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Ethnic Minorities and National Building in Laos: The Hmong in the Lao State

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Acknowledgement: I am grateful for financial assistance from the American Social Science Research Council (Indochinese Studies Program), New York, and for the support of Dr. Timothy Dunnigan, Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota, USA, and his collaboration with this research project. This paper is an attempt to reconstruct Hmong history in Laos from the perspective of the leaders and their involvement in Lao politics or their participation in the shaping of the Lao nation. It is based on data collected from a year of field interviews and supplemented with written sources in Hmong, Lao, French and English. Some of the chronological events related here are already familiar with many readers, but others are hopefully new. As this is a very brief overview, it only touches on the essential and thus many other actors or facts have to be unfortunately omitted. A more detailed account will be made available at a later date.

Discussion

At the beginning, they had only the words of the Chinese trader who twice returned from the South and talked of a vast expanse of land covered in virgin forests and stalked by wild animals. Few people lived on this southern land as it was inhabited by fierce tigers, wild elephants and rhinoceros. This sounded indeed like a land of golden opportunities, a land dreamed of by all Hmong and so many times mentioned in their legendary stories. On the traders' third trip to the South, the Hmong sent their own messengers with him, and again they came back with the same glowing account of this southern country known as "Niag Moos" or the Mother State.

Southwards the Hmong migrated, hoping there were no other people going ahead of them. They were not sure whether the exhausted grassland they left behind was in Yunnan or Tonkin, because in these northern parts the Chinese were then the rulers everywhere but they did not know who ruled in this land in the South into which they were now moving. The first group to arrive on this migration to Nong Het, in North-eastern Laos, was the Green Hmong. They were soon followed by two groups of White Hmong. The newcomers settled on mountain tops and began clearing their first swiddens out of the choicest virgin forests around their villages.

On a fine day in the middle of the dry season, the Lao farmers living in the lowlands nearest to the Hmong looked up to the highlands. They saw nothing but thick smoke burning out of green jungles. This was indeed most unusual, for in all their lives these impenetrable forests had never given up so much grey and black smoke for weeks on end. Perhaps, the evil jungle spirits were angry and were burning up the hills? As quickly as the Lao villagers could run, they reported the strange sighting to their local overlord who sent a few of his best men up the mountains for a closer inspection. Cutting their way through uncharted terrain, they reached where the smoke came from. They discovered that patches upon patches of virgin forests had been cleared, left to dry and then were burned. Yet no one seemed to be in sight.

After much searching, they then found what appeared to be a human settlement perched on a mountain ridge. This was, however, no ordinary Lao village, for all the houses were built on dirt floor instead of on stilts. When the Lao approached the village, all the inhabitants took to the jungle with their children and possessions on the back. These people must be savages, indeed. Otherwise, why would they flee at the sight of other human beings? And look at the spoons and bowls on the kitchen shelves: they were all carved from wood. These foreigners must be really primitive, for no Lao would use wooden kitchen utensils. The country had probably been invaded again, but this time not by the usual Vietnamese from the East who always come with armed troops.

The King of Xieng Khouang, in whose domain the events took place, was informed in haste. Instead of being concerned, the King merely said to the emissaries from the Lord of Muong Kham who controlled the Nong Het area: "Return to your master, and tell him not be alarmed. These forest people are none other than my own subjects. If they prefer living in the highlands, let them be. We will pay them our own visit when the time is appropriate". The King soon sent one of his representatives to see the Hmong, and demanded that they paid taxes in return for permission to live in the hills of the northern State.

Not long after their discovery by the Lao, the Hmong settlers found that they were not living alone in the highlands. There were Khmu lower down the slopes, the aboriginal race who were pushed up the hills by the incoming Lao many centuries before. At first, when the Hmong were still only a few families they were tolerated, but once their number increased they were soon in conflict with the slope dwellers over land use. The Khmu claimed to possess much of the upland forests and did not want the Hmong to clear them for farming. Many Khmu had also become addicted to Hmong opium and many were reduced to working for the Hmong or Lao in the lowlands. Resentment soon turned into hostility, and finally armed clashes (Larteguy and Yang, 1979:85). Using flintlocks, the Hmong had a stronger firepower over the Khmu's spears and arrows. They also had much longer war experiences with their centuries of resistance against invaders in China. These skirmishes were to play an important role in subsequent relationships between these two hill minorities. Many Khmu moved to Luang Prabang province and later joined the communist Pathet Lao (PL) against the many highland Hmong on the side of the Royal Lao Government (RLG). Those who remained in Xieng-Khouang came to identify with other groups as underdogs of the French colonial authorities and lowland Lao overlords, and tended to unite with the Hmong in their common political struggles.

By the time Laos became a French protectorate in 1893, the Hmong had settled in greater number in Laos and could be found not only in Xieng Khouang, but also in Sameua, Luang Prabang and Phong Saly provinces. The system of Hmong paying tax to lowland Lao had been well established. Not only was tax paid in the form of two silver coins per households, but those Hmong chiefs who were given village or clan leadership by the Lao such as the Kiatong, the Xophia, the Photong also had to pay occasional tribute with the product of their hunting and gathering: elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, deer meats, etc. without counting a few kilograms of opium (Yang Dao, 1975:45). The French had only to maintain this tax system. Because the tax was now paid to the French through local Lao mandarins, the latter were deprived of their traditional source of incomes from the highlander. They in turn illegally levied their own tax.

Finding themselves now paying double tax without any consultation, the 3 Kiatong Hmong in the Nong Het areas organised an ambush against tax collector and the few guards who accompanied them in 1896 at Ban Khang Phanieng in Muong Kham, Xieng Khouang province (Yang Dao, op.cit.: 46). Following subsequent negotiations with the French, the first Hmong tasseng (canton administrator) was established and given to the chief negotiator, Kiatong Muas Zoov Kaim. Another tasseng was also created near Xieng Khouang town with Zam Yaj Hawj assuming the title in 1940. Under the new arrangement, all Hmong leader were to collect taxes from their own people and would have their own autonomy with Hmong village administration, bypassing Lao officials at the Tasseng and Muong levels (Savina, 1924:238). This was to affect greatly later political events in Laos, for it gave the Hmong leadership a tendency to prefer dealing directly with Western allies (be them French or Americans) instead of the Lao, primarily because of a basic distrust of Lao authorities based on these early administrative conflicts.

The Pa Chay (Batchai) revolt against the French from 1918 to 1921 only served to strengthen the bond between the pro-French Hmong leaders and their colonial masters. Pa Chay Vue, an orphan, was brought up by an uncle but after his marriage and the birth of his first child he claimed to be called on by god to teach the Hmong to live in good health and harmony with their environment (Yaj Xooj Tsawb, 1984; 29-31). his mission did not extend to the declaration of war against the Black Thai in Northwest Vietnam where the rebellion first took place. Nevertheless, Pa Chay was urged to lead the Hmong against oppressive lowland mandarins by his uncle after the latter saw him transform a cotton ball into an exploding grenade at a New Year gathering. At the time, the Hmong were regularly recruited to work as coolies for Black Thai officials, in addition to tax or tributes requisitioned from them. Eventually, the French in Tonkin were told that Pa Chay was stirring up Hmong for an uprising. In January 1918, troops were dispatched to fire at Pa Chay's followers, thus starting the four-year conflict which spread into Lao when the Hmong leader took refuge there after two years of cat-and-mouse war games with the French in Vietnam.

At its peak, the rebellion covered a territory of 40,000 square kilometres, spanning from Dien Bien Phu in Tonkin to Nam Ou in Luang Prabang, Laos, down south to Muong Cha north of Vientiane, and going north-east to Sam Neua. Many Hmong took up arms in collaboration with Pa Chay either out of their

own personal grievances against lowlanders or in the belief that they were part of a holy war foretold in many of their myths. In China, the Hmong had staged many such bloody uprisings through the centuries against Chinese domination based on a belief in the coming of a mythical king (Tupp, 1982: 114-127). The Pa Chay war was originally brought on by discontent with Thai leaders, but it was soon turned against the French when the latter set many of its colonial soldiers on the trail of the Hmong rebels. As stated by Gunn (1986: 115), the largest military expedition ever organised in Laos "by that date was mounted to break Batchai's rebellion; four companies of tirailleurs were brought in from other parts of Indochina to restore order."

Following the pattern of conflicts between the Hmong and the Khmu established at the beginning of their settlement in Laos, it was the Khmu who in the end killed Pa Chay in his hide-out in Muong Heup, Luang Prabang, on 17 November 1921 (Le Boulanger, 1969: 360). By this time, many Hmong had surrendered, owing to French military might and merciless suppression. Of those who co-operated with the rebels, the leaders were decapitated at Nong Het in front of hundreds of Hmong spectators forcibly assembled there by the French. Many of the old Hmong told me of this story when I did my research in 1985 still remember being compelled to watch French swords descending on the neck of these Pa Chay prisoners, when they were only children clinging to the arms of their parents. Those who were not leaders of the revolt had to pay compensation to the French at fifty piastres "for every Lao or Vietnamese killed, not including compensation for loss of house, cattle and crops" (Gunn, op cit.: 120). Altogether, 375 kilograms of silver bars and coins were collected from the Hmong. Many who could not pay had to sell or pawn their children and possessions.

The French were not the only ones benefiting financially from the rebellion. Lo Bia Yao, who helped the French put down the revolt in Nong Het also gained incredible wealth acting as collector of these war compensations. The cattle given to him as Kiatong filled a valley which took three hours to walk through, and the money he amassed filled a metal trunk which two strong men could not lift. It is this wealth resulting from the Pa Chay war which eventually brought an end to the control of Hmong leadership by his family in Nong Het. Lo Bia Yao's

oldest son was granted the office of canton chief or Tasseng by the French, but Chong Tou neglected his duties and preferred dissipating his father's money and cattle through gambling with local Chinese and Vietnamese traders. In the beginning, Kiatong Lo Bia Yao's son-in-law and secretary, Lyfoung, had sent three of his sons to study in Xieng Khouang town, followed by secondary studies in Hanoi and South Vietnam.

In 1939, the eldest of Lyfoung's educated sons, Touby returned to Nong Het, the only Hmong who could speak and think as a French. The previous year, Chong Tou had just lost his Tasseng title to Lyfoung, but the latter died after a few months in office. The French soon engineered an election for a new Tasseng. Although one of Lo Bia Yao's sons, Fay Dang, did contest the election with Touby, the latter won (Lee, 1982 200-201). Fay Dang and his family appealed many times unsuccessfully to the local Lao administrator in Muong Kham, and the French Commissar in Xieng Khouang. As a last resort, Fay Dang took the long journey to Luang Prabang to ask Prince Phetsarath, the Viceroy, to intervene so that political power in Nong Het could be kept within the Lo clan (Castle, 1979: 53). Phetsarath assured Fay Dang of this support, and was presented a treasured rhinoceros horn. However, the Viceroy was apparently too preoccupied with his Lao Issara (Free Lao) movement against French domination of Laos to have paid much attention to the grievances of a distant minor Hmong leader.

On 9 March 1945, Japanese troops occupied Laos and systematically attacked all French military and civilian strongholds. Many local resistance French officers took refuge with the Hmong who hid them in their mountain fortress. Fay Dang sided with the Japanese; and soon after Touby was arrested for his past collaboration with the French. Touby escaped to hide with French officers in the forests near Phu Son, in Muong Kham, from where he directed Hmong militia units to carry out French resistance. Vang Pao, the first Hmong to become a general in the Royal Lao Army (RLA), served in the guerrilla units, set up by French Para commandos, Bichelot and Gauthier, during their period of hiding from the Japanese. With the Japanese capitulation on 15, August 1945, Fay Dang found himself without support, while Touby still had his French Para commandos and his militia to protect him.

The French re-occupied Laos in September 1945 with the co-operation of French parachutists and local partisans (Thompson and Adloff, 1955: 99-201). However, Xieng Khouang town remained in the hands of the Lao Issara who took it over in November 1945. With Hmong militia under Touby and Lao forces under Tiao Saykhan, Xieng Khouang was taken back for the French on 26 January 1946 (Gunn, 1985: 248). Tiao Saykhan was a member of the Xieng Khouang royal family who was a class mate of Touby and was hiding with the latter during the Japanese occupation. With the Japanese gone, the French now found themselves confronting a new and much craftier enemy, the Vietminh or anti-French Vietnamese guerrilla units under the control of Ho Chi Minh. The Vietminh had not only infiltrated North Vietnam,

but also North-eastern Laos even before the Japanese surrender.

Touby's Hmong militia were able to repel some of these Vietminh attacks in the Nong Het areas. For this reason and for his pro-French stand, he was asked by General Salan, Commander-in-chief of the French Expeditionary Forces in Indochina, to organise more Hmong to resist the Vietnamese advance. The French imposed a new opium tax on all Hmong to be collected by Touby. This opium would be used to finance a thousand of "armed men in the field" and was to be dispensed through the French mixed airborne Commando troop in South Vietnam (Gunn, op. cit. 244).

In return for his service to the French, Touby was appointed to the position of Chao Muong or County Governor for the Hmong of Xieng Khouang in September 1946 by King Sisavang Vong of Luang Prabang. This was the highest office a Hmong had reached at that time, and was largely the result of strong lobby by Raymond, the Commissioner of the French Republic in Laos (Ibid.: 240 and 242). Tiao Saykham was made Provincial Governor or Chao Khoueng. A harmonious relationship between the Lao and Hmong ensued in the province, and Tiao Saykham continued to collaborate with Hmong leaders on the RLG side until the PL won the day in 1975.

Against this background, Fay Dang Lo and his supporters were driven into North Vietnam by Touby's militia. There, they are said to have made contact with the Vietminh for the first time (McCoy, 1972: 85). With political indoctrination and arm support, Fay Dang was able to recruit Hmong members for his Resistance League, due also in part to the oppressive opium tax Touby had to administer for the French. Fay Dang probably made contact with Lao Issara leaders such as Nouthak and Kaysone during this time but might not have met Souphonouvong until the latter joined them from Thailand in Vietnam in 1949. At that stage, these anti-French dissidents were already well trained by the Vietminh, and some had even become Communist (Deuve, 1984: 31). A people's congress in August 1950 resulted in the formation of the Neo Lao Issara or Free Lao Front and a resistance government in which Fay Dang became one of the two ministers without portfolio representing ethnic minorities (the other being Sithon Kommadan, the Lao Theung leader).

Despite this modest beginning, Fay Dang's Hmong and Sithon's Khmu were the grass roots movers in the progress of the Free Lao Front in Northern Laos. As mentioned by Deuve (op.cit.: 36), the Front had to operate initially in isolated ethnic enclaves, inaccessible frontiers untouched by the Royal Lao Government (RLG) in Vientiane. By 1956, the Front had gained sufficient popular support in the countryside to be changed to the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) or Patriotic Front. Fay Dang was made vice-president of the new organisation. When the NLHS and the RLG decided on a coalition government in 1958, one of Fay Dang's relative, Lo Fong, was elected to the National Assembly while Touby represented the Hmong on the RLG side.

For a time, there was great hope that the two Hmong groups would live in peace with many other previously antagonistic Lao groups. However, this was not to be the case. Two months after the elections, the Coalition Government under Souvanna Phouma collapsed, and a rightist government under Phoui Sananakone was instituted. By July 1959, most NLHS leaders in Vientiane had been arrested by the new government. Fay Dang, who was in Xieng Khouang, once again fled to Vietnam after the NLHS and the Neutralists took Xieng Khouang in 1961, he returned to live in Nong Het where he remained until 1975.

Although Fay Dang had been with the NLHS from the beginning and his Hmong followers had died in their thousands for the Pathet Lao (PL) cause, he did not get a post in the Cabinet of the new Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). He and Sithon were offered the ceremonial positions of vice-president in the People's Supreme Assembly, and were not even members of the new Lao People's Revolutionary Party Central Committee "where real power lies" (Everingham, 1977: 27). In the last few years of his life, Fay Dang returned to line as a farmer in his native Nong Het under the watchful eyes of PL guards. Old and ailing, he died in 1986, but his death was not even announced officially until three months later.

Touby, unlike his cousin and arch enemy Fay Dang, died a lonely death in a re-education camp in Sam Neua in 1978. It was said that he had to dig his own grave before being executed by PL soldiers for allegedly attempting to arouse camp internees to mutiny. Following his election to the National Assembly in 1958, he became Minister of Social Welfare in 1960 before joining the King's Council as an advisor on minority affairs, a post he held until the cease-fire between the NLHS and the RLG in 1973. In the Provisional Government of National Union formed in April 1974, Touby was given the position of Deputy Minister of Post and Telecommunications before being taken away in 1975 to Sam Neua to grow chillies and to sharpen knives for other detainees in an attempt to cleanse their capitalist minds with manual labour.

Apart from Touby and Fay Dang, the other better known Hmong leader in Laos in probably General Vang Pao. From village militiaman under Touby, he joined the French military police, then went as the first Hmong (under much protest from the Lao) to study at the Military Officers College at Dong Hen in Southern Laos where the instructors were still French in 1951. After graduating, he served for many years under Lao commanders in the Royal Lao Army in Xieng Khouang. By 1959, he had been promoted to the rank of major with soldiers of all ethnic backgrounds under his command. He was later made Commander of the Second Military Region in Northern Laos, and became a general in 1964.

In the view of some Western writers (McCoy, op. cit.: 268-81; and Deuve, op.cit. 255), Vang Pao was no more than a warmonger and opium broker for the CIA, or the commander of a Hmong mercenary army carrying out its own "secret war" in Laos independently of the RLG. For many other more informed people, however, he symbolised the hopes, not only of the Hmong but also other minorities in Laos in the region under his control, he set up schools for the highlanders, paid the teachers when money was not forthcoming from the government, and organised nurse education through the US Agency for International Development (Garret, 1974: 78-111). He built dormitories for minority students in Vientiane so that they could pursue higher education in the capital. More importantly, he ensured that hill minorities were represented in the provincial public Service and in the National Assembly (with 3 Hmong and 1 Khmu members). One of the two radio stations with minority languages at the time operated from his headquarters in Long Cheng.

In many ways, the highlands minorities had attained a new level of political participation and a new identity under Vang Pao. He arranged regular visits by leaders of the royal families of Luang Prabang and Champassak, by Buddhist monks and the Lao elite. He insisted that the Lao shared key positions in civilian or military administration so that in all this endeavour he was assisted by many Lao army officers and troop, as well as minority and Lao public servants. Although nine out of the fourteen battalions under his command were made up of special Forces paid for by the CIA, these forces were always considered part of the regular army; they were special in so far as the RLG could not train and pay for their upkeep. It was only some people in the West who referred the Hmong as "mercenaries" in the soil of their very own country. So much for helping their Western allies fight against Communism!

Along with many other Lao right-wing leaders, Vang Pao had to escape from Laos after 1975. He was one among four condemned to death in absentia by the new PDRL. Since his exile in the West, he has organised with a numbers of Lao leaders a resistance movement which includes members of all minorities from Laos. He is by all accounts one of the most active in this new political activity designed, in his view, not only to regain Laos but also to structure Lao politics in such a way that all ethnic groups would have an equal part to play in a new regime so that contribution to national building could be made by all at every level. Many Lao refugees, including those from the lowlands, have come to put their hopes and dreams in his efforts along with those of other resistance leaders.

To conclude this short exposition of Hmong political participation in Laos, let me say that I have not tried to put my account in any analytical framework, because our knowledge on the subject is still too rudimentary for synthesis or interpretation. I merely wish to share what emerge from my research in the hope that a better appreciation can be made of the role of the Hmong played in Lao recent history. During the civil war from 1961 to 1974, it is estimated that close to 15,000 Hmong died in the battle fields serving the Royal Lao Government. On the PL side, it is difficult to know how many of them had perished, but its Hmong commanders such as Thao Tou Saychou and General Praseut had paid with their own lives. The toll was heavy for the military; and the costs were even more hefty for Hmong civilians, especially on the RLG side when more than 150,000 Hmong had been uprooted from their own country and are now living as refugee in different parts of the world.

Considering that there was about 300,000 of them in Laos before 1975, the price the Hmong paid in their contribution to the building of the Lao nation has been particularly high in comparison of other groups.

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