

The Hmong Come to Southern Laos: Local Responses and the Creation of Racialized Boundaries

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Abstract

There is a long history of Hmong migrations from the north to south. Most recently, Hmong have begun emerging in the southern-most parts of Laos, including Champasak and Attapeu Provinces, places where they never lived before, and some Hmong have tried to move south from Bolikhamxay to Khammouane Province. Southern Laos would appear to represent a new southern ‘frontier’ for the Hmong. This article looks at the interactions between the Hmong who have attempted to migrate into southern Laos and the Lao and Mon-Khmer language-speaking peoples they have encountered. Some Hmong movements into southern Laos have been accepted, while others have not. Crucially, negative racialized stereotypes about the Hmong being aligned with anti-government resistance groups, and being inherently destructive of the environment—as unfair as they may be— have influenced the prejudiced responses in southern Laos to the arrival of the Hmong. Others simply see the Hmong as being difficult to get along with and administer (still another unfair stereotype). The cultural practices and habits of some Hmong arrivals have confused and upset some Mon Khmer language-speaking peoples in southern Laos. The movement of the Hmong from the north to the south, and the reactions of others to them, are important for understanding the ways Hmong are geographically positioning themselves, and how others are attempting to construct spaces and associated boundaries designed to restrict them. Thus, the focus of this article is on the reactions of others to the Hmong, and the way particular racialized boundaries have been developed.

Keywords: race; ethnicity; resettlement; relocation; boundaries; borders

Introduction

On December 22, 2009, the well-known Hmong former General and US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) favorite, Vang Pao, made a surprising and bold announcement in front of a group of 1,000 well-wishers attending a dinner party organized in Fresno, California, in celebration of his 80th birthday. Vang Pao declared that he intended to make amends with the communist Government of Laos (GoL) and return to the country in January 2010, after spending 35 years in exile. During the emotional 30-minute speech, the General explained that he believed it was time to reconcile with the GoL, in order to save those Hmong who remained in the forests

of northern and central Laos, as well as others trapped in the Huay Nam Khao refugee camp in Thailand (Magagnini 2009).¹

General Vang Pao's announcement is particularly relevant for this article because of the expected economic aspects of the agreement, which were apparently being brokered by senior Thai officials and possibly a member of the Lao Politburo. According to Roger Warner (2009)—who wrote an article about the plan that was published on December 23—the idea was for Vang Pao, his Hmong compatriots, and his Lao and Thai partners, to obtain a 25,000-hectare land concession for a 99-year period. The reasoning was that this land would provide the Hmong in refugee camps in Thailand, and in the jungles of northern Laos, with a good place to live and become reintegrated into Laotian society. One might have expected the concession to be located in parts of northern Laos with high Hmong populations—maybe in Xieng Khouang, Luang Phrabang, or Vientiane Province. Instead, it was expected to be in the highlands of “southern Laos”,² a region historically not populated by the Hmong. So why there? And was Vang Pao thinking of who would have to be displaced from the 25,000 hectares of land he expected to receive as part of the agreement? Was he aware of all the problems that people in southern Laos have already faced due to various land concessions given to Vietnamese investors to develop rubber plantations?³

In fact, the agreement—if it existed in the first place—fell through. On December 25 the GoL announced that there was no such deal with Vang Pao, and that they had absolutely no

¹ The Hmong refugees at Huay Nam Khao in Petchabun Province, and those in Nong Khai, were all repatriated from Thailand to Laos less than a week later, on 28 December 2009 (Hillmer 2010a). It is not, however, believed that Vang Pao's proposal had anything to do with this repatriation. Instead, it seems likely that the Lao and Thai were waiting for the Southeast Asian Games in Vientiane to end before moving ahead with the repatriation plan.

² It turns out that this area is in Bolikhamxay Province, which most people would consider to be in central Laos, not southern Laos, but relative to parts of northern Laos where most Hmong live, the area chosen in Bolikhamxay Province is in “southern Laos”. It is apparently not an area where Hmong people previously lived.

³ See, for example, Baird 2010; Rattanaovong 2008; Luangaramsi *et al.* 2008; Obein 2007.

intention of making up with the General. A representative of the GoL stated that their arch enemy could only return to the country if he was willing to serve his death sentence, which was handed down by a Lao court in 1975, with Vang Pao in absentia (*The Nation* 2009). Shortly afterwards, Vang Pao announced that he had “postponed” his trip to Laos, since the GoL was not yet ‘ready for him’ (Hillmer 2010b).

This was not the first time that plans were conceived for Hmong people to move to ‘southern Laos’. Hmong have tried to relocate into parts of that region a number of times since the late 1980s, although few of their attempts have apparently been successful. The Hmong have been unable to establish themselves in the south for various reasons. This purpose of this article is to shed some light on this issue, my contention being that racialization has been paramount in the space and boundary-making processes that have occurred.

Here, I provide information about recent Hmong attempts to migrate to southern Laos. In particular, I wish to problematize the Hmong southern migration situation by considering the view of many non-Hmong in Laos regarding the Hmong, but especially those in southern Laos. I argue that people in the south⁴ frequently unfairly discriminate against the Hmong, often due to inaccurate stereotyping that has constructed Hmong people as forest exploiting people with tendencies to become involved in rebel anti-government military activities. This portrait is conceived for all Hmong, including those without any history of opposing the GoL, or destroying the environment. In the minds of some non-Hmong, the Hmong as an ethnic group are represented solely by the arch enemy of the GoL, Vang Pao, even if the reality is much more multi-faceted. However, for those who are familiar with the Hmong, especially people living farther to the north, they may link the Hmong less to anti-government activities and

⁴ Many from other parts of Laos also discriminate against the Hmong.

environmental destruction, but more frequently believe that the Hmong are simply difficult to get along with and to administer. Nicholas Tapp (1989) has shown how the Hmong are frequently subjected to unfair stereotyping in other countries in Thailand, where they are frequently linked with forest destruction, opium production and rebel activities (this time aligned with Thai communists). The situation in Laos is different, but with many similarities. In addition, I show how the treatment of the Hmong in Laos by ‘others’ has sometimes manifested itself spatially, both in relation to the spaces that the Hmong are permitted to inhabit and regarding responses to Hmong migration to the south.

Racialization and Boundaries

Here I engage with the concept of ‘racialization’, which involves the application of ethnicity-based prejudices and stereotyping to a particular group of people. It is a concept that has been applied by various scholars, including Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) and Anne Stoler (2002). However, Peter Vandergeest’s (2003) use of the term to link ethnicity-based prejudices to essentialized ideas about natural resource management practices in Thailand has particularly influenced my research. Vandergeest demonstrated how particular stereotypes related to ethnic identities had led to the construction of essentialized racialization, which linked whole groups of people indiscriminately with particular environments and perceived unsustainable natural resource management practices, thus leading to highly spatialized and state sanctioned forms of discrimination. Crucially for Vandergeest, as well as others, racialization has important spatial implications, through territorializing and influencing political geographies, and thus resource tenure arrangements. It involves the social construction of spaces and associated boundaries.

The concept of racialization is useful for better understanding what is happening with the Hmong in relation to their attempts to migrate to southern Laos. It also helps explain the

responses of local officials who have sent many Hmong back to the north. I want to illustrate how racialization has manifested spatially, to the point of restricting the movement of Hmong people to southern Laos, with imaginary and unofficial, but meaningful boundaries being envisioned and enforced by some government officials.

To understand this racialization process and associated space-making, we need to consider the basic meaning of boundaries or borders, as understood by human geographers and other social scientists (see Pellow 1996; Newton and Paasi 1998; Donnan and Wilson 2001). Today, it is widely recognized that boundaries take on many different forms. They can come with physical barriers or markers, or without visible indicators. Boundaries are no longer considered to be in any way 'natural', impermeable, inflexible or constant. They can be virtually impassable to some, but practically insignificant or even non-existent to others for a whole host of social, cultural, ecological, economic and political reasons. They are often seen differently by groups of people. Boundaries also shift due to temporal changes, with some existing only at certain times of the day or night, or in particular seasons. Thus landscapes are covered with constantly shifting and overlapping sets of boundaries of varying importance and intensity for different individuals and groups. Although governments and others in positions of power frequently attempt to naturalize or otherwise enforce certain boundaries, they are rarely able to maintain consistent boundaries at all scales. In thinking about boundaries, I find it useful to envision them not as equal sized lines on maps but rather as pulsating spaces that are constantly morphing in response to outside conditions, at times connecting or dividing particular socially constructed spaces that are always in flux.

Thus racialization, founded on certain ideas about the 'racial other', creates its only social spaces and associated boundaries; boundaries that are variable and shifting, but yet are in some

ways, and in certain circumstances, tied in sometimes surprising ways to the social systems and associated boundaries of the past. Processes of racialization result in spatial changes and the creation of new boundaries, in this case ones that relate to Hmong migration.

Early Hmong Migrations

Amongst the Hmong there has long been an historical narrative about migrating from southwestern China to Vietnam, Burma, Laos, and Thailand, the origins of which are complex (Culas and Michaud 2004; Lee 2007). McCoy (1972) positions the roots of Hmong migrations from China with the establishment of the Manchu dynasty in 1644, after which time it was supposedly decided to abolish the Hmong autonomy. According to him, the Han Chinese hoped to integrate the Hmong into standard Chinese polity, but when the policy met with Hmong resistance, the Chinese began a 200-year campaign of exterminating those who resisted and replacing Hmong resisters with more pliable Chinese populations. According to Darrah (1994), beginning in the mid-1850s, this policy escalated into a series of bloody massacres of Hmong dissidents and their dependents in southern China, forcing thousands of Hmong to migrate south to escape their tormentors. It should be mentioned, however, that other ethnic groups were facing similar problems in China during this period.

While many authors have emphasized Hmong movement south from China as resulting from persecution, Gary Yia Lee (1985/86) argues, in contrast, that most Hmong moved south in search of fertile land for conducting swidden agriculture and growing opium, with the mass movement of Hmong beginning in 1810-1820 (see, also, Culas and Michaud, 2004).

Whatever the reasons, in the early 1800s hundreds of thousands of Hmong began migrating south into the highlands of Vietnam, Burma, Laos and Thailand. Wherever they

settled, they tended to be independent, living apart from lowland societies, and practicing their own forms of Animism⁵ (Hillmer 2010a).

Since the Hmong first arrived in what is now Laos in the 19th Century, some—but not all—have gradually shifted southward. Ovesen (2004) pointed out that in Laos some Hmong doing shifting cultivation have gradually moved south once resources became exhausted. This apparently occurred because the Hmong often utilize resources in a way that some refer to as “resource maximizing”. This refers to using resources until they are depleted and then moving on (Robichaud 2005), so as to find new resources and allow the old ones to rejuvenate. This is not to claim that Hmong swidden practices are inherently unsustainable. In fact, given sufficient forests, they are quite sustainable.

Still, Hmong movements have certainly not always been to the south; neither have they been unidirectional. Nor have all or even most of the Hmong specifically desired to extend their presence southward. Yet one can see how some of the over 460,000 Hmong, or 6.7% of the population in Laos,⁶ have gradually extended their areas of inhabitation within Laos, with many moving as far as present-day Bolikhamxay Province (see Figure 1).⁷ There are now more Hmong in Bolikhamxay Province than ever before, including in parts of the province where they were not found until recently.⁸ This is partially due to GoL-supported efforts to resettle Hmong from

⁵ Note that I have intentionally chosen to capitalize ‘Animism’.

⁶ According to the GoL (2005), the Lao census for 2005 recorded approximately 460,000 Hmong people in Laos, which was about 6.7% of the population of Laos.

⁷ Apparently about 30,000 Hmong presently live in Khamkeut District, Bolikhamxay Province.

⁸ There have, however, been rumors that some of the Hmong settled in the Lak Sao area in Bolikhamxay Province actually came from the Dien Bien Phu area in northern Vietnam, and not from northern Laos. Some believe that the Vietnamese government has supported the gradual movement of Hmong people into the area since the 1990s. However, the GoL denies that these Hmong are from Vietnam. Other sources report that many Hmong there originally come from Nong Het, Xieng Khouang Province, but traveled to Lak Sao via Vietnam as it is a more direct route than traveling there via Salaphoukhoun and Vientiane. Some of the Hmong there were also repatriated from the Napho refugee camp in Thailand in 1992, and originally came from various places in northern Laos. It seems especially unlikely that Vietnamese Hmong are being allowed to move to Laos in large numbers. Gary Yia Lee, for example, told me about one incident in which people working for the Vietnamese Embassy brought a truck to pick

the uplands to the lowlands (see Baird and Shoemaker 2007 for more information about internal resettlement of uplanders in Laos), and also because of efforts to relocate Hmong out of the Phou Bia and Saisomboun areas due to security concerns associated with anti-Lao government resistance activities.⁹

Recent Hmong Attempts to Migrate to Khammouane Province

Over the last couple of decades some Hmong have attempted to migrate from Bolikhamxay to Khammouane Province (see Figure 1). The Theun-Hinboun Power Company (2006: 5-29) wrote about the recent arrival of many Hmong people to Khamkeut District, Bolikhamxay Province, in an environmental impact assessment associated with the Theun-Hinboun Hydropower Expansion Project,

“Natural movements have been made chiefly by groups of families moving out of areas of reduced food security, physical insecurity and perceived malevolent spirit influences, into areas thought to have higher opportunities. Latterly, significant numbers of Hmong people have moved into the area [Khamkeut District] as a result of a number of unspecified GoL activities in the mountainous zones north of the reservoir area, including campaigns against opium poppy and cannabis cultivation.”

Various documents also claim that there are Hmong living in the province (e.g. Bliatout *et al.* 1988). The Lao Embassy reports, for example, that there are Hmong villages in Khammouane.¹⁰ Some Hmong have even suggested that there are Hmong living as far south as

up two Hmong families from Vietnam that had tried to resettle near Vientiane. The truck returned the two families directly to Vietnam (*pers. comm.* Gary Yia Lee, February 2010).

⁹ *Pers. comm.*, Gary Yia Lee, February 2010.

¹⁰ The Lao government now considers there to be “Hmong villages in Khammouane Province, as shown on the following website: <http://www.laoembassy.com/discover/sites/khammouane.htm>, accessed January 27, 2010.



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Savannakhet Province,¹¹ although I have not seen any evidence to support this claim. Many Hmong villages are directly adjacent to, but north of, the border with Khammouane (Messerli *et al.* 2005). This appears to indicate that Hmong people have moved as far south as they have been allowed, or that the original provincial border was established specifically with the idea of ensuring that all Hmong remained north of Khammouane Province.

It seems likely that some of the misunderstandings regarding the existence of Hmong in Khammouane are the product of shifting political geographies in Laos. Prior to 1975, before the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Bolikhamxay Province did not exist. There were just Khammouane and Bolikhan Provinces.¹² This explains why there were more Hmong living in Khammouane than now, as Khamkeut District, where many Hmong have been living at least since the 1930s, was part of Khammouane, as was the area presently included in Viengthong District, another area with a substantial Hmong population, and now included within the political boundaries of Bolikhamxay Province. Thus, those parts of Khammouane where the Hmong lived were all transferred to Bolikhamxay Province when it was established in 1983, combining what at that time were parts of Khammouane and Vientiane Provinces (Bolikhan Province was dissolved after 1975).

Still, there are some Hmong living in Khammouane Province. In the early 1990s many were repatriated from refugee camps in Thailand to a site not far south of the provincial capital of Thakhek. A group of ethnic Lao returnees were moved into the same area. This group is visible on the socio-economic atlas of Laos (Messerli *et al.* 2005). Over the last few years some of these Hmong have moved to the east into Mahaxay District, Khammouane Province. Thus, as

¹¹ *Pers. comm.* Paoze Thao, January 2010.

¹² Bolikhan is now constituted as district in Bolikhamxay Province. When it was a province before 1975, it was apparently only semi-independent from Vientiane Province, where it had been carved from.

will become clear later in this article, limitations to Hmong movements to the south have not been uniformly applied. Some Hmong have been allowed to enter Khammouane because they did not come directly from the north, but via Thai refugee camps, thus not being affected by particular boundaries. As a Hmong government official from Khamkeut District told me in May 2010, “The Hmong near Thakhek were allowed to move into Khammouane because it was the Central government’s plan to move them there from Thailand.”

Recent Hmong Efforts to Migrate to the Deep South of Laos

It appears that the first Hmong group of five families to arrive in Paksong District, Champasak Province, from Xieng Khouang Province (it is unclear what district or village(s) they came from) showed up on the Bolaven Plateau in 1996. They arrived in a rented truck, and somehow ended up at Lak Khao Village, which is nine kilometers outside of the district capital (see Figure 1). They had papers signed by the district government verifying their origin, but there were no signatures from the provincial or national levels, which disturbed local government officials in Paksong, especially considering that most had very little if any interaction with Hmong. After some consideration, it was decided that the Hmong should return to where they came, and they were ordered to leave immediately. The head of sub-district #5 at the time, Dot La-ounmuang, himself an ethnic minority (or indigenous person) from Paksong, was saddled with the unpleasant task of conveying the news to the Hmong. According to him, they were not happy, and initially refused to abide by the order. It took two visits before they finally begrudgingly agreed to leave Paksong, presumably to return to Xieng Khouang, although there is no confirmation where they actually went. In any case, they have apparently not been seen in southern Laos since.

The second group of Hmong arrived to Paksong in around 2001. Some came from Xieng Khouang, but a Hmong official from Bolikhamxay told me that many came from Khamkeut District in Bolikhamxay. They hired a truck to move to Paksong. These Hmong apparently learned about the rich forests and cool climate in parts of Paksong when they visited the district as ‘tourists’ sometime earlier. According to Paksong officials, there were 20 families, but the Hmong from Bolikhamxay believes that there were 16. Possibly because this group was larger than the first, they appeared more determined to not have their migration plans quashed.

They moved into the relatively forested eastern part of Paksong, near the villages of Nong Kan and Nong Soung. They had the same sort of documents as the first group; again, however, there were no signatures from provincial or central GoL officials. By some accounts, they were told to return almost immediately upon their arrival. Local people from the ethnic Jrou (Laven) group were under the impression that they had indeed left, but some time later villagers found the Hmong “hiding deep in the forest”. However, other locals claim that the Hmong never intended to hide in the forest. Hmong from Bolikhamxay believe that the Hmong were indeed attracted by the rich forest in the area. All accounts confirm that they ended up living in small huts on the Plateau, where they began conducting swidden agriculture. This group was unwilling to return when ordered to do so by district GoL officials. They had to be firmly told three times before they left, albeit unhappily. In the end, the GoL hired a truck to take them back to where they came from. As a Hmong official from Khamkeut told me, “They rented a vehicle to go there, but on the way back the people were returned for free.”

According to a former district official in Paksong, the Hmong were ordered to leave Paksong because at the time there were some Hmong rebel activities in northern Laos, and the ethnic Jrou (Laven) district officials were afraid that bringing Hmong people to Paksong might

lead to similar security problems there. In other words, in the eyes of the local GoL officials, the Hmong were linked as an ethnic group to anti-government rebel activities, even if there was no evidence to suggest that any of those who moved to Paksong had any association with rebel activities. However, just being Hmong was deemed reason enough to unfairly expel them from the district. It is particularly notable that other migrants from the north, including approximately ten ethnic Khmu families that are now living in Paksong town, have been allowed to remain in Paksong. This is because they migrated from the north to be near ethnic Khmu men who came to Paksong as soldiers or as senior officials with the present government. One even came to become district chief. These migrants, because of their close connections to the GoL and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, lacked any stigma linking them to Hmong rebels. They were not seen as security threats, and were thus approved by the district government.

The third group of Hmong to try moving to Champasak Province included four Hmong families, apparently all from Xieng Khouang Province. They arrived at Nong Hin Village in Pathoumphone District, Champasak Province, which is off the beaten track, located just north of Xe Pian National Protected Area and Laos' southern border with Cambodia. However, rather than renting a truck like the first two groups, they arrived by public transportation via Pakse. They stayed in the village for two months, although they reportedly did not socialize much with the ethnic Lao villagers. There is, however, one person from northern Laos living in the Hong Hin, and he may be Hmong. He probably encouraged the Hmong to move there. However, they did not have 'papers' for immigrating to Champasak Province. Furthermore, three years earlier four men had emerged from the forest near Nong Hin fully armed with automatic weapons. They asked for the man from the north who may have encouraged the other Hmong to come to the south. However, he was away, so they did not meet him. The four men melted into the forest and

were not seen again. Locals believe that they were Hmong anti-government rebels, although there is no evidence to support this assertion, or that they were even Hmong. Anyway, the lack of documentation and fears about their possible conduct resulted in the local government eventually telling the Hmong to return to Xieng Khouang. They unhappily abided by the order.

The Lao Government's Plans to Move Hmong to Southern Laos

The fourth example of Hmong migration from northern to southern Laos is quite different from what has been described. In around 2001 another group of 13 Hmong families were resettled with GoL support from Bolikhamxay Province to Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province. However, they did not come to the mountains, but to the relative lowlands just east of the Xekong River (Baird and Shoemaker 2008).

In late 2000 or early 2001 the GoL—as part of its drive to eradicate swidden agriculture—put together an Agriculture Development Master Plan for the country. It identified three provinces as still having substantial underdeveloped lowland areas with the potential to convert for wet-rice agriculture: Khammouane, Bolikhamxay, and Attapeu. The report led senior central GoL officials to create a plan that would result in large numbers of swidden cultivators from northern and central Laos being resettled into areas in central and southern Laos where lowland wet-rice agriculture could be developed. One of the key plan supporters was apparently Politburo member, and former Prime Minister, Sisavath Keobounphanh. As part of this grand scheme, the GoL had convinced five prominent Hmong leaders and their close relatives to move to Phou Vong District to determine the situation there. They were told that if, after a period, they found the conditions in Phou Vong favorable, they could tell their Hmong compatriots and then a much larger group of Hmong—rumored to be 100,000, mainly from Houaphanh and Xieng

Khouang—could be moved with central GoL support to Phou Vong (Baird and Shoemaker 2008).

According to ethnic Brao GoL officials from Phou Vong, the Hmong who moved to the district were quite happy with what they found. They were satisfied with the relatively large areas of available land, and after some consideration, they seemed willing to settle there permanently. The Brao, who demographically and politically dominate Phou Vong District, were also impressed with Hmong industriousness, as well as their abilities to successfully cultivate areas invaded by imperata grass. The Brao tend to abandon such areas, but the Hmong, they found, could do well there (Baird 2008). They were also impressed with Hmong hunting abilities, including their use of poisonous arrows.

However, the Hmong relocation plan backfired as relations between Hmong immigrants and some Brao in Phou Vong soured. First, some Brao found the Hmong to be generally unfriendly. They allegedly prohibited young Brao men from flirting or even talking with young Hmong women. The Brao were interested in raising the indigenous varieties of chickens that the Hmong brought with them. Some tried to buy chickens from the Hmong. However, the Hmong apparently refused to sell them any, unless they were dead. These special ‘Hmong chickens’ could only be raised by Hmong, they told the Brao. Conflicts also emerged when Brao people found that the Hmong had claimed particular forests and stream areas as their own. When Brao people from nearby villages tried to go to these areas, as they had often in the past, they were allegedly told by the Hmong that they were no longer allowed into the area. The Brao were unhappy that they were prohibited from fishing, hunting or collecting non-timber forest products (NTFPs) there. Some found the Hmong to be overly aggressive toward them, not very friendly, and unwilling to create good solidarity or *samakhi* with the Brao, although the Hmong

themselves were apparently strongly united. Misunderstandings and unfair stereotyping may have contributed to these impressions. Unfortunately, I was unable to ask the Hmong in Phou Vong their opinions.

In any case, the Phou Vong District government, which is dominated by Brao, finally became dismayed by the problems developing between the Hmong and the Brao. They were also influenced by Lao prejudices and unfair stereotypes against the Hmong, and feared that moving large numbers of Hmong into the area could lead to security problems, since once again, the Hmong were assumed to be linked to anti-government rebel activities. Finally, the GoL abandoned the plan to move Hmong people to Attapeu, and that the Hmong already in Phou Vong were asked to return to Bolikhamxay (Baird and Shoemaker 2008). Again, one can see how racialization, or the use of racially framed stereotypes to justify certain decisions and practices, has been crucial in keeping Hmong from moving as groups to rural areas in southern Laos.

But the Hmong in Phou Vong were not eager to leave. It took a concerted effort by Brao district officials to convince them that they had no future in Phou Vong. Seven families left in late 2002 or early 2003 (Baird 2003), but it took until early 2004 for the rest to begrudgingly leave (Baird and Shoemaker 2008).

Why Have the Hmong Tried to Move to the South?

It is hard to know why many Hmong have attempted to migrate to southern Laos. The reasoning of Hmong groups has probably differed. One might be tempted to link these movements to historical patterns of southern movement by the Hmong, but that would represent a too essentialized explanation. From the last example above, it is clear that at least in the case of the failed plan to move Hmong people to Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province, the GoL was

paramount in what happened. However, the reasons why the Hmong tried to migrate to Champasak Province cannot be explained by GoL efforts, as in all three of the cases presented here the Hmong came on their own, without GoL permission, possibly even against the wishes of the government.

One of the first Hmong to spend a considerable amount of time in southern Laos was none other than Vang Pao, who studied at the French Military Academy based on Dong Hene, Savannakhet Province, between 1950-2. Many other Hmong went to study in Dong Hene later, after the French colonial period came to an abrupt end in 1954.

Vang Pao later developed close ties with members of southern Laos' royal family, the Na Champassaks. Both the famous Hmong leader from Nong Het, Touby Lyfoung, and Vang Pao were close with the southern royals; Touby with Chao Boun Oum Na Champassak; and Vang Pao with Chao Sisouk Na Champassak. The Na Champassaks and right-wing Hmong apparently became close after both sided with General Phoumi Nosavan after the Kong Le *coup d'état* in 1960. Vang Pao was also closely aligned with Sisouk Na Champassak, because Sisouk was Defence Minister until mid-1975, and Vang Pao was the chief military commander in Military Region 2.¹³

One explanation for why the Hmong knew a lot about southern Laos has its roots in the war that raged on the Bolaven Plateau in the early 1970s. At the time, the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies were engaged in heavy fighting in southern Laos against Lao regular troops, as well as CIA-funded irregulars, and Thai 'volunteers' (see, for example, Briggs 2009;

¹³ On June 18, 1981, in Paris, France, Chao Sisouk Na Champassak, General Vang Pao, General Kouprasit Aphay, General Phoumi Nosavan, Houmphanh Saignasith, Khamphan Panya, Ngon Sananikone, and Inpeng Suraydhay (known commonly by Lao people as '*8 phagna*', jointly established the United National Liberation Front (commonly known as *Neo Hom* in Lao) in order to fight against the communist government in Laos. Sisouk had a stroke and died in Vang Pao's house when he was visiting Santa Ana, California from France in 1985.

Ahern 2006; Robbins; Conboy 1995). The Royal Lao Army and their anti-communist allies were not doing well, and while there was some back and forth, government forces were floundering and gradually losing ground to the Communists. One of the leading Lao army officers in Military Region 4, which encompassed all of the southern-most part of the country, was Colonel Samlan Singratchaphak, the brother of General Phasouk Soratchaphak (a.k.a Somly), the head of the military region from the early 1960s until General Soutchay Vongsavanh took over the command on July 1, 1971 (Vongsavanh 1981). In June 2009, Colonel Samlan told me that in 1970 or 1971 hundreds of Hmong from Long Tieng were transferred from Military Region 2, under the orders of General Vang Pao, to Military Region 4 to assist with military operations. It was hoped that their success in battle in northern Laos could ignite changes in the south.¹⁴

However, according to Col. Samlan the experiment was a dismal failure, and many Hmong died in battle in southern Laos. They did not fare any better than the Lao or southern Lao highlander soldiers already in the south, and to make matters worse, they were apparently demoralized and not happy to be in the south. Colonel Samlan said, “If the Hmong are in the steep mountains they can do well, but they are not good in the flatlands.” He also mentioned that part of the reason why the Hmong did well in the north was because they knew the terrain. That was not the case in the south. According to him, he personally assisted those Hmong who survived battle in southern Laos. He met them after they have retreated to Houay Kong, on the eastern Bolaven Plateau in what was Attapeu Province at the time (now part of Champasak Province). There was no reason for them to stay in the south, so they were sent back to Long Tieng.

¹⁴ *Pers. Comm.*, Col. Samlan Singratchaphak, Paris, June 2009.

General Soutchay Vongsavanh, who was a colonel in southern Laos at the time, confirmed that a small battalion of about 300 mainly Hmong Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) soldiers came to the Bolaven Plateau from Long Tieng in late 1970. However, he claims that they did not engage in armed conflict in the south, as Col. Samlan claims; instead, they apparently took up a defensive position at PS (Pakse Site)–22, since other military units were engaged elsewhere. General Soutchay recalls that they were based there for three months before returning to the north.¹⁵

The point is that many Hmong were on the Bolaven Plateau for a few months as soldiers. Thus, it is possible that this early exposure of Hmong to the Plateau contributed to Hmong understandings of the Plateau, as well as more recent efforts by Hmong people to move to Paksong. Certainly the Hmong soldiers who went there in the early 1970s would have noticed the pleasantly cool temperatures of the over 1,000 m above sea level plateau when they were there, and typically being good farmers, they would have also noticed the high quality volcanic soils of the plateau. They may well have thought, at the time, that given different circumstances, the Bolaven Plateau might be a suitable place for the Hmong.

Furthermore, many soldiers from Military Region 4 were sent to northern Laos to help support operations there in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was more common to send troops from the south to support northern operations than the other way round.¹⁶ Thus, southerners ended up interacting with Hmong soldiers in various circumstances, including in northern Laos, and it is likely that the Hmong came to better understand the geography of southern Laos through these relations. Essentially, the war helped expand Hmong consciousness about the geography of

¹⁵ The deputy leader of this group of soldiers was a Hmong named Vang Koua (*pers. comm.* General Soutchay Vongsavanh, 26 February 2010).

¹⁶ Thomas Briggs, *pers. comm.* 27 January 2010.

Laos and the region beyond what would have been common prior to the First Indochina War. In many ways, the situation is similar to Gerard Hickey's description of how the war in the Central Highlands of Vietnam resulted in people from many different ethnic groups coming together for the first time, thus making them aware of each other in ways that were not possible before (Hickey 1982). In Laos, as well, the Hmong, the Lao and people from other ethnic groups were brought together as a result of the war.

During the height of the war in northern Laos, many Hmong were displaced, and there was a lot of talk amongst the Hmong and others about where the civilian Hmong population should be moved. There were especially discussions around 1970, when large numbers of Hmong were being displaced due to the war. One of the options proposed was to resettle large numbers of Hmong in southern Laos, since the security situation tended to be better there. There was also talk of moving some Hmong south after the 1973 peace treaty. According to one Hmong informant in the USA, many Hmong were well aware of the Bolaven Plateau by the early 1970s. Some may also have been interested in the south of Laos due to the success of coffee cultivators in the Bolaven Plateau, and the interest of many entrepreneurial Hmong in developing commercial agriculture based on cash crops such as coffee.

Many Hmong also became aware of southern Laos through schools, film documentaries, and especially radio broadcasts. Dignitaries from southern Laos frequently visited Hmong populated areas, and some Hmong leaders, such as Vang Pao, visited the south on various occasions. Gary Yia Lee, a well-known academic Hmong Australian, remembers teaching about the geography of Laos in French to high-school students in Xieng Khouang during the 1960s. The emphasis was on the different economic activities important for different parts of the

country. Some Hmong would have learned about the upland crops such as tea and coffee that were being planted on the Bolaven Plateau.

It appears that the Hmong who went to Attapeu in the early 2000s did so on the encouragement of an ethnic Hmong Pathet Lao military commander of the *Pa Chay* Hmong military unit in northern Laos, Sue Yang, who was sent to take up a senior position in southern Laos in 2000 (Lee 2000). He apparently saw that there were many suitable locations for Hmong settlement and later encouraged his relatives to migrate from the north.¹⁷

Racialization of the Hmong in Laos

Hmong migration to southern Laos has so far been largely unsuccessful due to the racialization of the Hmong by some GoL officials in the south (both ethnic Lao and from other ethnic groups).¹⁸ The evidence suggests that some officials have unfairly linked all the Hmong, based on the social construction of an essentialized Hmong ‘race’, in which the Hmong are seen as inherently associated with rebels. This has resulted in them being categorized as potentially dangerous. This classification has occurred through essentializing particular stigmas of the Hmong linked to ethnicity and the Second Indochina War, even though these stereotypes clearly represent overly simplistic understandings of the Hmong. What we can see is a particular type of racialization, one that has caused people to become afraid of the Hmong, even when they have never encountered them, or have no clear evidence to suggest that they are a threat to them. I have encountered wariness amongst southern GoL officials and other common people in southern Laos when the Hmong have been mentioned in the past. The mention of the “Hmong”¹⁹

¹⁷ *Pers. comm.* Gary Yia Lee, February 2010. Gary Yia Lee apparently heard this story from the previous deputy Lao Ambassador to Australia, Sisavath Khamsaly, who is a Hmong from the Lee clan.

¹⁸ Although some officials are definitely prejudiced against the Hmong, I do not have sufficient evidence to suggest that all officials feel the same. Furthermore, levels of prejudice undoubtedly vary amongst individuals.

¹⁹ I have also heard southerners refer to the Hmong as “*Lao Soung*”, and less frequently, “*Meo*”.

frequently puts people on edge. Southerners may not always say anything, but the narratives that I have overheard clearly indicate how concerned many are of a perceived Hmong security threat. Certainly the general ignorance of southerners to the Hmong has made it easier for racialization to occur, as generalizations associated with race are often based on ignorance, leading to discrimination. For example, the Hmong have been stereotyped as jungle people who do not want to associate with others and are hardened rebel fighters. This image induces fear amongst some Lao people in the south, even if it is far from reality.

This sort of racialization appears to be occurring not only in southern Laos, but also in other parts of the country. For example, in mid-2001 I was in northern Laos, in Houay Xai, the capital of Bokeo Province, attending a training workshop for people from all the different ethnic groups in the province. It was part of a project designed to document all the ethnic groups in Bokeo. Tong Yeu Thao, the Vice-President of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), a prominent Hmong politician in the present GoL, and member of the National Assembly for Sam Neua at the time, was attending the workshop, since it was the first of its kind, and the GoL wanted someone in a senior position to watch over things.

During the second or third day, one incident illustrates what is happening in many parts of Laos. During a coffee break, one of the middle-aged male Hmong village representatives at the workshop approached Tong Yeu Thao.²⁰ He initially spoke with him in Hmong, but then switched to Lao, probably so others, including me, could hear his story. He was angry that ethnic Lao soldiers had come to his village and accused him and other villagers of being enemies of the country. One soldier apparently said, “The country will not be peaceful as long as there are Hmong people in Laos.” The Hmong man was upset by this statement, because his community

²⁰ Referred by the GoL as Tong Yeu Tho (not Thao).

had apparently always supported the Pathet Lao, and had no history of involvement in anti-government activities. He felt that the GoL should recognize their contribution to the Pathet Lao, and not accuse them as being the major obstacle to developing the country. So why were they now being categorized as enemies, and why were they being labelled with racialized stereotypes that tend to exclude them from being contributors to the Lao nation?

Tong Yeu Thao tried to calm the Hmong leader down, explaining to him that he should not be upset by the ignorant words of a junior soldier. It was clear from his response that this was not the first time he had encountered this sort of Hmong complaint. The view of some ignorant soldiers did not, he claimed, represent the policy of the GoL. He stated emphatically that the GoL recognizes the Hmong as having an equal role in developing the country. Still, the Hmong man was not satisfied. It took him a long time for him to calm down.

There have been other racialized moves taken against the Hmong. While the Hmong are well represented in higher levels of government, including in the central committee and Politburo, there have been various reports about not promoting Hmong military officers to positions of power, for fear that their loyalty to other Hmong might override their loyalty to the Lao state. Some civilian Hmong leaders have also been passed over for senior positions because of similar fears. This has apparently led to some tensions and frustrations. In around 2004 the military unit named after the famous rebel Hmong leader from the early 20th Century, Pa Chay, which was largely made up of Hmong and had been long-time supporters of Lo Faydang and the Pathet Lao, rebelled against the GoL because of complaints about Hmong and other minority leaders not receiving adequate promotions, or possibly over concerns about the military unit being disbanded altogether.²¹

²¹ *Pers. comm.* Gary Yia Lee, February 2010.

This same sort of racialization was certainly part of the reason why the Hmong from northern and central Laos could not stay in the southern-most provinces, particularly Champasak and Attapeu. It seems likely that had members of the three groups of Hmong that came to Paksong and Pathoumphone been from another ethnic group, the GoL would not have been so eager to have sent them back.

There is, however, more to this than simply the racialization of the Hmong. Remember that the Hmong have had considerable interaction with other ethnic groups, including the Lao, especially those living near them in northern and central Laos. While the Hmong are often treated as being simply ‘Hmong’—a single people living in many countries—the reality is that the Hmong in Laos differ from those in Thailand, and the Hmong in China from those in Vietnam, etc. They are all Hmong, but identities have been influenced by the social, cultural, political, economic and ecological contexts, including the nation states that they have found themselves enclosed within. Local differences within countries are also significant. Hmong interactions with others have undoubtedly had an impact on how they classify others, including Lao people. For example, one Hmong man who originated in Laos and now lives in the USA told me that Hmong sometimes had a difficult time dealing with Lao people from the south as southerners tend to be hot headed and difficult to deal with. He even said, in Lao, that “Southerners could kill others.” This view, I suspect, is not indigenous to the Hmong, but was probably picked up along the way through hearing northern Lao discourses about southerners. Thus, the Hmong may have sometimes come to southern Laos with their own prejudices against southerners, and this could have negatively impacted the abilities of many Hmong to gain good relations with southerners and thus successfully negotiate their continued stay in the south. Their

own prejudices may have clashed with those of the southerners, resulting in each side reacting poorly to the other, and stereotypes being reinforced rather than broken down.

Firmer Boundaries to Southern Hmong Movement

When I first started this study of Hmong movements to the south, I did not suspect that there was any concerted effort by the GoL to keep the Hmong out of southern Laos. I was not looking for a conspiracy theory. The GoL's efforts to move large numbers of Hmong to Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province indicated that at least at the highest levels of government, nobody was against the Hmong moving south. However, I was then informed by a friend who had lived near the Khammouane – Bolikhamxay provincial border for a number of years that there appeared to be more to this than met the eye. He wrote:

“As far as I can tell and have been able to learn, the GoL drew a line in the sand at the border of Bolikhamxay and Khammouane Provinces, and have said: "No more Hmong south of here". Hmong are apparently forbidden to move into Khammouane or points south. If the GoL has its way, their three centuries of southward flow through Laos is at an end.”

Upon further investigation, I found that Bill Robichaud (2005: 24) had written,

“In about 1996 [it seems likely that it was actually in 1995], when the Hmong village on the edge of NNT [Nakai-Nam Theun] (the southernmost Hmong village in the country) attempted to relocate further south, into NNT, government authorities forced it elsewhere, away from the protected area. Since then, no Hmong settlement has been allowed in upland areas of Khammouane Province or NNT. Centuries of Hmong expansion south are at an end, at least in rural Laos.”

The ban on Hmong movement to Khammouane was promoted, at least at one point, by the acting Governor of the province at the time, Southam Latthachack.²² He had heard that the Hmong village mentioned above by Robichaud had moved from Bolikhamxay to Na Vang in the NNT, in Khammouane, where they had begun clearing land for swidden agriculture. The governor apparently became angry and sent provincial military forces to Na Vang Village. A confrontation ensued. At least one Hmong died, and one source reported that a relative of Southam was claiming that four Hmong leaders from the village were killed. Prior to the battle there was apparently a tense standoff. Later, the group was resettled along the road between Lak Sao and Nakai, in Bolikhamxay Province.

I later learned that this was not the only incident involving the Hmong being pushed back from moving into Khammouane. A Hmong official from Lak Sao told me, in June 2010, that the Hmong from Pha Heua Village in Khamkeut District first attempted to cross into Khammouane in around 1989. They asked to live in a particularly rich area of forest, with abundant wildlife. However, the Khammouane government ordered them to return. An argument with officials followed, and the Hmong from Pha Heua overwhelmed the government officials and stole their guns. There was fighting and two Hmong were apparently killed. The Hmong official said, “The government would not let them move south, so people had no choice but to accept. Anyway, the Hmong like the cold climate of eastern Bolikhamxay Province.”

Many people in the GoL appear to be aware of the southern boundary for Hmong migration to the south unofficially set by local officials in Khammouane. It seems likely that there is an implicit understanding regarding this boundary, but that it has not actually been written down anywhere. Or it may have only been documented in internal Party or GoL

²² He passed away a few years later due to a heart attack. He was ethnic Thay Vang, a variety of Phou Thai. He was originally from Mahaxay District, Khammouane Province.

communications that I cannot access. Certainly, there is nothing in the Lao constitution that suggests that the Hmong should be restricted from living anywhere in Laos, including south of Bolikhamxay. Since the 1947 Lao constitution was created, the Hmong have always been considered full citizens of the country (Harvey 2009), including in the present constitution that sees those from all ethnic groups as equals, and prohibits discrimination against anyone based on ethnicity (LFNC 2005).

A friend provided a specific example relating to the Nakai-Nam Theun National Protected Area and excluding the Hmong. The GoL's Watershed Management Protection Agency has a branch office in Lak Sao as well as their Head Quarters in Nakai. There was a very dynamic Hmong staff member working in the Lak Sao branch. My friend wrote, "I once suggested promoting him [the Hmong staff member] and transferring him to the Nakai Headquarters, and the softly mumbled response was, 'Not possible. Hmong aren't allowed to live in Nakai'". This occurred relatively recently, in just 2008, so it appears that restrictions on the Hmong coming to Khammouane continues. The policy appears to be based on more than simply the whim of a single governor who had a dispute with one particular Hmong village. However, it seems likely that the policy did not originate with the central government. Instead, it may be based on the views of southern Lao leaders who, due to their unfair prejudices against the Hmong, do not want them to live in the south, even if that contradicts government policy or the country's constitution. The central government may be unwilling to stop this from happening. In fact, despite the appearance of having a lot of power, the Lao central government rarely attempts to force things on senior provincial officials if they are strongly opposed. Local government in Laos has considerable agency, despite outward appearances.

In May 2010, when I asked a Hmong government official from Lak Sao about the Hmong not being allowed to cross into Khammouane, he confirmed that this was indeed the case. When I asked why, he explained, “The people and government of Khammouane do not want Hmong people there, as they are afraid that the Hmong will destroy the forest. There used to be a lot of forests in Khamkeut too, but after many Hmong came much of the forest became imperata grass.” He continued, “It is fine if the family of a government employee officially moves to Khammouane, but this is not common.” It appears that this Hmong man has been heavily influenced by state discourses about Hmong agricultural practices, even though those discourses are distorted and inappropriately essentialized.

Some Hmong government officials in Vientiane are not happy about these restrictions. In one case, at a World Bank organized meeting in 2006 or 2007 and hosted by the LFNC, a Hmong deputy director of a department in one of the Ministries confronted the Hmong deputy President of the LFNC, Tong Yeu Thao, who was chairing the meeting. In response to some previous comments from Tong Yeu Thao, who stated that people from all ethnic groups have equal rights within Laos, the deputy director claimed that it was wrong for the Hmong to be prevented from migrating south to Champasak and Attapeu, apparently referring to the instances already described above. He pointed out that all Lao citizens were supposed to be able to live where they want.

The GoL, including the media in Laos (which is all State controlled) has been very careful not to make negative statements, or produce any negative media specifically about the Hmong, so as to reproduce the types of prejudice that already exists. In addition, I am not aware of any public reports that have negatively targeted the Hmong as an ethnic group. In Laos, causing ethnic rifts is considered a serious offense, although the GoL has made negative

comments about Vang Pao in the past, and to many, he is the well-known Hmong leader. It appears that negative prejudices targeting the Hmong are being reproduced through informal oral networks at various levels in Lao society.

Exceptions to the Rule

Apart from the Hmong already discussed, there are three other groups of Hmong migrants to southern Laos who have so far escaped comment. The first is made up of mainly elderly Hmong women. They can be found in various locations in southern Laos selling mainly plant-based traditional herbal medicines.²³ These women are especially prevalent at the larger markets in Pakse and Savannakhet. They frequently travel south in groups without men. Two Hmong women also regularly sell traditional medicines at the Lao Ngam District market in Salavan Province.²⁴

While these Hmong have been visible in southern Laos for many years, most Lao southerners do not appear to consider them to be a significant security threat, which contrasts with the other Hmong migrants already mentioned. This appears to be because these migrants have not attempted to take up permanent residence in the south. They are considered transient, and are therefore classified differently. Their numbers are also relatively small and they are thus not seen as threatening. Gender biases are also apparently important, with these medicine sellers generally not being seen as problematic because they are virtually all women. The boundary to access is not being applied equally for men and women. Furthermore, they are generally old, and age appears to be influencing the nature of the boundary. These women also tend to stay in urban areas where people are less concerned about the presence of ‘outsiders’ as compared to rural areas, where the other Hmong settled. This all adds up to these Hmong being able to occupy

²³ There are also many operating near the main post office in Vientiane.

²⁴ Ramsey Affifi, *pers. comm.*, May 7, 2008.

particular spaces in southern Laos. Part of the reason for their general acceptance may also be pragmatic, as many southern Lao people appreciate being able to buy the traditional medicines that the Hmong women sell. These Hmong women are not seen as directly competing with people from the south, and are providing a needed service. This makes their stay for selling medicine an apparently widely accepted practice.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the struggle over 'place' is often an important part of the dynamics between people from different ethnic groups in Laos (Baird 2009), and this example illustrates how Hmong women have managed to gain agency or control of space by claiming that their 'place' is still in the north of Laos, thus signalling to southerners that they are temporary migrants and thus not a threat. In cases when whole families have migrated into the countryside in southern Laos, they have been seen as being 'out of place', and thus their migrations to the south have not been accepted. This racialized spatial categorization already has a long history in Laos, with the Hmong having been referred to as *Lao Soung* (Highland Lao) for decades, as opposed to *Lao Theung* (midland Lao) and *Lao Loum* (lowland Lao). In this way, racialized categorizing has determined what spaces are appropriate for different groups, at least in the minds of particular people.

The second group are young men or women who marry into ethnic groups coming from southern Laos. They arrive as individuals, and are integrated into the families of their spouses. They too are not generally seen as a threat, and they are apparently not being restricted from moving south of Bolikhamxay Province. This is probably because they come as individuals, and are thus not perceived as a group threat. Crucially, non-Hmong appear to fear groups of Hmong much more than single Hmong. This is not surprising considering the nature of stereotypes in southern Laos about the Hmong. In addition, their marriage into non-Hmong families symbolizes

integration into the Lao nation, thus making them seem less problematic. The Hmong man living in Nong Hin is included in this group.

The third group is made up of temporary workers, both male and female. For example, a Hmong man from northern Laos has invested in growing jatropha (*mak ngeo* in Lao) in Taoi District, Salavan Province in southern Laos. He obtained a 1,700 hectare concession for a 30-year period in 2006, and has been allowed to stay in Salavan. He has also been able to hire a large number of Hmong people from Luang Phrabang Province to work on his plantation as temporary workers. Hmong people are apparently occupying all the senior posts in the company, but some are also working in lower level positions. However, these Hmong have largely not migrated with their families (although a few have), and so fall into the category of temporary workers. One particularly important factor, at least in this case, is that the owner of the concession is the grandson of none other than Lo Faydang, the Hmong leader from Xieng Khouang Province who became closely aligned with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and was considered to be a 'hero of the revolution' and even became a member of the Politburo for a period after 1975. This undoubtedly separates this Hmong concession holder from other Hmong, making him perceived as much less of a threat than other Hmong; giving him political capital.

The above examples speak to the reality that each boundary tends to have its own special characteristics. As is typical, boundaries rarely apply equally to all people, or all times, even when they are racialized. Boundaries may be almost impenetrable in some cases and very permeable in others. This may appear to be a contradiction to some, but this sort of scenario occurs commonly and should be of little surprise to political geographers. It demonstrates how a particular boundary has been applied selectively depending on the circumstances.

Conclusions

The Hmong of Laos are not all allies of Vang Pao; nor are they all supportive of anti-government armed resistance. While many Hmong were linked to Vang Pao's CIA funded army prior to 1975, most Lao people seem to be unaware that many Hmong were also aligned with Lo Faydang. But the racialization of Hmong identities in the eyes of many Lao people has erased this fact from their view, especially amongst those in southern Laos, who have had less personal contact with the Hmong compared to people in other parts of the country (although there are certainly exceptions), and are thus more ignorant about Hmong diversity. Unfair stereotyping has led to the production and reproduction of certain impressions that lead to the bundling of the Hmong as a people—regardless of village, family and personal backgrounds and histories—with Vang Pao and other anti-Lao government elements. This, in turn, has resulted in the Hmong generally coming to represent a grave security threat to those in southern Laos.

Others who are more familiar with the Hmong may not link them as much with anti-government activities, and may exhibit more nuanced responses, but some may still show racialized prejudices against the Hmong, due to the perception that the Hmong are different and difficult to get along with and administer. This may also be the case for some in southern Laos who came into considerable contact with the Hmong when they were soldiers in northern Laos, or otherwise found them in the north in Hmong populated areas. Others, however, get along well with the Hmong.

Unfair prejudices against the Hmong related to the perceived destructive nature of their swidden agriculture methods are also feeding into certain negative stereotypes that are working against the Hmong, even though the Hmong agricultural system was a sustainable practice when there was sufficient forests to maintain long fallow cycles.

The racialization of the Hmong by Lao people has had important spatial implications, including creating particular racialized boundaries, and leading to spatial exclusion, which translates into not allowing many Hmong to relocate to the south, with an unofficial boundary to entry being created along the Bolikhamxay–Khammouane provincial border. Political boundaries, whether written down or not, have had real impacts on Hmong attempts to move south. However, the spatial divide between the Hmong and others has affected Hmong people differently, preventing some from migrating south, but apparently being inconsequential, or at least negotiable, for others. In fact, this is typical of boundary creation globally, with boundaries throughout the world tending to be strong obstacles to entry for some people, at some times, and under certain circumstances, and being relatively permeable to others, depending on the social, cultural, political, economic and ecological circumstances they find themselves in. The situation with the Hmong, and the racialized boundaries to entering southern Laos that they have encountered, is yet another good example of how boundaries tend to be associated with contradictions and inconsistencies. These boundaries are, indeed, applied differently depending on the Hmong involved, and the circumstances of those with the power to influence Hmong movements to the south, or even to restrict them from entry entirely. The boundaries will change over time, and should not be expected to have the same function, or even exist, long into the future. Only time will tell as to whether the Hmong will be able to successfully migrate to southern Laos, and how the boundaries that prevent them change over time.

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About the Author

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