

>artist*profile<

We try to be strong.



Paj ntaub (story cloth) from Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun. Photo by Will Brown. Inserts, top to bottom: Pang Xiong and her family in Laos, c. 1959. Pang playing a jaw's harp, with T-Bee Lo. Photo: Jane Levine, 1993. Pang and other Hmong women in the early years of producing paj ntaub for sale here in Philadelphia. Photo: Tom Morton, c. 1990

by Sally Peterson

Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun

Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun says that she would like to make a movie of her life in four parts. Pang Xiong has lived in Philadelphia, and devoted herself to sustaining Hmong culture, for more than 28 years now. She and I worked together on several projects in the 1980s. My visit now, after a long absence, comes when Pang is preparing a retrospective exhibition of her needlework, and in particular the paj ntaub (flower cloth) of the Hmong people, an art that she has developed in many ways here in Philadelphia. She begins to reflect on a life that began 63 years ago in Xieng Khouang province in the mountains of northern Laos, not far from the borders of Vietnam and China.

The first part of the movie, explains Pang, would establish the geographic and historical setting of the Laotian Hmong, an ethnic group that migrated southward from China to the northern highlands of Southeast Asia several hundred years ago. Self-reliant and industrious, Hmong clans farmed the lands alongside their mountain-top villages and slowly expanded their settlements throughout the

highlands of Laos. Though without a written language until the 1950s and the arrival of Christian missionaries, the Hmong retained a highly sophisticated oral literature and history, and the women excelled in minute and delicate forms of embroidery and appliqué that embellished their clothing. In Pang's movie, the picturesque scenery of the Laotian highlands and the stability and familiarity of home, family, and tradition form the backdrop to the love story of her parents, which ended tragically with the death of her mother when Pang was just seven years old.

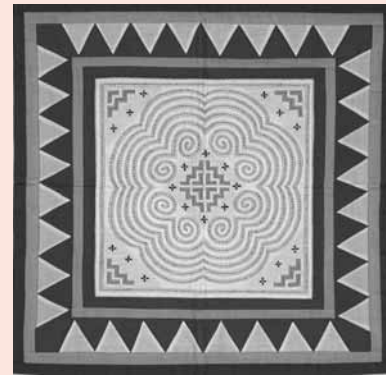
"In the second part of my movie," she says, "the communists come." In 1945, when Pang Xiong was just one year old, the occupying Japanese surrendered the country to the French, who had ruled Laos since 1890. Vietnamese-backed nationalists struggled for control, and Xieng Khouang was contested territory. One of Pang's earliest memories is a hurried departure to nearby caves to escape a bombing attack. "Where is my spoon? Don't forget my spoon!" She laughs to remember her childish anxiety in the face of such danger. She knows she was

wearing toddler clothing, so she must have been about two years old. "I loved my spoon, I had my own spoon. And my little basket for the back."

Pang Xiong's safe, insulated Hmong world changes in part 2 of her movie with the death of her mother and the constant threat of war. Life is dangerous and difficult. Though only seven, she is the older sister. Her mother was her father's third wife. There are 14 children to care for. She learns quickly, helped by her aunt and her grandmother. A stepmother joins the family with several of her own children. Then she too dies in childbirth. There are more children to care for, and soon a new mother and new siblings.

Describing the events that formed her character, Pang Xiong introduces themes that echo throughout her story: the obligation to family and the value of selfless generosity. Her father, Xia Cao Xiong, encouraged her to be strong, to understand her place in the extended family, and to have compassion for its other members: "My father told me, 'You have a dad. But they don't have a dad. Your mom can help you, but your dad is like a tree

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Samples of paj ntaub from Pang's workshop by Will Brown.

standing up, and you are like a bird under the tree. They don't have the tree. So you are happy already. Accept for them to call me their dad. Sometimes they get more than you. But don't be jealous. Love is more important."

If Pang Xiong's movie has a message, I think it must be an inspirational one. Her inner wellspring of exuberant life and dynamic creativity cannot be suppressed.

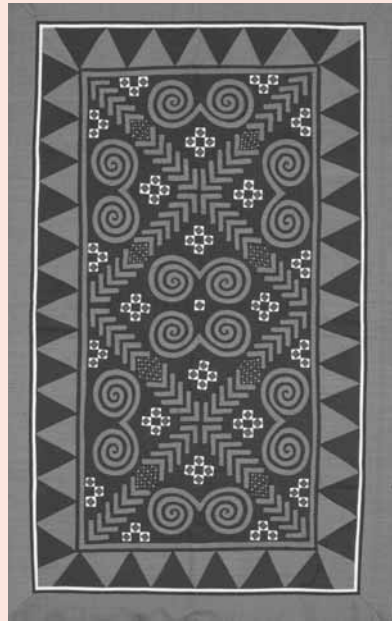
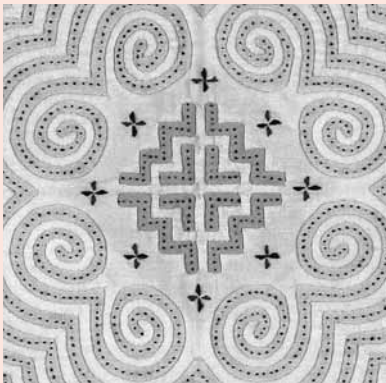
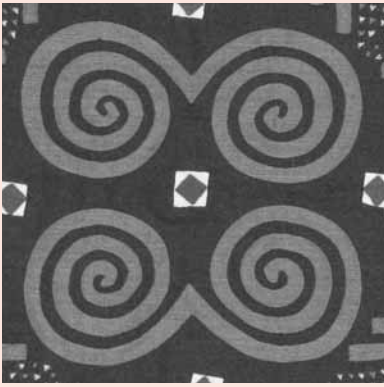
Pang Xiong always wanted to be either a teacher or a nurse—she needed to help people, she says, but she also wanted the uniform! But her father could

not afford to formally educate a girl. Xia Cao knew his daughter was bright, and a good learner, and so he encouraged her to become a student of Hmong culture itself: to learn to cook, to sing the intricately rhymed kwx txhij songs (used in a kind of semi-improvised verbal display and duel, during courtship), to play musical instruments, to do her paj ntaub. Xia Cao shared with his daughter his own repertoire of Hmong lore, teaching her things not usually shared with children so young or with females. A shaman who diagnosed and treated spiritual and physical illnesses before his conversion to Christianity, Xia Cao was also versed in the protocols and recitations of marriage settlement mediators, knew the legendary stories of Hmong history, and enjoyed telling a good folktale. Pang Xiong quickly excelled as a kwx txhij singer and developed her paj ntaub skills, executing minute and complex cross-

stitch patterns. She learned to fold and cut the intricate designs of Hmong appliqué, anchoring the cut fabric to the backing cloth with tiny "mos mos" stitches, intrigued by the challenges of the unfolding geometry. The two-inch-squares she produced became borders for jackets, collars, aprons, and skirts for herself, her brothers, and her sisters.

"One day I had to know how to read," she says. She repeats, in a whisper to herself, "One day, I had to know how to read." She persuaded her brother to teach her so she could read and answer the notes coming to her from boys. Soon she had organized the younger brothers and sisters and the household tasks well enough that her parents allowed her to attend the night classes offered by the local Christian pastor's wife. Eventually, the family would rely on her ability to learn.

Isolated no more, Hmong



*Pang Xiong
teaching children
needlework. Photo:
Jane Levine*

villagers in 1954 Xieng Khouang were at the edge of a war that would eventually engulf them. Ho Chi Minh's communist forces defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, not far to the east in Vietnam. Soon refugees fleeing the communists began streaming into Xieng Khouang. Pang Xiong's family sold produce and farm products to the new arrivals. Pang Xiong became fluent in Lao and Thai: languages used for exchange among people from many ethnic groups who spoke different "first" languages. An able and effective communicator, she was quick to read nuances of character and motivation. She understood the persuasive power of language and behavior, and she used it wisely. One terrifying night, her emerging abilities were put to the test.

In the late 1950s, the Pathet Lao communists, backed by North Vietnam, began an offensive to occupy more territory in Northern Laos. Pang

Xiong recalls Hmong soldiers of the opposing Royal Lao Army interrupting a community-wide New Year's celebration and ordering everyone to evacuate because the Pathet Lao were expected to overrun the area very soon. Taking only what they could carry, the village population fled. The next night, Pang Xiong, her sisters-in-law, and her younger brothers crept back to feed the animals, cook food, and retrieve whatever they could from the abandoned farm. It was too dangerous for men and older boys to go; the Pathet Lao were detaining those of military service age. Pang's little group had almost finished its tasks when an enemy patrol interrupted them. Pang Xiong nerved herself to respond gaily to the suspicious questions: "No, no, we didn't run away. We are just farmers. No, no, we don't know any soldiers." The commander believed her and let them go, but she never saw her

home again.

In the late 1950s, Thailand and the United States became increasingly concerned about the growing influence of

My father told me, 'You have a dad. But they don't have a dad. Your mom can help you, but your dad is like a tree standing up, and you are like a bird under the tree. They don't have the tree.'

Vietnamese-backed nationalists pursuing a socialist agenda in Laos, supported by both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Prohibited by

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the 1954 Geneva Convention from interfering with Laos openly, foreign governments aiming to help either the Royal Lao Army or the Pathet Lao carried out secret operations. The town of Padong, on a mountaintop six miles southwest of the Plain of Jars, became the headquarters for the clandestine recruitment and training of Hmong soldiers for the Royal Lao Army under the command of General Vang Pao. Organized and funded by the CIA, the Hmong were trained by American military advisors and by Thai military and special police personnel. Xia Cao Xiong's family and Hmong from over 70 Xieng Khouang villages fled south to Padong. Pang Xiong's stepmother's family worked a farm nearby, and once again Pang Xiong set up shop along the roadside, joining the many other young girls with impromptu coffee stands and soup pots who sold their wares to residents, refugees, military advisers, and Hmong trainees quartered in the town.

Pictures from that time show Pang Xiong as a pretty, petite, and stylish teenager with bright eyes and a wide smile. "Pretty cute," she admits. She surely sparkled, bantering with the young men who hung around as she deftly cooked the chickens they brought to her and wowed them with "Hmong salad," a concoction of cayenne peppers, scallions, cilantro, salt, and limes. Her fluency in Thai, her wit, and her singing talents soon brought her to the notice of a handsome young Thai paratrooper serving the Royal Lao Army as a medic. Charoon Sirirathasuk worked closely with the Hmong as a medical practitioner and weapons trainer. He began to visit Pang Xiong's house with her brothers, bringing gifts and supplies for her business. Soon, he asked to marry her. The match, she was told, would be good for her, and for the Hmong people, too. Charoon's service to the Hmong military and their families earned him respect, and his marriage to a Hmong woman deepened his ties to the

Hmong people and their cause. Pang Xiong and Charoon met in January 1960. They were married in March. She was 15.

Pang Xiong's honeymoon in Bangkok ends the second part of her movie. Part 3 opens in Thailand in the mid-1960s. Pang Xiong is living in Sukhothai with Charoon's family. She has given birth to three sons, finished sixth grade, attended Thai Girl Scout courses, and studied tailoring. The war has escalated in Laos, and now Hmong troops are fighting battles as well as monitoring the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the route through eastern Laos used by the North Vietnamese Army to supply its mission in the South.

Charoon was still headquartered in Laos, and Pang Xiong joined him for months at a time, assisting him in the vaccination programs that were part of his military duties. They maintained homes in both countries, and Pang's younger brother lived with them.

The war in Laos did not go well for the Hmong people. Many, many Hmong soldiers died, including five of Pang's brothers. The Hmong were losing territory to the North Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao, and the Americans were losing the political will to continue a war with little remaining domestic or international support. Promises of an independent country and of continuing aid and support for the Hmong people evaporated. In 1973, a cease-fire was proclaimed, the Americans pulled out, and all Thai civilians working for the government had to leave Laos. World opinion correctly predicted that the forces led by Hmong General Vang Pao would not be able to withstand the Pathet Lao for long. In 1975, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos fell. The Hmong leadership was airlifted out of Laos, while the crowds of Hmong following them were turned back with gunfire. The emergent government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic instituted a policy of repression toward the remaining Royalists, and the

Hmong had been their most effective enemies. Many Hmong felt they had no choice but to flee.

Safe in Thailand but sick with worry for her family, Pang Xiong could not get word of their fate. She listened avidly to the daily Hmong broadcast from Chiang Mai, Thailand, and was shocked when she heard her father's voice with a message for her. Like other stranded refugees, he had sent a tape-recording to the radio station from a temporary holding camp. Pang and Charoon traveled across Thailand to see the family members who had arrived from Laos and try to learn the fate of those who had stayed behind. The reunion in the overcrowded, unsanitary, and restrictive environment of the temporary refugee camp was filled with both joy and uncertainty. Lao citizens residing in Thailand, like Pang Xiong, had only one month to decide whether or not to join their families in refugee camps to await resettlement in the United States. Pang had lived in Thailand for 15 years. She had a home, a farm, a successful restaurant business, and a tailoring job. But her family was moving far away to America; one brother had already gone "to Pillapilli, something, Puppiafia." She laughs, remembering the strangeness of the sound of "Philadelphia." What should she do? She tells me in detail, nearly 30 years later, what happened: "I go back to my brother, I say, 'We have to go inside the camp. Because we don't want to stay here anymore. I need my people. I need to see my people. The years I've come to Thailand, too long already.' I cry, I say, 'I need to go. If you don't want to, that's OK. I go.' He says, 'Yes, I go.'"

Now the parents of six young sons, Charoon and Pang Xiong sold their property, their livestock, and their car and registered at Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. They were quickly enlisted as staff. Charoon trained medical assistants in the hospital, and Pang Xiong taught sewing and hygiene to adult women, drawing upon her paj

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ntaub skills, her tailoring experience, and her Thai Scout training. She felt that she was in her element when teaching. She was proud of the success of her students, and she insisted on high standards. Life in the camps, though, was hard. Many people were still suffering, many had lost their families. They didn't know what would happen to them.

In 1979, word came. Pang's brother Chao Xiong had arranged for them to join him in Philadelphia. They packed eight pillows and eight blankets. Two sets of clothes for each person. A box of dishes (do they have pots like these in America?). A box of paj ntaub wall hangings—producing enlarged, simplified adaptations of traditional designs to sell to tourists had become a cottage industry in the camps. Pang also packed her own paj ntaub—the pieces from her mother's hand, her auntie's hand, her grandmother's hand, her own hand. But there was room for little else. They boarded the plane for America.

Part 4 of Pang Xiong's life story finds her in Philadelphia. She was accustomed to succeeding through communicating, and her lack of English left her feeling frightened and frustrated. But a chance encounter with a Thai student led to an invitation to perform traditional Lao and Hmong dances at a Pan-Asian festival. Within three weeks of her arrival in America, Pang Xiong formed and trained a dance troupe that performed at Drexel University, International House in West Philadelphia, and public events sponsored by various church and civic organizations.

Philadelphia was a resettlement destination for thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia in the early 1980s. Some arts organizations, churches, schools, and volunteer agencies turned to the presentation of traditional arts—music, dance, and needlework—to ease the transition for refugees. Pang Xiong's

knowledge of Hmong culture, ability to organize performances, and out-going communicative style made her an invaluable resource for ethnic arts programs, and she was frequently asked to perform for local schools and libraries. More opportunities developed as new relationships formed. The instructor in her intensive English program admired the paj ntaub needlework that Pang Xiong embroidered during breaks. She arranged for Pang Xiong to sell paj ntaub at Headhouse Square, a weekend crafts market in the heart of Philadelphia's tourist district. Pang discovered you couldn't just pack up and leave if you wanted to, as vendors did in Thailand, and it took a while to understand how to price the pieces—but she loved the atmosphere, and the income surprised her. (She has returned to Headhouse Square every summer since 1980, and has now been there longer than any other craftsperson.) Pang Xiong was not the only refugee Hmong woman to sell paj ntaub. Craft fairs, museums and galleries across the nation, wherever Hmong resettled after the war, displayed the flower cloth of Hmong women.

Resettled Hmong helped support relatives in refugee camps by selling the paj ntaub sent to them from Thailand. They suggested adaptations that would appeal to American consumers, adjusting sizes, supplementing the traditional palette of bright, contrasting colors with pastels and earth shades. The bulk of refugee camp production went to brokers in Thailand, but tens of thousands of pieces were sent to extensive networks of kin in resettlement communities in the United States, bolstering the stock of needlework made by resettled women. The labor-intensive story cloths, a pictorial form of embroidery that narrated scenes, stories, and experiences of Hmong life, were made almost exclusively in the refugee camps. Pang Xiong often accompanied other Hmong women to crafts fairs

and other sales opportunities. But in 1980 occasional cultural arts programs and paj ntaub sales did not pay the rent, and Pang Xiong also pursued other means to make a living.

Like hundreds of thousands of immigrants to the United States, Pang Xiong and her family took advantage of every opportunity to earn income. Within three months of their arrival in Philadelphia, Pang Xiong, Charoon, and their two eldest sons found employment at a popular restaurant, (Friday, Saturday, Sunday), where they introduced touches of Hmong cooking. Pang pursued her life-long desire to be a nurse and completed a nursing assistant program. This work, however, did not bring her the joy and freedom that she experienced as an artist and as a vendor of traditional arts. Barely a year after her arrival in the United States, Pang Xiong performed and demonstrated paj ntaub at the 1980 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C. She found the experience both exciting and profitable; her displays and performances sent many to the sales tent to purchase paj ntaub. The two weeks in Washington convinced Pang Xiong that making, selling, and presenting Hmong traditional arts not only produced income, but furthered understanding and appreciation between people. This was exactly what she wanted to do, and what she felt she did best.

Since 1980, Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun has maintained a successful business selling needlework crafted by Hmong hands, taking pieces on consignment, buying directly from other Hmong women, or ordering specific items from paj ntaub makers. She continually explores new ways to present paj ntaub, adapting embroidered borders to jackets and dresses, sewing handbags, Christmas ornaments, and dolls. Pang Xiong has shared selling opportunities with other Hmong women, although few can sustain the grueling hours,

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discomfort, and uncertainty that accompanies craft fair participation for very long. In the mid-1980s Pang joined other Hmong women contracting with vendors in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to make quilts of contemporary Amish and Mennonite design. She now instructs over a dozen women in quilt-making and oversees production of hundreds of quilts a year.

By the late 1980s, Pang's passion for teaching and learning, not to mention her unerring ability to recognize and act upon opportunities, had made her an eloquent spokesperson for the values and aesthetics of Hmong culture. Journalists, scholars, and other artists still seek her opinions and ask her to share her knowledge. She has received national recognition and prestigious grants. Yet recognition, even on a national level, rarely brings dependable remuneration. Pang Xiong continued to fill gaps in the family income by picking blueberries in New Jersey, cleaning churches, and other forms of seasonal labor and domestic service.

As the years rolled by, Pang and Charoon's sons graduated from high school, then college, and began to marry. Grandchildren were born, and the older generation began to leave life. Within a few short years, Pang Xiong said final good-byes to a brother, her mother and father, and her husband, Charoon. The last time I saw Pang Xiong before this visit in 2006 was the day she buried her husband. She told me then, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what will happen to my life."

If Pang Xiong's movie has a message, I think it must be an inspirational one. Her inner wellspring of exuberant life and dynamic creativity cannot be suppressed. Since our last visit, Pang has made a second happy marriage. The whole family joined together to open Sukhothai Restaurant, named after Charoon's hometown in

Thailand. Sukhothai enjoyed a popular run in Center City, only to succumb to the depressed business climate that arose in the aftermath of 9/11.

Simultaneously, Pang Xiong completed training programs in medical and legal interpretation, serving her community by providing informed translations in Hmong, Lao, Thai, and English.

And still she bent her creative powers to the creation and promotion of Hmong needlework and its makers. A 1996 Pew Fellowship in the Arts enabled her to spend a year studying the weaving techniques of Green Hmong women, traveling to Hmong communities in China to learn from masters of the art. She shipped a full-sized loom back to Philadelphia.

Pang Xiong retains those early lessons about generosity, self-sacrifice, and devotion to the family. She remains a quick study—swiftly grasping the truth of a situation, swiftly intuiting deeper meanings. She gives Thai language lessons in her kitchen every Saturday, and feeds her students lunch. She continues to both preserve and invigorate the principles of Hmong paj ntaub. Recently, she has been experimenting with combining the cotton print fabrics used to appliqué Amish-style quilts with the geometrically complex designs of Hmong paj ntaub. The flowered prints commonly used to appliqué tulips and doves onto a creamy muslin for the Amish tourist trade seem to deepen and swirl when overlaid with a dizzyingly complex geometric Hmong reverse appliqué layer. The resulting creations pop with an energy that recalls the days when the intricacy and intelligence of Hmong paj ntaub design first burst onto the American art scene.

Pang Xiong's movie will never really end. Scenes of war and love, loss and renewal remain vivid for her. Evaluating her own experience, and those of her

people, Pang Xiong says: "We came to this country very sad, and we try to win something.

You cannot win the war. You cannot win the gun. You cannot win the life.

You say, what do I win? I do not win my brother's life, he died...they killed him. They threw him in the Mekong River. He died. We do not win their life, I cannot bring them back.

I [can] not win my five brothers' lives.

But I win because my brothers' children are here.

My mother, my father came here, even though they died, but they win, because they already come here.

We win when we can get a house.

We win, we can get a new car.

We win, we can get a new home, we can be an American citizen.

We try to be strong here. We try to be an example people.

We win. My name is in books, articles, so I win that.

People know my name, know Pang Xiong.

You see, I win lots of things.

I win a lot. My children got bachelor's, master's degrees. That means I win.

Many people win in this country the same way with me. Same way.

But they don't know the meaning.

But my meaning's in my head."

A retrospective exhibition of paj ntaub and other needlework from **Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun's** workshop will be on display at the Folklore Project: **March - June 2007**

Please call 215.726.1106 or for details visit our website (www.folkloreproject.org)