place in their success in this larger society. Not having had the benefit of such mentors, I think, it's really important that we do so.

TOM WEBER: Pai Yang, I appreciate your joining me here from New York and reflecting on this commentary you gave us 21 years ago. Thanks so much for your time.

PAI YANG: Thank you, Tom. I appreciate it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

TOM WEBER: Pai Yang now lives and works in New York. We were talking especially this week about the Hmong 40th anniversary here, 40 years of resettlement because there's a new exhibit opening just this weekend here coming up this weekend at the Minnesota Historical Society at the Minnesota History Center. We are Hmong Minnesota it's called. There's also a big collection of archives and facts and figures in all of the reporting we've done in the shows we've been doing here on this show at mprnews.org as well. So go there, and check it out.