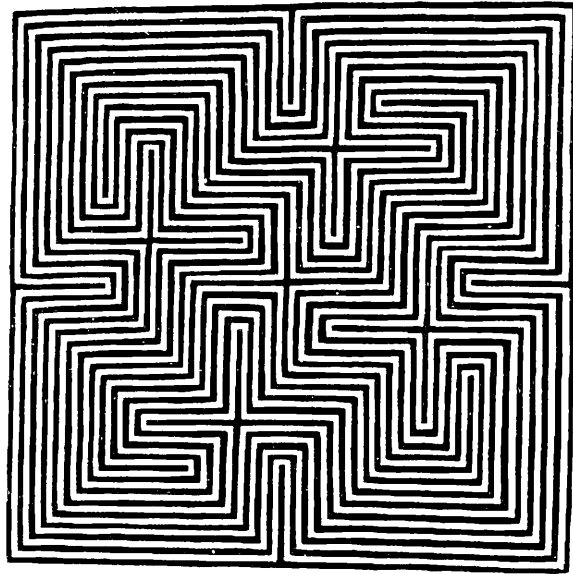
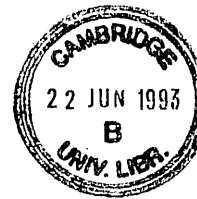


Tragic Mountains



INDIANA
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Bloomington
and
Indianapolis



The
Hmong,
the
Americans,
and the
Secret Wars
for Laos,
1942-1992

Jane Hamilton-Merritt

1993

x xviii, 500

Fa—"Prince of the Sky." The rebellion was short-lived, and by the 1920s most Hmong considered their relationship with the colonial French to be to their advantage. The Hmong and other minority groups, whose combined populations outnumbered the ethnic Lao who ran the country, were generally disliked and discriminated against by lowland Lao and by the Vietnamese. This attitude was absent in the colonial French. By the 1930s, many Hmong believed that since the French had education, an advanced economy, laws, a military capability to provide security, and technology—particularly aviation—they could guide them to a better life and improve their status in Laos.

While colonial French authorities and Hmong leaders had worked out a relationship amenable to both parties, there was still discrimination against and mistreatment of the Hmong by Lao and Vietnamese bureaucrats, whose perceived aggressive Vietnamese personality and hostility toward the Hmong conflicted with Hmong values. Hmong observed that when the French brought Vietnamese soldiers with them, the French did not allow the Vietnamese to harm them. However, when Vietnamese soldiers came without French officers, they killed Hmong animals, entered Hmong houses, took whatever they wanted without paying, and called them insulting names.

Nong Het, nestled in a 4,500-foot mountain pass on the Vietnam-Lao border, was a major market town, a French military outpost, a center of Hmong culture, and the home of the young Hmong chieftain Touby of the Ly clan. Educated in French schools in Vinh in northern Vietnam and in Vientiane, Touby and his brothers were the first formally educated Hmong in the area. Touby, who modified his clan name of Ly to LyFong, was the pro-French Hmong leader in the area. (Frenchmen called him Touby. Later the Americans would call him Touby LyFong, placing his given name first in Western style.) Hmong who claimed allegiance to Touby lived both in Laos and in northern Vietnam. National boundaries were unknown to the Hmong who farmed these highlands. In Nong Het, Hmong, who had lost their written Hmong language many years before, studied in French in an open-air school and became knowledgeable about the world. Touby believed that only through education could his people achieve equality and respect. This town of approximately 3,000 people was most proud of its school.

Not all Hmong were loyal to Touby or pro-French. One anti-French and anti-Touby Hmong was Phay Dang, from the Lo clan. A bloody dispute had erupted between the Ly and Lo clans over which clan should receive the honor of being Tasseng, a district officer in charge of many

villages. This dispute had its origins with the Hmong king, Lo Pa Sy. Sometime in the mid-1800s, Lo Pa Sy brought his followers out of China to escape persecution. In Laos, he and his son Lo Bliá Yao, who reigned as the Hmong leader from 1920 to 1935, were acknowledged by the French as the local authority and given the prestigious and coveted title of Tasseng. As Tasseng, the Lo clan leader reported directly to the French authorities, giving the Lo clan the highest possible status among the Hmong. The Lo clan assumed that clansman Phay Dang, who was next in line, would become Tasseng following the death of Bliá Yao. Phay Dang even made a pilgrimage to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, to see Lao Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa to convince him to plead his case with the French. So important was the title of Tasseng that Phay Dang gave the Lao prince a gift more powerful than money: his father's rhinoceros horn, which was believed to hold extraordinary protective powers. Phay Dang's pilgrimage and gift were unavailing. In 1938, Touby, in his twenties, was appointed Tasseng by the French. The Lo clan had lost prestige, and Phay Dang developed a hatred for Touby that would consume him for a lifetime and result in deadly battles between the Ly and Lo clans. Phay Dang's passionate dislike of the French and of Touby drove him to become guide and collaborator for the Japanese and the anti-French Vietnamese, soon to be called the Viet Minh.

The Hmong also had problems with a Lao named Phoumi Vongvichit who had gained influence by becoming secretary to the French Resident in Xieng Khouang Province, a rich agricultural area with a large Hmong population, and a tax collector for the French. In his tax-collecting role, Phoumi Vongvichit charged more than ten times what the French ordered. When Hmong tried to complain to the French Resident about this Lao's corruption and cruelty to those who could not pay, Vongvichit blocked their access to the French. The Hmong finally managed to speak directly to the French Resident about him. The French were about to take action against Vongvichit when the Japanese invaded. Vongvichit immediately allied himself with the Japanese garrisoned at Xieng Khouang and became one of their most important collaborators.¹

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In 1940, France's surrender to the Nazis brought the Vichy collaborators to power. Under the Vichy regime, the French military and civilian apparatus stayed in place in Indochina. Frenchmen were instructed to do nothing to interfere with Japanese military activities and administrative

and then he spit out all of grains of rice, and all grains of rice became soldiers by his good magical action. . . .

Well, when all of bad giants including the big bad one had died altogether, Sin Sai he said that, "If I shall stay in men's world there is no use at all for me. I have to go to kill bad giant or bad spirits at the other world."

In his last words to his soldiers, Sin Sai warned them to stay on the high hills to avoid bad monsters and evil spirits. Before leaving in a flash of fire, he told his soldiers that one day he would return.

It was this Sin Sai that centered Chao Fa beliefs. While all the details of the origins, plans, and allegiances of the Chao Fa are not fully known, the emergence of this group as a major military force occurred after General Vang Pao's departure. Before 1975, the Chao Fa were a little-known mystical group dating back to the early 1900s. The Chao Fa story probably began with the first Chao Fa, Paj Chai, a Hmong who fought against French colonial rule from 1917 to 1920. Paj Chai, who proclaimed to be in contact with former Hmong kings, held a mystical power over his followers. His force seriously challenged the French. Eventually, with a combination of French victories and disillusionment with Paj Chai, the influence of the Chao Fa waned, but not the memory of their exploits.

In the 1960s, the Chao Fa leader was Yang Shong Lue, who called himself "Nhia Daow," meaning "Mother of Letters," because he had created a special alphabet for the Hmong language. He was reportedly an uneducated man and therefore his amazing ability to create an alphabet impressed many people. He believed that God had sent him to lead the Hmong people to a better life. He could also predict the future. One of his devoted teachers was a youth from North Vietnam from the Her clan, named Pao Kao. The "Mother of Letters" and his teachers not only promoted the Chao Fa alphabet, but also the need for a Hmong king, explaining that when Hmong lived in China, they had a king and an alphabet. They had lost both. Now it was time for Hmong to have their own king and their own alphabet again, not one based on Romanized characters as devised by Westerners.

Initially, Yang Shong Lue had lived in Vietnamese-Pathet Lao-controlled territory in Phong Saly. Later he and some of his teachers, including Her Pao Kao, who would play a leading role in the Chao Fa resistance, defected to join General Vang Pao, who accepted them and allowed the younger men to join the Lao Army. The defectors lived briefly with the general and then moved to a village near Long Chieng.

Rumors spread that the "Mother of Letters" was a communist spy.

School superintendent Moua Lia remembered the problems. "They had a center of education that many people complained to 'V.P.' about because they were teaching a new alphabet. 'V.P.' brought him to Long Chieng and scolded him, telling him he had to stop teaching a written language from Vietnam because Hmong are in Laos and Lao citizens and that the Hmong already have one written language. He warned that if the Lao government found out that he was teaching a Vietnamese Hmong alphabet, they would not like it."

Soon, however, he resumed teaching, conducting classes at night. His followers wore red and blue armbands to identify themselves as Sons of Heaven. Chao Fa teachers taught more than an alphabet. They taught that the Hmong had to dress as Hmong, not as Lao, to indicate that they were sons of a Hmong king. The Chao Fa also urged their followers not to assimilate into Lao culture, warning that if they did not dress like Hmong, they would be eaten by a tiger.

For some time Vang Pao did not believe the rumors about the "Mother of Letters," strongly accusing him of spying and prophesying, but they persisted. He was later found to have radio contact with followers in communist-controlled areas in the north. On September 15, 1967, Yang Shong Lue was jailed in a maximum security facility at Pha Khao. By 1969, he was allowed outside to walk about and to have visitors, and sometime in 1970, with the aid of his followers, he escaped to the jungle to hide. In early January 1971, the "Mother of Letters" was found and shot by men dressed in Vietnamese uniforms. His student, Xiong Nhia Ly, took up his dead leader's cause and built a Chao Fa temple east of Long Chieng near Phou Bia, the highest mountain in Laos, where he reportedly preached incredible and unbelievable things. His miraculous tales of men being able to fly and jump from mountaintop to mountaintop reached General Vang Pao, who ordered a T-28 strike against the temple.

Another of Yang Shong Lue's followers was Her Yong Joua, who commanded a battalion of Chao Fa in Vang Pao's forces. Before each battle, Yong Joua conducted a *ba-sii* ceremony to protect his soldiers. They lined up with outstretched arms as Commander Yong Joua chanted auspicious words and tied strings on their wrists from a "never-ending" ball of white twine that he carried in his jacket pocket. No ball of string was visible, yet he could produce a never-ending supply. He told his troops that his power produced these powerful *ba-sii* strings and there was no end to them. Vang Pao once called him in and asked why he lied to his troops about his magical powers. The Chao Fa commander supposedly

answered: "You have trouble getting soldiers to fight. I don't. So forget it. Don't scold me." In spite of his magic and powerful *ba-sii* strings, Yong Joua's Chao Fa battalion, operating on the Plaine des Jarres, was mauled by the NVA in 1970.⁸

After Vang Pao left Laos in 1975, Her Yong Joua promoted himself to a higher rank and preached that the power to fight was given by the gods. According to him, the Hmong no longer needed guns. With the Chao Fa magic, they could kill the enemy with sticks and clubs. They were no longer vulnerable to enemy fire; they were under the protection of Chao Fa.⁹ Chao Fa priests espoused the invincibility of those who worshipped properly. True believers could defeat the enemy with magic given by the supernatural intervention of Sin Sai, the great mythological defender, against bad giants such as the Vietnamese and Lao communist forces. As the communist net of terror and death tightened, Hmong, realizing they were doomed, turned in desperation to the Chao Fa priests.

Lo Cheng, a former second lieutenant, knew that it was only a matter of time before the communists captured him. As a "carbine soldier," he had begun his military career as a child, carrying water for the mess cook at Bouam Loung. After Vang Pao's departure, the communists declared that any soldier who had worked for Vang Pao or Jerry Daniels would be eliminated. "I was extremely frightened that I would be rounded up and taken to seminar like the others. One day a Hmong from the Hang clan came and told us about a Chao Fa prophet named Nhia Pao and about the Chao Fa magic. I was so scared that I decided to go to stay with Nhia Pao."¹⁰

He and three other former lieutenants took their families to live near Nhia Pao. They declared themselves Chao Fa by being "baptized" by a priest using a white stone. The wood, bamboo, and thatch temple was nine-sided; Lo Cheng thought it was beautiful. In this temple where only men were allowed, he learned that the Chao Fa believed that Vaj Chue Chao, appearing in the form of a pig, and Sin Sai were sent to earth to help and to cure the people. With incense and paper the faithful worshipped. The Chao Fa had a red flag that featured a crescent moon next to a sacred pig and other animals, including a rhinoceros. Priests told the men not to cut their hair, warning them if they did they would not be safe.

Nhia Pao impressed Lo Cheng with his prophetic abilities. "He knew when it would be raining and when it would be clear. He meditated and then announced that tomorrow a visitor would come—and always the visitor came."

While most Hmong only heard the fantastic stories about Chao Fa

magic, primary school teacher Yang Soua saw some with his own eyes. One Saturday noon, Yang Soua was standing outside his parents' house on a Muang Cha hillside when he saw 20 to 30 armed Hmong soldiers dressed in black, marching in a column heading toward Muang Cha. "Leading the column was a young Hmong girl carrying a flag with a crescent moon and some animals, including a pig. The soldiers had M-16s, carbines, rifles and one shoulder-held M-72 mortar. I watched, expecting the NVA to shoot them down, but they didn't. A Hmong soldier fired his M-72 mortar and it went through the roof of the former mayor's house. Some NVA ran out and were killed. Other NVA ran to gun positions on the higher ground overlooking the valley. They fired their DK-82 mortars on the Hmong soldiers. Their mortars exploded in mid-air instead of on the ground, so not one Hmong was hit. The girl continued to march around with the flag."¹¹

"During this battle many NVA soldiers were killed, including NVA officers in the mayor's house. It took six trucks to take away the dead Vietnamese soldiers. No Hmong died. No Hmong were wounded. After the battle, we learned that these Hmong were Chao Fa. We asked them how they could kill so many Vietnamese and not lose one Hmong. They said that the god looked after them and that their flag protected them. They also told us that the mortar that hit the headquarters was fired at Vang Pao's former office, not at the headquarters building, and that it had turned and hit the building with all the Vietnamese in it. This was the power of the Chao Fa, they said." Yang Soua thought the explanation was probably more in faulty weapons than in magic. Yet he had witnessed the successful Chao Fa attack against the NVA and was astonished.

Soon after, Yang Soua asked the Pathet Lao once again for his back salary. He had not been paid since they took over. "They told me I would have to go to Sam Neua for seminar and get my money. I was scared. I knew that they intended to trick me into going to Sam Neua and take me prisoner. So I took my family, my brothers and sisters, my cousins, and my parents and we went to the jungle to join the resistance of Yang Say Shoua, my uncle. He had been the Tasseng of Pha Khao district and had left there for more remote mountains to escape the communist purges. Now, he led former Vang Pao soldiers and their families. My uncle was a civilian so he was advised by several former colonels."

In the jungle, the young teacher's brother commanded a group of 100 resistance fighters of which he became the assistant commander even though he had no previous military experience. Life as a jungle fighter posed extreme difficulties. "The Vietnamese controlled everything—the