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THE HMONG DIASPORA AND THE STRUGGLE
FOR AN IDENTITY

by

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During a United Nations (UN) sponsored meeting between non-governmental organizations (NGO) and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination held in February 2012, representatives alluded to continued violence towards the Hmong. The Congress of World Hmong People, a non-profit NGO that advocates Hmong economic, social, and cultural rights, vehemently stressed that massacres and murders of indigenous Hmong are still occurring in the Xaysombun Administrative Zone territory within the Phou Bia Mountains in northern Laos.¹ “Poisonous chemical agents had been used against Hmong people, including children, leading to severe health consequences for the population. The goal of those attacks, led by the Laos Army and Vietnamese Military battalions was to wipe out the Hmong in the region completely by 2015.”² The Hmong people are part of a minority group that has been challenged with significant obstacles within the countries that they have lived. The Hmong have called many places home and can be found in China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Australia, France, and the United States. During the previous two centuries, the Hmong have faced both oppressive governments and people that have affected their identity. Throughout history, the Hmong have strived for independence, lived in a continuous state of migration, and fought against authorities that threatened their livelihoods. No move was more notable than the monumental migration of hundreds of thousands of Lao Hmong who allied themselves with the United States in a secret war during the Second Indochina War. The Hmong’s unceasing diaspora categorizes them as an inherently exiled people.

The Hmong culture is over 4,000 years old and places significant value on concepts of honor, commitment, loyalty, and freedom. The word Hmong has an inference that means “free people” or “those who must have their freedom or independence.”³ The Hmong originated in the highland regions of Southern China and were called the Meo or Miao by the Chinese.⁴ However,

the Chinese called any southern minority Miao, so exact origins remain unclear.⁵ The Hmong of Laos believed that the term Miao or Meo implied slavery and contempt thus identified themselves as Hmong.⁶ China still uses the term Miao to describe the five million Hmong living there today and to identify numerous other ethnic groups with similar cultural and linguistic families such as the Hmu, the Qoxiong, and the Hmau.⁷

The eighteenth century marks a time period in which conflicts within China initiated the migratory movements of the Hmong to other countries in Southeast Asia. Differing Chinese dynasties of the Han, Mongols, and Manchus sent war parties to the southern highlands to pacify, subordinate, extort, tax, or repress the populations.⁸ Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, China experienced a tremendous demographic influx of 200 million people that caused the Han majority, mainly living in the lowlands, to seek other areas to live.⁹ China's population growth was due to a combination of factors, including: internal peace under Manchu rule, increased trade and transportation system, and most importantly an increase in food supply.¹⁰ Technological advances with irrigation and various varieties of rice that had different harvesting periods throughout the year allowed farmers to double and triple the yields from existing land.¹¹ Additionally, the Spanish introduced low maintenance crops such as maize, sweet potatoes, and peanuts from the Americas.¹² The Han realized that these crops did not require rich fertile soil and provided an opportunity to cultivate less fertile lands. The Han began to invade the Miao highlands which resulted in territorial conflict. Revolt and resistance from the Miao minority were numerous.¹³

The Han invasion sparked territorial and cultural conflict that ignited an aggressive response from the Hmong who wanted to defend their land. The Chinese were never able to completely subdue the fiercely independent Hmong and bargained for an agreement with their

last recorded Hmong king in China, King Sonom. The Chinese negotiated a peace with King Sonom that contained the condition he honorably surrender. The King and his court travelled to Beijing to finalize the agreement but uncovered a plot that planned to torture and kill the travelling party. The Chinese emperor ordered the killing of the party and to have their decapitated heads placed on display for all to see. Those who remained alive were to be relegated as slaves for Chinese military officers. The Chinese emperor executed the plot successfully and began the tortures. King Sonom, his advisors, his doctors, and his aunt were slaughtered into pieces with their heads placed on public exhibit. Some of the lower ranking individuals were executed shortly thereafter.¹⁴

Additionally, Chinese generals were ordered to subdue the remaining Hmong and separate them into groups; the groups were identified by the type of clothing that they wore.¹⁵ Categorizing the separate Hmong groups through dress could explain the development of different subgroups with dialectic and sartorial differences: Green Hmong, White Hmong, Black Hmong, Flowery Hmong, and Striped Hmong.¹⁶ Also, the Chinese forbade the Hmong from practicing written language; those that did otherwise were given the death penalty.¹⁷ The only historical remnants of Chinese ancestry left for the Hmong were maintained by women. Women kept the Hmong alphabet alive by knitting symbols onto tribal dresses that were passed on from generation to generation. However, the Hmong's written communication was decimated by Chinese oppression, which caused everlasting effects: "during the years of fleeing and disruption, the Hmong lost the ability to use their written language. Many twentieth-century Hmong women who still painstakingly embroider or batik ancient symbols and ideographs of historical events, are not able to read or write the language which their needles preserved."¹⁸ Continuous persecution by the Chinese left many Hmong leaders to take their people southward

into Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, marking their first major diaspora in the mid nineteenth century.¹⁹

Another factor initiating the Hmong migration is partly due to the contention for control of a lucrative cash crop in opium. China was suffering from French, British, and Portuguese marketing campaigns that focused on the sale of opium.²⁰ The colonists grew the crop in Bengal and distributed it without trade restriction in China, which was allowed by the Treaty of Nanking that allowed Europeans to install trade posts on the Chinese coast and trade easily with the Chinese market.²¹ Consumption in China soared and Chinese leaders began to contemplate the loss in revenue due to colonial control of the crop and social factors that affected the population. Emperor Dao of the Qing dynasty became alarmed at the number of opium addicts within his country; local governments of Guangdong and Fujian reported that nine out of ten people were addicted to Opium.²² On the other hand, locally produced and controlled opium would benefit the domestic economy as explained by Lin Zexu, a provincial official charged with dealing with the opium problem, “if people grew opium themselves, the money they made would stay in China and in the final analysis it would be better if silver did not go abroad.”²³ China’s rulers decided to contend the colonists for both revenue and distribution control of opium.

Opium requires rich, alkaline soil and thrives at elevations of 3,000 feet and above with southern or western sun exposure.²⁴ The southern Chinese mountains had perfect growing conditions for opium, and the Chinese authorities pressured populations living in those areas to grow the poppies and produce raw opium.²⁵ Farmers sold the opium to government agents who then distributed it to the market. The Hmong began cultivating opium as a traditional crop and took advantage of the opium trade, but disliked the taxation and production controls used by the Chinese authorities. Consequently, the Hmong initiated an economic war with the Chinese

administration.²⁶ The Hmong persisted on wanting to keep control of the production and sale of opium but essentially succumbed to the Chinese and began searching for other areas to cultivate their crop. The Hmong moved southward and found settlement in regions with highland areas such as Laos in the nineteenth century.

With traditions originating in China, opium was still considered a cash crop for the Hmong and used as a source of income. Unrefined opium was easy to transport and important to their prosperity.²⁷ It was much easier to transport a handful of opium down the mountainside than its economic equivalent in more traditional crops. Opium was not a highly used drug amongst the Hmong, but rather it was used as a limited folk remedy, stimulant, and pain reliever; addiction did exist in Hmong society, but it was considered socially stigmatizing.²⁸ The Hmong believed that drug addicts were a burden to his or her family, clan, and village.²⁹ Accordingly, opium was a means of producing wealth for the Hmong and not a fuel for addiction.

The wealth derived from opium and the independent nature of the Hmong began to cause conflicts with French colonists in Laos. France entered Indochina in 1858 and annexed Vietnam and Cambodia; by the late 1890s, Laos fell under French control as a protectorate. Prior to the French arrival, Laos was ruled under a monarchy that lacked political control and could not provide adequate border security for the country. Since the fifteenth century, Laos was invaded twelve times by Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma.³⁰ The Laotian Lan Xang (land of a million elephants) kingdom managed to survive by acknowledging Thai and Vietnamese suzerainty.³¹ Loosely controlled borders allowed relatively unrestricted movement of immigrants such as the Hmong into Laos. In 1896, Laos suffered a budget shortfall of nearly fifty percent, and the French colonists initiated draconian taxes to make up the difference. Local Laotian authorities were used by the French to collect taxes and often collected more than required taxes for

personal profit; the Hmong were sometimes forced to pay a special market place tax called Tah La that was above and beyond the normal taxes.³² Over-taxing caused an outrage amongst the Hmong and led them to revolt against the government and its French control.

The Hmong attacked a French trading post nestled in the mountains of the Laos-Vietnam border in 1896. The Hmong had rudimentary weapons and were decimated by modern French rifles, yet their ferocity shocked the French. The French officials, who were not aware of the illegal over-taxing of the Hmong, discovered that the attack was instigated by a local Lao government official. The local official personally benefited from the over-taxation and wanted to shift attention to the Hmong to avoid punishment by the French for illegally collecting additional taxes. Taxes were reduced for the Hmong but this easing of their burden was short lived. France began collecting taxes twice a year instead of once and extended taxation to Hmong teenagers as well as adults. These taxes were collected on livestock, opium, and land, but if the Hmong were unable to afford payment, they paid with human labor.³³

In 1919, years of resentment from burdensome taxes caused a rebellion led by a Hmong chieftain named Pa Chay. He started fighting in the Laos-Vietnam border town of Dien Bien Phu. Pa Chay was said to have received orders from the heaven and used cannons made out of hollowed out tree trunks; the French thought Pa Chay was insane and dubbed the rebellion as the Madman's War.³⁴ The fighting continued for nearly three years, but the violence ended when French-hired assassins (through bounties) killed Pa Chay. A French colonel described the Hmong's strong motivation during the rebellion stating that the "warrior temperament of the Meo [Hmong] reveals itself for good reason: crushing taxes, heavy impositions on opium, [and] horses requisitioned without being paid for."³⁵

The Hmong's temperament and quest for independence carried throughout their years in Laos. During the First Indochina War and Laos' battle for independence from colonial France, the Hmong found themselves separated into two clans with differing political positions. The Ly clan led by Touby Lyfong was loyal to French colonists and the Royal Lao Government, and the Lo clan led by Lo Bliayoa and his son Faydang was loyal to the Lao Issara (Free Lao) movement.³⁶ The Lao Issara was formed after World War II in response for independence and anti-colonial rule.³⁷ Faydang formed the Meo Resistance League in 1946 and joined forces with the anti-French Lao Issara. The Lao Issara eventually dissolved and split into three factions, and Faydang aligned himself with the one led by Prince Souphanouvong; in 1950, the Prince's faction formed into the Pathet Lao which joined forces with the Viet Minh.³⁸

On the other hand, the French recruited and built a Hmong militia and used Touby Lyfong as the leader. The Hmong decided to align themselves with the French because they offered a better alternative than the communists despite taxation. For instance, the French provided the Hmong educational opportunities by allowing them to attend French established schools.³⁹ Additionally, some Hmong developed allegiances with the French through family ties with French officials. The French elected Hmong tassengs (district leaders), which drove an affiliation and loyalty to the colonists that also spread to the tassengs' family members.⁴⁰ Likewise, Clan loyalty and family ties with Touby Lyfong influenced some Hmong to side with the French. Moreover, the Hmong feared the communists as explained by a tasseng, "they [communist Laotians] were very disrespectful. We were scared of them because they had weapons. They came and took our livestock and killed our chickens... We had to fight them... In my area, all Hmong were united to fight the communists."⁴¹

The Hmong became deeply entrenched with the French during conflict, but the French began losing significant ground against communist insurgents and turned to the United States for support. The French called on United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower for mobility aircraft support in transporting supplies and heavy equipment to French, Hmong, and Royal Lao Army forces that were under siege.⁴² The United States provided mobility support with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) owned aircraft that operated under a cover company called Civil Air Transport (CAT).⁴³ CAT provided C-119s to support the resupply of French forces, mainly to the French stronghold at Dien Bien Phu.⁴⁴ The French were compelled to control Dien Bien Phu due to its strategic value as an operating location that could be used to invade Laos and fortified it with 12,000 men including 200 Hmong.⁴⁵ However, in May 1954 after 55 days of battle, Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao forces.⁴⁶ Nearly 2000 Hmong who aligned with the French found themselves captured by the Viet Minh; some of these Hmong were not released until 25 years later.⁴⁷

The Hmong became concerned after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu about a communist takeover and revenge for siding with the French. The defeat at Dien Bien Phu ultimately led to the 1954 Geneva Accords that included an agreement on ending the First Indochina War. The accords prohibited the introduction of foreign troops (except for effective defense) and foreign bases into Laos, but it did not deal with Viet Minh troops presently in Laos or reintegration procedures for Pathet Lao forces.⁴⁸ The accords did authorize the Royal Lao government to establish administration zones in the northern Pathet Lao-controlled provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly.⁴⁹ The Pathet Lao maintained control of the northern provinces and began regrouping and the Hmong became increasingly concerned about retribution.⁵⁰ With the aid of the Viet Minh, the Pathet Lao began terrorizing Hmong villages in the northern provinces and using their

villagers for slave labor.⁵¹ The Royal Lao government could do little to protect the isolated communist-controlled northern provinces and left the burden of protection to the Hmong.

The Hmong would soon be provided an option to countering the communists' forces as the United States increased its interest in the region. Recognizing a mounting threat of communist control, the United States became more and more concerned about a political domino effect in Southeast Asia. President Eisenhower considered Laos a strategic geographical position in the center of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. The United States was content with an independent Laos as long as it remained non-communist. However, if Laos fell to communism, it could affect Thailand; if Thailand was lost, others countries would follow in a domino effect and communism would dominate Asia.⁵² The Hmong population lived in the region of Laos where communists were concentrated.

Vientiane had little control of the Pathet Lao dominated northern provinces, and the Hmong represented a viable option for Americans on deterring communist aggression in the north. President Eisenhower decided to commit millions of dollars in aid and advisor support to Laos to prevent a takeover by the communists.⁵³ In the late 1950s, CIA paramilitary officers and U.S. military training advisors began to arrive in Laos with the task of building a lowland Lao national army in order to prevent the communist threat, but were faced with an organization that had "tremendous corruption, apathy, and desire to avoid combat."⁵⁴ Leadership and morale were low amongst the national army, but the Americans eventually discovered a "fiercely independent hill tribe called the Hmong that were willing to take up arms against any group that threatened their mountaintop homes and opium fields."⁵⁵

Hmong involvement in the United States' communism containment strategy increased after war broke out between neutralist forces paratroop commander Kong Le, supported by the

communist Pathet Lao, and rightwing General Phoumi Nosavan, supported by the United States. In December 1961, intense fighting between the two groups drove Kong Le out of Vientiane and forced him to retreat north to the Plaine des Jarres. Unbeknownst and alarming to the Americans, Kong Le received support from Soviet Union aircraft. The appearance of Soviet support concerned the United States and subsequently encouraged President Eisenhower to seek additional options to impede a communist threat without introducing American combat force; one option was to use indigenous people as surrogate fighters.⁵⁶

The CIA introduced a proposal to arm and train Hmong tribesman, and the president viewed this proposal with favor.⁵⁷ However, in early 1961, President Eisenhower's tenure was ending as John F. Kennedy was preparing to take the presidency. President Eisenhower expressed to President-elect Kennedy that Laos was critical in Indochina and an intervention by the United States was necessary to prevent a communist takeover.⁵⁸ Eisenhower also remarked that his efforts thus far were on the verge of failure, and military forces might need to intervene.⁵⁹ After the presidential turnover, Kennedy remarked, "the Eisenhower administration would support intervention—they felt it was preferable to a communist success in Laos."⁶⁰ Kennedy was also not inclined to introduce American combat forces in Laos and capitalized on the CIA proposal.

While political discussions continued, covert operations in Laos persisted with CIA case officers training and recruiting the northern Laos Hmong population. Gordon L. Jorgenson, U.S. Embassy's CIA station chief in Laos, directed a contingent of CIA case officers to begin the Hmong campaign with the strategy of using the Hmong to help gain control of northern Laos.⁶¹ The CIA travelled village to village recruiting Hmong with the message that "the Vietnamese will soon come to take your land. We [the U.S.] will give you the means to fight."⁶² The CIA's

recruitment tactic was successful and led to training several thousand men within a few months.⁶³

Of particular importance to the CIA's effort was finding a natural leader for the Hmong. Vang Pao emerged as the person that would lead the contingent of Hmong fighters and essentially became their inspiration. Vang Pao, called VP by the CIA case officers, was a charismatic and young soldier formally trained at a French-ran officer training school.⁶⁴ VP became concerned about the increasing communist presence in Laos and feared that his people may eventually suffer from retribution by the communists for supporting French forces.⁶⁵ VP devised a plan of occupying the mountaintops that surrounded the communist held Plain de Jarres with Hmong forces. VP received support from the CIA's covert air transport service, Air America (previously CAT), which delivered personnel and provided supplies to the different hilltops. Hmong fighters increased in numbers from 1,000 to 9,000, which subsequently increased the demand for airlift.⁶⁶ The construction of hilltop airstrips, later known as Lima Sites, began and developed into an intricate logistics system to provide both supplies for Hmong fighters and food for Hmong villages.⁶⁷ The Hmong also used the intricate logistics system to transport opium, which still provided a means to cash and financing the war. VP was concerned about opium addiction, but he occasionally air-dropped opium to addicted soldiers that were in a prolonged campaign so that they would not suffer from withdrawal and affect combat effectiveness.⁶⁸ Hmong soldiers, albeit being socially stigmatizing, used opium to calm their nerves during battle. As the war progressed and attrition took its toll, VP began exploiting opium in an effort to finance the recruitment of additional Hmong soldiers and used military helicopters to collect and transport opium from mountain villages to merchants in central Vietnam where opium earned top dollar.⁶⁹

In July 1962 after intensified fighting in Laos, the Hmong became worried when President Kennedy and Soviet Union Premier Nikita S. Krushchev endorsed the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. The declaration established a coalition government and required the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Laos. However, of grave consequence to the Hmong, not all parties adhered to the declaration. The U.S. pulled out its advisors with the exception of two CIA agents to monitor the compliance of the agreement. Conversely, the CIA reported that 7,000 North Vietnamese troops remained in Laos and were expanding its control with help from the growing Pathet Lao forces. The Vietnamese and Pathet Lao began attacking Hmong and neutralist positions. U.S. concern grew and was further exasperated by North Vietnam sending additional troops to Laos in 1963. President Kennedy then authorized the CIA to increase the Hmong army to counter the threat, which grew the Hmong forces to 20,000 by the end of 1963.⁷⁰

The President's authorization for an increase in Hmong troop numbers fortified the alliance that the Hmong had with the United States. The Hmong were initially charged with "saving the country from domination" by North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao.⁷¹ However, when the United States committed airpower in 1964 and ground troops in 1965 to South Vietnam, the Hmong guerilla warfare in Laos became a "sideshow to the larger struggle between Saigon and Hanoi."⁷² Nevertheless, the Hmong's strategic position was pivotal in interdicting supply routes in Laotian territory, namely the Ho Chi Minh Trail, used by Hanoi to supply North Vietnamese and Viet Cong operating in South Vietnam. The Hmong supported the American effort by destroying North Vietnamese logistics infrastructure, including supply depots, transportation routes, vehicles, and military forces; Hanoi had to deploy four battalions in order to counter the Hmong.⁷³ The Hmong participated in guerilla style warfare against the North Vietnamese throughout the proceeding years.

The Hmong also supported search and rescue missions for downed US Air Force and US Navy aircrew shot down over Laos and on occasion, North Vietnam. Together with Air America, the Hmong served a substantial role in search and rescue operations due to their intricate knowledge of the terrain in Laos and ability to exploit tactical intelligence.⁷⁴ Air America and the Hmong search and rescue collaboration was overtly successful in rescue attempts. One pilot noted that before he was able to unbuckle his parachute, Hmong guerillas appeared and guided him to the nearest Hmong village, provided shelter and food, and transported him to a site that had a helicopter waiting; news of the rescue was made real time through tactical Hmong radio nets.⁷⁵ The Hmong were responsive despite having no U.S. military presence on the ground. The Hmong essentially found themselves deeply involved in a “secret war” in Laos.⁷⁶ CIA Director Richard Helms stated that using the Hmong instead of U.S. personnel was “a much cheaper and better way to fight a war in Southeast Asia than to commit American troops.”⁷⁷

As fighting intensified, VP encountered a different war concerning narcotics. The Hmong farmers that grew opium were unable to sell their crop because the fighting kept merchants out of the highlands.⁷⁸ Desperate for income, the farmers sold their harvest to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in the area, who then resold the crop and used the profits to purchase weapons to be used against the Hmong.⁷⁹ In an effort to redirect profits and arming the communists, VP arranged for the CIA to transport opium from the highlands to Vientiane, Saigon, and Bangkok.⁸⁰ VP then began transporting and distributing opium through his CIA subsidized airline, Xieng Khouang Air Transport, and again used the income from selling the crop to recruit Hmong villagers for his army.⁸¹ Conversely, in response to a probe by United States government officials about drug trafficking, CIA case officers stated that they “never

encountered any evidence that CIA people participated in any such traffic....nor was its culpability the work of a few corrupt agents, eager to share in the enormous profits...never saw any indication that Vang Pao or any other Hmong leaders were parties to commercial narcotics traffic.”⁸² The CIA also threatened that any use of CIA assets for Narcotics was not tolerated and could result in the abandonment of the Hmong and CIA partnership.⁸³

However, in 1968 after nearly a decade of fighting, the Hmong found themselves in a state of war weariness with minimal support from the Royal Lao Army. The years of fighting have taken its toll on the Hmong and their guerilla warfare was increasingly turning into conventional type battles with the North Vietnamese forces. VP had insurmountable casualties and injuries to his people and began recruiting teenagers—some as young as thirteen and fourteen year olds—to continue the fight.⁸⁴ In 1972, the U.S. embassy in Vientiane stated that if fighting and subsequent losses of Hmong continue, VP would not be able to stop his fighters from disbanding or prevent them from rejoining their families.⁸⁵ Conversely, the United States effort to build a lowland Lao army never panned out as millions of dollars in foreign aid could not counter poor leadership and motivation; the Royal Lao forces never stood up to defend their country.⁸⁶ In February 1973, a ceasefire agreement, in conjunction with the Vietnam War ceasefire, was signed in Vientiane that led to a coalition government for Laos and projected an end to the war.

After the ceasefire agreement, VP again feared the threat of communist retribution from the Pathet Lao due to the Hmong’s long standing support of anti-communist forces of France and the United States. The United States began planning its withdrawal from the country. However, the Pathet Lao began increasing its presence in the Royal Lao government. A Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) was formed in April 1974 by royal decree and placed

brothers Prince Souvanna Phouma as the new prime minister and Prince Souphanouvong (Pathet Lao leader) as the National Political Consultative Council (NPCC) leader.⁸⁷ The NPCC became the most powerful political force in the new government. Prince Souvanna Phouma suffered a heart attack and paved way for his brother to gain political influence. After South Vietnam and Cambodia fell to communist takeover in 1975, five non-communist members of the PGNU resigned and Royal Lao military officers panicked, causing them to flee to Thailand; Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma responded by appointing Pathet Lao collaborators as minister of defense and commander of Lao armed forces.⁸⁸ The Pathet Lao influence increased tremendously within the Lao government and in December of 1975, the Pathet Lao declared an end to the Lao monarchy and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR).⁸⁹ VP requested and received support from the United States for the evacuation of thousands of Hmong to Thailand; those who were not able to be airlifted, numbering in the tens of thousands, followed in a mass exodus across the Mekong River into Thailand.⁹⁰ Those who remained in Laos and could not escape were faced with uncertainty from the newly installed communist LPDR government.

Americans became worried about the Hmong who remained inside the LPDR. CIA officers petitioned the U.S. Embassy in Laos for support and were concerned with the provision of food, shelter, and schools for the Hmong. The response from the CIA Far East division manager was unexpected due to the support that the Hmong provided the United States. The division manager responded to the requests with:

The war is over up there. Put down your Hmong. Go Home. They have been well taken cared for these many years they worked for us. They can look after themselves now. No one forced the Hmong to fight for us. This is their homeland. We've helped them defend it all these many years. Our job's over and we have to go.⁹¹

Hmong persecution from the LPDR was inconsequential and efforts to evacuate the Hmong met “delays at the highest political levels.”⁹² There was no evacuation plan and 50,000 Hmong fighters and their families were left at Long Tieng waiting for aircraft that never came.⁹³ The Hmong had no homeland and developed an identity forged with the United States that reinforced and established a relationship of patronage.⁹⁴ The U.S.-Hmong relationship was evident in an interview with a Hmong man in America who stated, “In Laos we helped you [the United States] fight the war...if the Americans came to our house, whatever we ate we treated the Americans equally...in some dangerous situations we were willing to let ten Hmong soldiers die so that one of your leaders could live.”⁹⁵

With the fall of the Laos monarchy in 1975 to Pathet Lao communists, hundreds of thousands of Lao Hmong fled their country in fear of persecution from the LPDR for aligning themselves with the United States. Those who could not leave moved into the Phou Bia Mountains in northern Laos to escape oppression and government re-education camps. Lao and Vietnamese troops began searching for and destroying most of the remaining Hmong army.⁹⁶ Nearly one-third (350,000) of the Hmong minority in Laos fled to Thailand; approximately 250,000 of these Lao-Hmong eventually settled in the United States.⁹⁷ The escape of the Hmong marked the beginning of their second major diaspora.

The settlement into the United States did not come without difficulty. During President Jimmy Carter’s administration, little was done to highlight the concerns facing the Hmong in Laos. The 1977 annual *Country Report on Human Rights* produced by the United States State Department did not even list Laos.⁹⁸ However, with the efforts of Congressman Matthew F. McHugh from New York, increased attention was brought to the Hmong issue. Representative McHugh recognized a “campaign of terror” occurring in Laos and raised attention to the 17,400

annual cap placed on all regular (non-emergency) refugees allowed into the United States; the Hmong alone were fleeing Laos at a rate of 2,000-2,500 per month.⁹⁹ In 1980, President Carter signed into law the Refugee Act of 1980 which: increased the amount of regular refugees allowed into the United States to 50,000, established emergency refugee procedures, removed parole authority exercised by the attorney general, and established federal programs for the resettlement process.¹⁰⁰ The new act paved way for nearly 127,000 Hmong refugees accepted into the United States by the mid-1990s.¹⁰¹

However, the Hmong had difficulty settling due to significant cultural barriers between their former homeland and other countries in which they resettled. For example, the Hmong that moved to the United States were described as the least adapted immigrants due to: their previous livelihoods based on slash and burn farming, unfamiliarity with modern conveniences such as electricity and plumbing, and the inability of nearly all Hmong refugees to read and write.¹⁰² Also, some Hmong in the United States remained determinedly vindictive towards the LPDR and became involved in an attempted coup of the Lao government. In 2007, VP was targeted in an undercover arms deal that was aimed at arming rebels to “overthrow the government of Laos immediately.”¹⁰³ The sting operation was handled by an undercover agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms posing as an illegal arms dealer and focused on entrapping VP through a retired United States Army officer Harrison Jack; Jack was supposedly in the market for assault weapons to supply VP.¹⁰⁴ Under the Neutrality Act, Americans are prohibited from engaging or supporting hostile actions against nations in which the United States is at peace with.¹⁰⁵ The U.S. government indicted VP as terrorist along with eleven co-defendants for plotting an overthrow of the LPDR. The charges were later dropped against the 79-year old VP “based on the totality of the evidence in the case,” remarked U.S. attorney Lawrence G.

Brown.¹⁰⁶ However, consequential to the VP episode and years of being persecuted, the Hmong in the U.S. became frightened and some communities thought, “If they can take down the general and tear his home apart, they can tear my home down too. The Hmong see this as an attack on them. They are afraid they are going to be in jail next.”¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, the United States remained faithful to the Hmong despite cultural barriers; Lionel Rosenblatt, president of Refugees International in Washington, stated “there was no group that did more for the United States war effort or paid a higher price and that put more of its faith in the premise that the United States was going to stand by them as a people...my God, we owe these people.”¹⁰⁸ It is estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 Hmong perished in support of the United States’ secret war in Laos.¹⁰⁹ During the 1990s, Congressional Representative Bruce Vento of Minnesota, belonging to a state that accepted the second highest numbers of Hmong refugees behind California, pushed legislation that would help offset Hmong cultural barriers to American citizenship. Lao advocacy groups such as Lao Veterans of America pushed for changes in the citizenship laws and Vento, with support from 57 cosponsors, introduced a House bill that would waive the requirement to learn English for the naturalization exam and allow the use of an interpreter.¹¹⁰ The legislation waived the language requirement, which would allow nearly 45,000 Hmong to take the citizenship test; eligibility for this program would be extended to Hmong veterans, their spouses, and widows that helped the United States during the secret war in Laos.¹¹¹ President William J. Clinton signed the legislation sponsored by Representative Vento, which became known as The Hmong Veterans Naturalization Act of 2000. President Clinton expressed the difficulties that the Hmong faced in meeting the citizenship requirements and mentioned, “Until recently, the Hmong people had no written language...without this experience, learning English, a requirement of naturalization, has been much more difficult for

some Hmongs.”¹¹² The Chinese’s earlier prohibition of the use of Hmong written language had long standing effects centuries later.

The United States continued to show their support for the Hmong in 2004; the U.S. State Department authorized the admission of 15,000 Hmong refugees that were staying at Wat Tham Krabok monastery in Thailand.¹¹³ Thailand received many refugees after the communist takeover in 1975; an estimated one-third (350,000) of the Hmong population fled across the Thai border.¹¹⁴ However, Thailand’s openness to refugees began to wear thin and culminated to a period of resettlement during the years 2004-2009. The United States decided to act and receive the refugees after Thailand indicated that they would disperse those living in the monastery. Conversely, some Hmong were involuntarily repatriated to Laos and their status remains an issue. Amnesty International, in its 2012 report on Laos, stated that information continues to be “scarce” about the last group of 4,500 Hmong from Huai Nam Khao due to the lack of transparency and independent monitoring.¹¹⁵ Hmong advocacy groups and human rights organizations highlighted Lao repatriation concerns, yet the LPDR denies unrestricted access to government established repatriation villages and declared the northern mountain provinces that are predominately Hmong off limits to foreigners.¹¹⁶ The treatment and plight of the Hmong in Laos is a concern for the United States and “persistent human rights issues stand in the way of closer relations with Washington.”¹¹⁷

The Lao Hmong and the United States have a built a relationship and many of the sacrifices that were made by them have been recognized by Americans. Continually searching for a homeland and years of persecution by oppressive governments have moved the Hmong all over the world with no single place that unites their heritage. A Hmong author reflected after Vang Pao passed away in 2011 that his people will forever live without a home; “For the

Hmong, there is no country to return to, no homeland to help us preserve who we are.”¹¹⁸ There are no archives for future Hmong to research their past and origins; their history will be remembered by works captured today from stories passed down from generation to generation and preservation of their ancestral garments. The Hmong diaspora has severely affected the culture and identity of the Hmong, but their close relationship with the United States may provide an identity for the Hmong of the future.

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² Ibid.

³ Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains, The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos 1942-1992*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paul Hillmer, *A People’s History of the Hmong*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 14.

⁶ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 3.

⁷ Jean Michaud, “From Southwest China into Upper Indochina: an overview of Hmong (Miao) Migrations,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, (August 1997), <http://search.ebscohost.com/aufric.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=10452080&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=airuniv>, (accessed November 12, 2012), 120.

⁸ Ibid, 122.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 168.

¹¹ Ibid, 169.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 122.

¹⁴ Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5-6.

¹⁹ Ibid, 6.

²⁰ Michaud, “From Southwest China,” 125.

²¹ Ibid, 126.

²² “How China Got Rid of Opium,” *China Now*, (March, 1977), <http://www.sacu.org/opium.html>, (accessed November 28, 2012), 17.

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²⁶ Ibid.

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²⁸ Hillmer, *A People’s History of the Hmong*, 28.

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- ⁴⁰ Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, 51.
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- ⁴⁵ Ibid, 55.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, 61.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, 62.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 64.
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- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos."
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
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- ⁷⁴ Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 236.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Information on the secret war was not released to the American public until 1971.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid, xvii.
- ⁷⁸ Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 242.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ⁸¹ Ibid, 243.
- ⁸² Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 539, 543. (Case officer names were not released on the previously Secret Document; names were blanked out.)
- ⁸³ Ibid, 544.
- ⁸⁴ Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 110.
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