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Interview with Wang Her

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Wang Her

Interviewer: Peter Chou Vang
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Editor: Paul Hillmer



(0:00) Grandpa, what's your name?

My name is Wang Her, my father was Vang Shoua and my grandfather was Txai Cheu [Hmong traditions & customs trace lineage only through the male side]. Grandfather Txai Cheu bore my father, Vang Shoua. My father married my mother and they bore me.

(0:30) What is you mother's name?

My mother was called Blia from the Moua clan. When I was born we lived in Laos; we lived in the village of *Nai-Koung.

(0:44) How far is Nai-Koung from Long Chieng? Is it west or east of Long Cheng?

*Nai-Koung is in the land of Xiang. [From Long Chieng to land of Xiang] it is as far as from here [St. Paul] to Kansas City [He wasn't talking about the distance but the time it takes to travel because in Laos one travels on foot many hours to get to other villages.]

(1:16) What is the land of Xiang?

The Land of Xiang is the Province of Xieng Khouang [North Central of Laos]. We lived in the land of Xiang in the village of *Na-Khoun. I was born there and grew up there. After we grew up and my father passed away, my mother had to take care of us by herself.

(1:59) How did your father pass away?

He passed away due to an illness.

How old were you (when he passed away)?

I was only 3 or 4 at that time. When my father passed away I was just beginning to learn how to crawl. I could not walk yet.

(2:20) Do you remember what the year was?

I do not remember the year. My mother was the one who told me about this. My mother was the one who raised me. I remember that I have two sisters. One was named Mai and the other Ploua. They were older than I. My mother told me that three days after I was

born, there was an earthquake in our area. That is all I remember [Older Hmong do not use dates but events to remember their past]. We then moved and lived with the Hmong from the village of *Ta-Ghien.

(3:28) Can you tell the year you were born?

I do not remember. My father passed away in the village of *Ta-Ghien and we buried him there. My mother decided that since my father passed away and we had no relatives there we should move to another village where we had some relatives. We decided to move into the village of *Traug [Mountain] Pia-La. We moved to that village in 1942-44 [not sure about exact year]. That was when we [the Hmong] fought in the Japanese War [During World War II, the Hmong allied with the Free French in Southeast Asia].

(4:12) Did you fight against the Japanese?

No, we were too young.

Have you heard about it?

Yes, I have heard about it. The older Hmong men went to ambush [the Japanese] on the roads. I did not fight in the Japanese War. After the Japanese War was over, we fought in the Laotian Civil War [the war between the older established government and the new one, called the Isalia War by the Hmong]. The newer government wanted a king and the older government resisted. The older established government held the capital and was in power and we sided with the newer group. They drove us out of Laos [talking about Laos' part in the French Indo-China War].

(5:45) Which side were the Hmong on?

The Hmong sided with the new government.

So the new government lost, right?

Yes, the new government lost. There were some Hmong who also sided with the older government. Most Hmong, however, were with the newer government. [I assume he referred to the older government as the Communist Pathet Laos and the newer one as the Democratic pro-French Laos]

(6:07) What side did the French support?

The French supported the newer government and French were also defeated. The French lost and they left the country. After the Isalia [Civil] War, Pa Nhia Bee came and ruled the province [Xieng Khouang].

(6:34) Who is Pa Nhia Bee?

He is a Hmong Tasseng [a local governor or mayor given power by the French]. He was from Long-hiey. He was a Tasseng in Long-hiey. Tasseng Bee was working for the Laotian government while Lo Fong was working for the Vietnamese [Communists]. [During this time, the two large powerful Hmong clans in northern Laos were the Ly and the Lor clans. They both wanted the Hmong to have political power in Laos at a time when the Hmong were considered nothing but "Mountain Barbarians." These two clans took different paths to find their own political power; that has divided the Hmong community to this day. Pa Nhia Bee was one of the first Hmong to ever achieve a high official status in the mainstream Laotian government because of his support of the French when the French were still in

power in Laos. Touby LyFoung was Pa Nhia Bee's father. He was also pro-French, and later pro-American. The Lor Clan at that time felt betrayed by the French and sided with the Communists. Most Hmong sided with Touby LyFoung.) There were arguments between the two groups and they fought each other. The pro-Vietnamese Hmong were defeated by the Hmong Xiang [pro-French from province of Xieng Khouang]. The pro-Vietnamese moved out of Laos into Vietnam. The pro-Vietnamese were from the Lor clan [who used to be in power before the French came to Laos]. The other group was from the Ly clan [which had recently risen to power because they were pro-French]. Later, the Vangs took over the Ly's position [for example, General Vang Pao was a pro-American during the Vietnam War]. The Vangs and Lys shared power, but the Vangs became more dominant [during the Vietnam War]. General Vang Pao came to power with Pa Nhia Bee. After the Isalia [Civil] War was over, we moved to Xieng Khouang. During Kong Le's War I was married [on August 9, 1960, Capt. Kong Le, who led a crack Bataillon de Parachutistes, decided to stage a coup against the pro-American government in an effort to restore a neutral Laotian state]. He wanted Laos to be neutral and stay out of the increasing tension in Southeast Asia. When he could not stay neutral he decided to back the communists first, but later joined the pro-American side. [Kong Le's decision to switch sides has to do with his later conviction that the Vietnamese in Laos were not fighting for a free Laos, but for a new puppet state of North Vietnam. After the war Kong Le went into exile in France.] During the early 1960s he fought alongside the Communist Pathet Lao against the Hmong in the Plaine des Jarres. This was in 1960. (8:40 min)

(8:47) Can you tell me before you were married, what was your occupation in your village?

[He didn't mention it but he later told me he was a farmer just like others Hmong in that area].

I became a Christian when I was really young. This was in 1949.

Can you tell us why you became a Christian?

The reason why I became a Christian was because of my older brother Wa Yao. His mother-in-law was a female shaman. She was going into a "She-yee." After her "She-yee" she came to our village and told us to cast away our "spirits" [or traditional religion]. She told us that no matter what we did the spirits would not be with us any longer; it was beyond our power to keep the spirits with us. This lady was from the Her clan; she married into the Kong clan. She was a female Shaman who knew how to perform "She-yee." "She-yee" is the type of trance that a shaman goes into when he/she hears the beat of the ritual drums. [In the Hmong culture, shamans were "ambassadors" to the spirit world.] She told us that our traditional spirits' times were up, and we should let the old spirits go. She also mentioned that a new type of "Spirit" would come and rule over us. During the time she told us that prophecy, there were not many Christian Hmong in our area yet.

(11:22) How did your brother's mother-in-law know about this? Had she met some white missionaries?

During that time, the American missionaries were close to our area. She never had met any Americans before. She knew about this only through "She-yee." The spirits were telling her everything.

(11:45) Did any Hmong [who were already Christians] tell her about God before this?

No one told her anything. We were one of the three families from our village to become Christians. The three families were my older brother Wa Ya, my other older brother Txiah Fong and myself. We threw away our tools for traditional spiritual worship and became Christians.

(12:20) Was your village a Her Clan village? How many families lived in it?

It was an all-Her village. There were many families, over 10 families. Not only that, there were two or three more Her villages next to ours. Txiah Fong [one of his older brothers] was from the village of *Tong Tao. My brother Wa Yao and I lived in the village of *Pa Lia. We became Christian by throwing away sacred objects, the spirit altar, religious streamers, offering bowls and everything else that was associated with the traditional spirit away. What we did not throw away we burned.

(13:32) Did the other villagers mock you three?

They did not. We all did as we chose. [In the Hmong culture, every man in charge of his family has the final say in everything.] Before I was a Christian, I constantly had fevers. After becoming a Christian my fevers were gone and I was not allergic to certain types of food anymore. To this day I have not experienced the same type of fevers or food allergies I used to experience before I became a Christian. Shortly after I became a Christian the Nai-Boumb (Mayor) hired me to become his secretary. I worked in this position for 10 years or so. After 10 years or so working for the Nai-Boumb, the Kong Le War began.

(15:17) Before you go on, I wanted to know if, when you became a Christian, you and your brothers received any Bibles, songbooks or other resources?

No, we did not have anything. All we did was pray to God. The only way for us to use songbooks was to go into the larger village at Xieng Khouang. It took us two days to reach Xieng Khouang. There were not any nice flat roadways, only small trails up and down mountain ranges. If we wanted to go to the church in Xieng Khouang, we had to travel one whole day and by nightfall we would reach and sleep at the village of *Ca-hum. From there to Xieng Khouang was still another day of walking. We attended church there. This was where the majority of the Hmong Christians were.

(16:19) Are there lots of Hmong living in Xieng Khouang? Were there as many Hmong as Laotians?

Yes, there were lots of Hmong living there. There were more Laotians than Hmong. But by this time the majority of the Hmong at Xieng Khouang were Christians. Grandpa Boua Yia and Nou Xian were the first to become Christians. After they were converted they converted all their relatives in *Phou Boon [village] at *Phou Kan Boua. After converting their relatives they converted the Phou Ther [another mountain people in Laos called Yao by Westerners] at *Houai Cia. From there they traveled to convert the Hmong Kongs at *Kang Hong, *Phou Hon, *Pho Ca Boua, *Kiangkhoang, and *Ca Niam. All the Hmong Kongs from this area were converted. [Today the church that Cher Kou attends in Maplewood, MN is the largest Hmong church in the world. There are about 3,000+ members and the majority who started that church were from the Kong clan.] The conversion finally spread to our village of *Pa Lia and *Ta Tao. From there it spread to *Nam Bai and from there to the whole region. I became an elder of the church after the first wave of conversions.

(17:42) Did you have a church by then?

By this time we had our own church. There were Hmong pastors who came by to give us sermons at our Vien Ha [church]. (17:55)

Where did the Hmong pastors study from?

They studied at Xiangkhoang. American missionaries taught them with the help of Laotian pastors as translators. Those who went to be trained as pastors were Wa Yao [his brother], Txiah Fong and myself [from the Her clan]. From the Kong clan there were Yee Bliä Tou, Song Pa, Seng Pao and Hue Sue Thao. After us, more and more young Hmong men wanted to become pastors. There were many generations of Hmong who studied to become pastors at Xiangkhoang. That is why today there are so many [Hmong] pastors. [The Hmong were the largest group in Laos to become converted to Christianity. Only a minority of the mainstream Laotian and other minority groups were converted.]

(19:08) Can you tell me about Kong Le's Coup?

Kong Le was a Po Ther [another minority in Laos called Yao, not from the mainstream group of lowland Laotians]. Yes, commander Kong Le who fought against General Vang Pao [a Loyalist] was a Po Ther. The Communist Pathet Lao were already a political group before Kong Le's coup. The Pathet Lao could not defeat the Royalists. During this time, Vang Pao was not a General yet. Kong Le attacked Vientiane [the capital of Laos] and the Royalist government moved to *Savannakhet [in southern Laos]. Kong Le planned to also take Xiangkhoang and send in a pro-neutralist governor first before Kong Le's arrival. Once the governor arrived in Xiangkhoang, they were arrested and detained by Vang Pao. Vang Pao sent his prisoners to *Savannakhet. Kong Le believed that Vang Pao was not to be trusted and marched north to take on Vang Pao at the Plaines des Jarres (at this time the Plaines des Jarres was still a Hmong stronghold).

(21:41) Were you one of Vang Pao's soldiers during this time?

No I was not. I was married but was not a soldier yet. My wife was Shoua Kong. I was married and lived in the village of *Pha Keg. After we had two children, we then moved to *Phonsava. I became a meat butcher down there at that village. I worked there for one year, but the battle [between Kong Le and Vang Pao] was raging really close by. They needed policemen, so I decided to join the police force at Xiangkhoang [trained by Royal Laotian officials]. On January 1st 1960, Kong Le, who sided with the Communist Pathet Lao defeated Vang Pao at the Plaines des Jarres.

(25:10) At that time, did the Americans help Vang Pao?

I am not sure yet. Vang Pao was defeated and regrouped at *Ta Zong. Here the Americans gave Vang Pao their support. When Vang Pao was defeated, I was still at Xiangkhoang. Vang Pao told the Royalist parties to move out and regroup elsewhere. Most of the Royalist parties moved to *Po Keg. I moved to *Ka-Hon. At that time, my wife and the youngest child [they had three now] went to see the in-laws in *Pho-Hon. *Ka-Hon and *Pho-Hon were directly opposite of each other, with Xiangkhoang in the middle of these two villages. I got our two other children who were Poua and Pang and we traveled to my older brother Wa Yao's village [He was on the other side of *Ka-Hon.] We slept there for one night. I took Txiah Toua, a man about my age, and went back to *Ka-Hon and from there to *Pho-Hon to pick up my wife and the youngest child. Once we picked them up we came back to *Ka-Hon and slept there for the night before heading back home. At this time, the war was raging all over the place. We [most Hmong were loyal to the Royalists] were told to let the

older ones stay in the village and the younger ones to fight the Communists. We became soldiers for Vang Pao during this time. We received our weapons at *Xiang-Chu. We were defeated at *Xiang-Chu and we escaped back home. The remnant of our government in *Xiang-Chu moved to *Pa-Kha. Our troops were in *Ha-Na-Seng when we went back to war again. After the war in the area was lost, we moved to *Pho-Kong. All the major villages from around my area were being defeated. This was in 1964-5. Kong Pa 21 [an army unit consisting of 1,000 soldiers] escaped from *Nag-Kha after it was overrun by the Vietnamese. They joined up with us. I was in Cong-Pa 6 stationed at *Tong-Leng. (31:24)

(31:26) How many Cong-Pa were there?

I don't remember. All I remember is that I was in Kong-Pa 6, which consisted of 1,200 soldiers.

Who provided the weapons and uniforms for you soldiers?

The Ly Clan from around our area was in charge of distributing weapons and supplies from the Americans.

How much were you paid?

I was paid 500 kiep. 500 kiep could get you a roll of silk or a decent-sized pig. The money was still worth a lot back then. We were stationed at *Tong-Leng on Traug [Mountain] *Phou-Chong. We were also defeated there and moved back to *Pho-Kong. Our Kong Pa was de-commissioned. A remnant of our Kong-Pa was attached to other Kong Pas. During this time, I came out of the army and farmed again. In 1964, the fighting was close around us again so I moved my family. Since we did not have any horses to carry our belongings we waited and flew on US cargo planes to Long Chieng. We stayed in Long Chieng while General Vang Pao was just setting up his secret base there. We were sent then to *Pho-Ca-Houa. The Her, Yang, Kong, Thao and Ly clans were resettled there. We stayed there for four to five years. After the land became unproductive [too many of them were living in one small area] we moved to *Trau Yia (Straight Mountain).

Did General Vang Pao send any supplies to you and to those who are living there at this time?

Planes came by to drop rice and supplies.

(36:56) Were you involved with the war during this time?

We were part-time soldiers during that time. We became village militias. We guarded only our villages. We came to *Trau Yia in 1970. Vang Pao and Kong Le were still fighting. Then later on, Kong Le allied with Vang Pao. The reason for this was Kong Le was on uneasy terms with the Pathet Lao.

(38:25) Did the Hmong soldiers have grudges against Kong Le and his forces?

Yes, at first but after a while we became close allies and worked together. We stayed in *Trau Yia until May of 1975. Then suddenly Vang Pao lost the war and became an exile. We decided that since he left, we would also leave after we planted and harvested our rice for the season. That year, the rice took longer to mature and we had little to eat. We went to *Na-Sue [trying to flee the country] but the main road was closed off. The Pathet Lao soldiers were guarding the roads. We could not do anything so we stayed at *Na-Sue. Meanwhile on one of the roadblocks, daughters from the Her (my own clan) and Kong clans

decided to break down the roadblock, and they were successful because the soldiers did not know how to stop these girls. If our sons had done it they would have been shot. We did not tell the girls to do it; they decided to risk it on their own. Then everybody that came to *Na-Sue followed these young girls out and the guards could not prevent our escape. The Pathet Lao decided to put up another roadblock at *Heng-Her. The roadblock was on the Nan-Li Bridge. It took us about seven or eight days to reach it. We arrived there late, so we slept there for the night. In the morning we packed our belongings and planned to go over the road guard. A Vietnamese Captain said to us, 'Brother Hmong, stay with us. Where are you going? Do you have any cigarettes? Please give me one.' One of us had some and gave him one. He took it and said, 'Look here, you do not want to stay with us, but here in Laos you could ask your neighbors and they will gladly give it [?] to you [free of charge]. Once you are out of Laos, people will not even give you a single cigarette if you ask for one.' What he said was very true. Here in America, people do give you free things but you can never ask for a single cigarette. Even after the Vietnamese Captain's speech we decided to move out of Laos. We were not satisfied with the condition in Laos at that time. All our political leaders have left and we wanted to follow them. The guards pulled out their guns and were ready to shoot us. They asked us if we wanted to go see Touby LyFong and Teng [former Hmong political figures who were in power during the time of the French Colonization. The Vietnamese later killed Touby LyFong]. We decided to go see them. Our group decided to send six of us to meet with Touby LyFong and Teng. I was one of the six that was chosen. A Pathet Lao officer took us by car to Vientiane. We did not meet Touby, but we met Ly Teng. Ly Teng was a political figure who used to work for General Vang Pao but switched sides. Ly Teng told us that we could not leave. We agreed with him since he was a man with authority. We slept in his house for the night. While we were shopping at the local market early the next day, sounds of a gunfight could be heard back at the roadblock.

(0:10) How did the six of you know about the fighting? (:10 sec)

We heard the sounds of B-40s [Bazooka-type weapons] that the Communists fired. It was very close, like from St. Paul to Minneapolis. The Hmong has only small arms and were massacred. The Hmong retreated back into the hills. There were dead bodies everywhere on one side of the bridge. Most of them were Hmong. I saw one who lay dying on the foot of the bridge. There was another moaning on one side of the road. At the site of the roadblock, there was a lady sprawled dead on the road; one side of her face was missing. After we passed her by, there was a child crying for its parents from the side of the road. It was raining the whole day and mud was thick. The road was very narrow for the vehicle to travel on. [They took a vehicle back to the roadblock.] There were lots of belongings dropped on the road as the Hmong fled back.

(3:01) Were there any dead along the road?

No, just on the roadblock. I only saw three bodies at the roadblock but we heard that many of the bodies were thrown by the Communist troops into the river below. The river was filled with blood and blood was everywhere. There were so many belongings left behind on the road. Even valuable items were discarded. We finally reached our people at *Pon-Song. I asked Tsu Fong to go get a taxi from *Na-Sue to pick us up. He rode up to *Na-Sue and found a taxi and came back to pick us up. At *Na-Sue we all went back to our old villages. We all went to find our weapons that we hid away and started to ambush communist convoys. We fought guerilla warfare for two to three years. We fled to *Phou Bia and the

Vietnamese attacked us there. We then decided to give ourselves up and the Vietnamese took us back to *Trau Yia [Straight Mt.]. We planted and harvested rice there for that season. We heard on the Communist radio that those who were trying to escape were Vang Pao's people and would be dealt with [the radio was talking about the incident on the roadblock.] We decided that we were in danger. Another radio announcement came up again. This radio announcement said that we were free to do whatever we wanted if we filled out some papers in the town square. We pretended to ask for farmland near the Thai boarder and when we were allowed to move there, we escaped quietly into Thailand. The Thais picked us up and that is how we came to Thailand.

(7:20) How long did you stay in Thailand ?

We stayed in Thailand for only one year. We came to Thailand in 1979. On April 30, 1980 we came over to the United States. We landed here in Minnesota and I have lived here ever since. Our older daughter and son-in-law sponsored us. They came over before we did.

(8:18) Do you have any words for the younger Hmong generations who will hear this?

No that will be all. Everybody just be careful and do not do anything that is wrong. That is all.

Thank You.

You are welcome (8:31)