



READING GROUP GUIDE • MNHSPRESS.ORG

From *Staring Down the Tiger: Stories of Hmong American Women* edited by Pa Der Vang

The tiger is considered a mystical character, eliciting wonder, mystery, and awe in Hmong culture. The tiger is feared and respected for its strength and prowess, yet the tiger is vulnerable, as it has been outwitted by humans in Hmong folktales. Although the tiger is considered a quiet, solitary animal, in folklore it is often portrayed interacting with Hmong in very complex ways. Hmong believe the tiger should not be approached; that is why in folklore, when Hmong are depicted interacting with the tiger, there is often a sense of fear, ambivalence, courage, awe, mystery, and danger. The term tigerbite (tsov tom), often considered a slur in Hmong culture, is used to refer to individuals to indicate lack of foresight, impulsiveness, malice, and lack of intelligence. Someone who is a tsov tom would actually approach a tiger—and get bitten.

1. Why would staring down the tiger elicit the accusation that one is a tsov tom (impulsive, lacking foresight, lacking intelligence)?
2. How do individuals challenge this notion that to stare down the tiger is to lack intelligence? What might staring down the tiger imply of a person's character, capacity, resilience, strength, and resources?
3. *Staring down the tiger* may be a metaphor for taking on risks, challenging norms, or pushing boundaries. Under what circumstances might someone choose to challenge social norms and push social boundaries?
4. How do the women in the stories in *Staring Down the Tiger* challenge their prescribed roles as wife, mother, daughter, Hmong woman?
5. Because Hmong culture is interdependent and collectivist, it is often frowned upon to speak about one's successes. Why should these stories be told, and what can we learn from them? What do we lose if we do not make room for these stories to be told?
6. How do the stories collected here inform our communities? What impact might these stories have on individuals who read them?
7. How else can we interpret a Hmong woman's choice to stare down the tiger?

8. In what other ways do Hmong women stare down the tiger?
9. In what ways do women from other cultures stare down the tiger?
10. How do you stare down the tiger in your own life?
11. What might be some consequences of staring down the tiger at the individual level? Consider personal factors such as emotional consequences, psychological consequences, or loss of opportunity.
12. How might a woman risk harm to or loss of relationships by staring down the tiger? What are the competing pressures for women to conform, and what risks do women take by pushing social and cultural boundaries that seek to inhibit them?
13. What other situations could the metaphor of *staring down the tiger* represent?