

**From Networks to Categories: Hmong Political Positionality, Mobility, and  
Remnant Subjectivities in Thailand**

by

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**Abstract**

This article discusses subjectivities of Hmong people (especially immigrants) as they are articulated to power networks in Thailand's space. Whereas some looks at Hmong spatiality have viewed Hmong people as a politically uncomplicated group in relation to the Thai state (Tomforde 2008). I fragment this picture exposing the mosaic of Hmong political identities in Thailand with some in positions of precarity and others in stability. In the chapter, I show how these positionalities are strongly influenced by a historical sequence of regional geopolitical and economic contexts which produce subjectivities as their corresponding power relations, immigration regimes, and citizenship categorizations act on the bodies of Hmong subjects. The road toward eventual precarity is marked by several signposts signaling conditions for the formation of power relations and their corresponding subjectivities which Hmong communities have made intelligible through semi-ethnic categorizations. I highlight differences in these autonymic categories within the Thai Hmong, Lao Hmong, and Vietnamese Hmong. Then I examine each group's mobilities as indicators of their relative precarity.

**Keywords:** Hmong, Thailand, precarity

For several decades, the cleavages between Hmong political subjectivities have been intimately affected by cold war conflict. Thai Hmong composed a significant portion of the Communist Party of Thailand's insurgency in the 1970s. Conversely, Lao Hmong support of the CIA backed royal Lao Government placed them in a network of military and governmental officials which included links to Cold War era power elites--especially Thai military and police. These links initially allowed them a less precarious place in Thailand's geography of power upon

arrival after the war and have given them varying degrees of citizenship and legitimacy--with entailing degrees of mobility. Over time, these power networks have destabilized and lessened in effectuality as the importance of Thailand's US-client status has diminished, and inversely the Thai state seeks regional economic integration with formerly estranged neighbors (especially Laos in this case). As a necessary part of building regional economic ties, The Thai Government must categorically preclude the possibility of Lao Hmong insurgent opposition to the Lao PDR based in Thailand. This motivation seems to drive Thailand's modus operandi to remove most Lao Hmong immigrants from Thai space leaving the remainder increasingly precarious and immobile, despite holding somewhat legitimate claims to refugee status. Relatedly, as ostensibly persecuted religious minorities fleeing Vietnam in the past decade newly arrived Viet Hmong immigrant's stories are seemingly unrelated to the Lao Hmong Cold War story. However, the Thai government's treatment of Vietnamese Hmong seems tempered by their potential to trigger new waves of Lao Hmong immigration into Thailand.

### **Introduction**

"Please help me brother" Lee pleaded, his words thudded on my chest but fell to the ground. There was little if nothing I could do to help this desperate individual who claimed to have been running from Lao spies for a year, taking Lee in a crisscross of migrations over the border from Laos into Thailand, across northern Thailand—Chiang Rai, Phetchaboun, Tak—and now to central Thailand only an hour outside of Bangkok. Lee now wanted to know where to go. I continue even now to receive phone calls from Hmong friends in similar situations in Thailand asking where they should go in Thailand to be safer.

This experience exemplified the precarity that logically concluded as networks were overcome by the government category of "illegal immigrant". I heard similar pleadings from

several other Hmong people I met in 2012 near Wat Tham Krabok Buddhist temple (hereafter WTK) in central Thailand's Saraburi province who would have, had they come ten years earlier, likely found access to networks of political patronage in refugee spaces and would eventually go to a third country. Instead they now face threat of police harassment and fear of deportation to Laos where they assume unfair treatment, abuse, possibly torture or even murder may follow. Lee's story sounded similar to many other Hmong tangled up in post-Cold War insurgency politics whom I had met previously. To some degree his story resembled others similarly persecuted for links to post-war insurgency whom I knew had already gained passage to a third country or were even given citizenship in Thailand following the dissolving of the Hmong gathering at WTK. However, at that point his claims to refugee status went unheard by formal institutions. Neither the Thai Government nor the UN would accept his application for asylum. The question emerges of why Hmong people with such similar life stories can be given different outcomes when they seek asylum, some granted salvation, others left in a state of precarity denied asylum or citizenship. In short, the answer is that some came to Thailand too late and found a different set of political conditions that allowed for their coethnics to fall into a wider category that would allow them to go to a third country.

In this article, I attempt to show how some Hmong face precarity and others find stability in Thailand. To answer this question, I view the tangled history of Hmong immigrants in Thailand with an eye toward understanding the tension between (1) Hmong immigrant group's respective levels of precarity (deep or shallow) in Thai space vis-a-vis their connection to state power networks, versus (2) their precarity (or lack thereof) in Thai space vis-a-vis their fulfillment of legitimate formal categories set by the state. I view precarity through the lens of

mobility. As they find themselves in or outside of formal categories, Hmong mobility is restricted or extended.

Through this lens, the chapter illustrates what happens to an individual's mobility in the shift away from a situation in which Hmong immigrants were provided some stability through a legitimacy afforded by wartime connections with networks of military and political elites (allowing some mobility), toward a situation of precarity due to Hmong people's unfitness for newly emphasized formal categories marked with legitimacy and illegitimacy in Thai space especially "refugee" or "illegal immigrant" (Supang & Tawin , 2011, p. 40). Though this distinction seems unsure at first, in that the government had not come down hard on whether Hmong were refugees or illegal immigrants as the UN negotiated with them (Supang Where UN negotiations with Thailand to accept refugees) These categories seemed to solidify partly to facilitate geopolitical negotiations of regional economic integration with Thailand's neighboring states, most notably the Lao PDR, whose favor was curried through Thailand's politics of cleansing Thai space of Lao Hmong insurgents (Chambers forthcoming). This more recent regime of cleansing state space of threats to regionalization is facilitated by the state's calculation and governing of Hmong bodies through categorization rather than considering the multitudinous network Hmong connections to political elites (especially military) considered in the past. In the end, it appears that networks of connections have been essentially overcome by formal categorizations to create Hmong immigrant's precarity in Thai Space and discourage the movement of Hmong bodies into (and out of) Thai Space.

This article lists five Hmong political positionalities with attention to the precarity and subjectivities formed within the power relations of particular historical contextualizations. This discussion emphasizes Hmong mobility in Thai space as a foil for understanding precarity. I

begin by discussing two groups of Hmong people firmly identified as Thai Hmong—*Old Village Hmong* and *Red Hmong*—who are more securely mobile in Thai space. Second, I discuss two groups of Hmong immigrants from Laos—*Camp Hmong* and *Cave Hmong*—who have likely experienced more precarious mobility than the Thai Hmong groups, but less so now since most have gained Thai citizenship. At this point, I consider an important change in the efforts of the Thai government to cleanse Thai territory of problematic immigrant elements. This happened sometime between when Wat Tham Krabok and Ban Huai Nam Khao were closed and was effectively the closing off of what I call *crypto-formal network's* ability to secure Hmong immigrants a place in what I call *refuge-ized spaces*. Lastly, the article turns to *New Hmong* from both Laos and Vietnam. This most recent group of Hmong immigrants is most precarious among these categories not really because of differences in their refugee experiences but because they came at a time when category is stressed over network in the management of refugee bodies.

### **Notes on Theory and Methodology**

Methodologically this research is based on both primary archival material and secondary sources, as well as ethnographic fieldwork. Admittedly however, my historical research done mostly in 2016 was heavily informed by earlier ethnographic fieldwork I did in 2012 and 2015, during which I found key cleavages in Hmong ethnic identities and political networks. This prompted an exploration of the histories that described the formation of these subjectivities. Thus, this article is meant to begin describing those subjectivities and contextualizing them, especially showing how the precarity of the undocumented Hmong experience in Thailand formed within a broader political economic and geopolitical context.

During a period of one year's fieldwork in Thailand in 2015 I spent six months traveling to several different Hmong communities—in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Phetchaboun, Lopburi,

Saraburi, Phayao and Nan—before finally focusing on one community for the final six months of my fieldwork. This itinerant form of ethnography (Novoa, 2015; Schein, 2000) allowed me to understand some key differences between different Hmong communities in Thailand, and get an idea of how similarities in subjectivities might have formed among segments of those communities. Three years prior I had spent a month and a half living in WTK completing masters research and doing preliminary PhD research, where I was able to get a grip on some aspects of political networks that allowed for the Hmong immigrants to function in Thai space with some degree of stability.

Attention to the mobility of my subject communities helped me understand their relative precarity in Thai space. Interviews were important in asking them about places that they could or could not go, how they moved, and how they felt in mobility. Similarly, I used participant observation to note their activities, tendencies (rationalized and not), and bodily affects as they moved in spaces. This attention gave me a window into their experience of precarity. Admittedly, I was most interested in the precarity of undocumented Hmong, but I was able to learn about this by comparing it to the relatively less precarious existence of other segments of the Hmong population in Thailand.

In terms of archival research, the leaked US state department cables helped my understanding of how US, Lao and Thai negotiations became real policy decisions regarding Hmong immigrants in Thailand, especially during the most recent Ban Huai Nam Khao period. The volume *Lao Hmong in Thailand* edited by Supang Chantavanich and Tawin Plaensri (2011) was very helpful for me in periodizing Thai government policy regarding Hmong immigrants. In this article, *precarity* describes the relative instability of Hmong people's claim to legitimate occupation of Thai sovereign space. Just as a precariously balanced stool limits one's ability to

rest comfortably on it, precarity limits Hmong people's ability to dwell in Thai space and make a home. This research discusses the relationship between precarity and mobility of the Hmong people and their perceptions of precarity in space. Speaking of the Hmong in Thailand, one may generally presume that mobile Hmong are less precarious. Precarity is related to mobility, but not necessarily in this simple way. For example, the lack of precarity experienced by a Hmong person possessing Thai citizenship and economic wellbeing might allow them to roam with ease across Thai territory. In contrast, the precarity of someone with no citizenship and very little claim to future citizenship status might force that person to flee frantically from place to place for fear of interdiction by agents of the state. Both individuals were mobile but one was experiencing more precarity than the other. The same can be said of stasis, in which a formally legitimate citizen can rest assured while a precarious individual may be in a stationary position stifled from movement by fear of venturing into hostile space.

Furthermore, Hmong people's place in space embeds them in networks of power relations which produce subjectivities like those highlighted by the categories described in this article. Though these subjectivities are numberless and complex there seem to be some similarities across the selected groups discussed here. These subjectivities hold a degree of endurance so even after a Hmong subject's articulation with the power network changes, a relic of former power relations remain printed on the subject. For example, an undocumented Hmong person without a driver's license learns to fear being caught while driving a car in Thailand. Such fear has inhibited several of my subjects from being able to drive and even effected their ability to drive even after gaining citizenship and a valid driver's license.

Although formal categories placed on Hmong bodies by the Thai government are important, this article discusses the Hmong experience of precarity within a framework of

changing relations of power directed at Hmong bodies and also notes informal categories which Hmong themselves recognize were inscribed on their bodies through power relations present at particular moments. So, this is a story of the categories the Hmong use rather than the categories created by the government. Particularly interesting is that the Hmong in Thailand very often categorize themselves based on this history of governmental categorization and movement. A discussion of these endonymic categories is necessary to make sense of the rest of this chapter; however, I should be clear that although many Hmong in Thailand are familiar with these categories they have not reached the status of a subethnic category in any formal sense.

Furthermore, though they are broadly used in informed discussions, there are a number of variations on the themes of these categories which are often improvised intuitively in discussion by Hmong people to describe categories similar to those listed. Furthermore, the lines between these categories can be blurred, with one person identifying with none or more than one of them. The primary categories are as follows: Old village Hmong (*Hmong Qub Zog*), Red Hmong (*Hmong Suav Liab*), Camp Hmong (*Hmong Soun*), Cave Hmong (*Hmong Qhov Tsua*), and New Hmong (*Hmong Tshiab*).

### **Policy Shifts, Covert Geopolitics, and Hmong precarity**

Some level of precarity and restricted movement has been a reality for Hmong people in Thailand refugee camps over the past four decades (especially for Lao Hmong immigrants) as many of them have found themselves successively at military camps, refugee camps, repatriation camps, detention centers, and the like. However, the precarity of their position as non-citizens, even illegal immigrants, living in Thailand has been thrice ratcheted up in 1988, 2003, 2009 in inverse correlation with the cascade of refugee camp closures. This divergence lines up with the market forward economic and policy imperatives of Thailand's Prime Ministers Chatichai



Choonhavan (1988-1991) and Thaksin Shinawat (2001-2006) that "turned battlefields into market places." Although such immigrants had limited legal rights to live in Thailand, from the late 1970s until 1988, Hmong insurgents were given Thai military support and allowed patronage through a variety of networks. Basing themselves at refugee camps along the border with Laos, these insurgents continued the battle against the Lao PDR and acted as a buffer against Lao encroachment. Or from their view, Hmong were given refuge in Thailand while they continued insurgent activities in Laos. Thus, Hmong refugees were allowed to stay in Thailand with some guarantee of protection and legitimacy of residence from the Thai government through patronage at the local level afforded particularly by more broadly connected military strongmen and local political elites. These connections afforded the Hmong a secret, crypto-formality as they lived at Wat Tham Krabok for a while, until they were cleansed from that refugee space.

Elsewhere, I argue that the movement toward increasing precarity of undocumented Lao and Viet Hmong living in Thailand at present is embedded in the broader geopolitical framework of Thailand's shift in policy orientation—from unilateral US relations to a multilateral regional approach (Chambers, forthcoming). This shift of scales and increasing precarity should be embedded within the frame of geopolitics surrounding U.S. Cold War policy in Southeast Asia. Despite Thailand's geographic positioning at the center of mainland Southeast Asia's five nation-states, it was not a cross roads for cooperation in the region. Beginning in 1953, the US, with intentions of making the kingdom into an anti-communist stronghold, sent aid and backing for Thailand's police and military that turned the country's authoritarian regime into a Cold War Era US "client-state" that shirked efforts at regional cooperation and stifled transparent national

politics (Baker & Pasuk; 2009, p. 146).<sup>1</sup> Aside from a narrowing of Thailand's foreign policy, this Thai-US cooperation (possibly cooptation) led Thailand's military and police (notably paramilitary organizations such as the Border Patrol Police and PARU) to assist the CIA in the 1960s and 1970s.

### **Old Village Hmong (Hmong Qub Zog)**

Firstly, *Hmong Qub Zog* (Hmong for "old village Hmong") refers to Hmong people who have long lived in their village in Thailand, and were some of the earliest to gain Thai citizenship. *Hmong old village* is a term frequently used in Khao Khor area in Phetchaboun referring to groups already living in the area when later Hmong immigrants settled.

Interestingly, usually one does not necessarily have to reside in their original village to be called Hmong Old village (old village Hmong), many of the Hmong living in Khao Khor were resettled there to be gathered during the communist insurgency for government legibility. Thus, the name Hmong Old village seems more to refer to the fact that they chose not to go into the forest to join the insurgency so they stayed in the old village rather than joining the insurgency. As such most Hmong living near Chiang Mai city would fall under this category as well, few of them joined the communist insurgency in the 1970s proving their loyalty. Inversely some of them began assisting counterinsurgency efforts taking positions in or allying themselves with the Thai Army. Of any of the Hmong groups I've listed, it appears old village Hmong are most likely to have citizenship and have had it for the longest. Their firm claims to legitimacy in Thai space is facilitated by sedentary positioning and legibility and has allowed them to become, I argue, the best integrated Hmong group in Thai society and economic relations. Because they

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1. For Example, Thailand's Prime Minister from 1980 to 1988 Prem Tinsulanond did not make a single official visit to Myanmar in his eight years as Thailand's leader.

often have well established land rights many are quite wealthy and influential. They are the least precarious of the Hmong groups in Thailand.

Interestingly Thai government policy toward Hmong immigrants began with a tendency to encourage Hmong stasis and bring them to settle in particular spots, though my opening vignette showed an individual frantically searching for a safe place to settle in a situation which Thai government policy was inhospitable to new undocumented Hmong immigrant settling. During the first half of the nineteenth century, undocumented Hmong people had begun moving into the mountains of Northern Thailand ((Prasit, 2010, p.13; Tapp, 1989) where they, like most southeast Asian uplanders, were living "during the period [...] in this area [...] before the creation of modern nation state when the present boundaries of countries had not yet been set" with little government intervention until the decades of the first half of the twentieth century (Prasit, 2010, p. 13; Scott, 2009). During the period proximate to the communist insurgency, although suspicion by Thais lingered about Hmong people's former insurgency and shifting cultivation practices (Pinkaw, 1999), Old village Hmong had increasing discursive claim on Thai citizenship as they became settled though the bureaucratic reality of this claim was often more hard-fought. "Hilltribes" were given attention through *Nikhom Chao Khao* and *Royal projects* (Geddes, 1979), and the Phrathamcharik missionization program (Prasit, 2001, p. 169; Wongsprasert, 1988; Keyes, 1971) which devoted considerable resources to uplander sedentarization, integration, and development. During the insurgency, Old village Hmong became increasingly, though not necessarily completely, legible or formally recognized by the Thai Government. Furthermore, though the geography of Hmong citizenship in Thailand was nascent and patchily implemented, Old village Hmong people's story and rootedness to their villages (seen as the homes of legitimate citizens) lent them traditional legitimacy to move in

Thai space even without formal citizenship and to eventually gain citizenship. At this point, it was only a matter of time before Hmong old village and all others who were born in Thailand would be given citizenship and subsequently be allowed to integrate into Thai Society as far as Hmong of the time were allowed (Prasit, 2009).

Noting such integration, Prasit acknowledges:

“that the kind of education arranged by the Thai state for highland ethnic people since World War II has contributed positively in many ways to the highland communities, for instance by helping to increase literacy and to communicate with state officials, and therefore to adapt themselves to a better quality of life; by broadening their worldview and thinking; by making them feel part of the same society as the lowlanders; and by fostering patriotism among the ethnic people. But on the other hand, the school system has had grave impacts on ethnic cultures, causing the villagers to lose their livelihoods and time-honored local wisdom. Youth who have gone through the school system feel less confident in their ethnic identities when living in a big city" (Nawarat, 2010, p. 44)

As such, at present Old village Hmong were eventually able to move through Thai space with relative ease compared to their Hmong coethnics though less than Thais. Gaining citizenship opens the way for one to get a driver's license and to finance motorcycle and car loans allowing the vast majority of Old village Hmong (most have citizenship) to attain mechanized mobility. One example of this is a former president of the Hmong merchant society of Thailand who began a business selling cloth in the 1980s not long after the end of the Communist insurgency. Seeing an opportunity to fill the important niche of cloth sales in the uplands, he began selling from a motorcycle he rode through the heavily rutted clay roads of the mountains surrounding Chiang Mai from village to village. His photographs showed his switch

to a well-worn Toyota pick-up a few years later. This beat up truck is now substituted by high quality diesel Toyota models commonly used by Hmong people of means in Thailand. He has opened successful storefronts in a central market area of in Chiang Mai City and elsewhere.

There's another example of a gregarious Hmong Old village vegetable merchant with a broad smile named Somsak. While sitting in the office of his vibrant vegetable produce distribution business, I asked him why he was so successful. He responded that Hmong people were the best at traveling and were able to make successful deals faster than Thais. He'd traveled the upland areas so many times that he was intimately familiar with the location and schedule of the crops of the Hmong and other ethnic farmers--especially Karen of whom his wife was one. He knew what they produced and when it would be ready to take to market.

Also, Somsak assured me that travel to those places was easy for him because he was confident on the roads. He not only knew the roads but had a good truck and was a capable driver in dangerous mountain areas where roads wind along narrow, pothole ridden paths or often unpaved clay or loam. Certainly, the areas that Hmong people traveled seem to be generally thought of as scary to most lowland Thai people. Many Thais have confirmed this to me, though a Thai friend who traveled the mountain roads surrounding Chiang Mai city making insurance estimates for a living gave me insight into what a lowland Thai considers dangerous would be comparably favorable conditions for some Hmong people especially those Hmong Old village who have been driving since their youth. This Thai struggled even on paved roads in the hills because he had not invested in an engine capable of handling steep grades and uneven surfaces. Although he frequently drove in upland areas he did so in a fairly broken down MV sedan. Neither the condition nor the make of his car prepared him for steep inclines and pothole ridden pavement. Most Hmong people especially Hmong Old village generally invest in a

Toyota 4-wheel drive diesel truck (Tiger or Hilux model) and keep it in good repair. The steady engine engagement and strength of a diesel engine helps minimize possible stalling that one cannot afford on a steep mountain road. On more than one occasion, I've bounced along dirt roads with gullies so deep the Toyota TRD package truck has tipped almost to the point of flipping while the Hmong driver blithely whistled and motioned for those riding in the back of the truck to jump out and start digging to balance the truck. This driver was so confident in the strength of his truck because he had tested its limits many times. As such Toyota trucks have become something of an ethnic marker for Hmong people not only in Thailand, but in most of the diaspora communities I have visited. And though not all can afford one there seems to be little question what type of truck should be purchased when the time comes to buy one. I only witnessed the wealthiest among HMAT leadership splurge on a truck so unreliable as a Ford or Isuzu. There is an expectation among Hmong family members that such a truck is needed for daily life so a great deal of group effort is put toward pooling money to finance these trucks.

Though Somsak didn't make his money simply because he had a nice truck. He depended on Hmong people producing crops which he could sell. Old village Hmong people are generally well positioned to successfully integrate into the broader Thai economy through producing upland cold weather crops that do not grow in the lowlands. Overall, they have a particular advantage over Thai farmers. Because the forest reserve was mapped by the Thai forestry department by uniformly following contour lines of Thailand topographical maps, mountain land is synonymous with the forest reserve. This mountain forest reserve space is off limits for cultivation for the majority of the Thai population (Vandergeest, 2009, p. 25). However, The Thai forestry acknowledges the royal projects set up to gather Hmong and encourage opium crop substitution as special allowances to the rule. This is especially the case

since the highly revered royal family have allowed upland inhabitants (including Hmong) to farm land in specific upland areas. Lowland Thai's rarely have similar claims to upland spaces (Forsyth & Walker, 2012). Because Thailand's upland areas are some of the cool weather areas this means, only upland minority ethnicities are now allowed to grow crops on the cool misty upland spaces surrounding the villages they have claimed. They grow profitable crops like strawberries, greens, and fresh cut flowers which do not survive in hotter lowland areas already dominated by Thai land control. Hmong Farmers frequently travel from their upland villages surrounding Chiang Mai to sell vegetables in the markets of Chiang Mai City, especially the market at *Talaad Mueang Mai*. On any given day, a fresh group of Hmong farmers set up shop from the back of their trucks in a warehouse amongst flows of Myanmar born Shan laborers wheeling bushels of vegetables here and there. While Hmong from surrounding areas of the city are well represented, a significant portion come from Mae Hong Son, Chiang Rai and other provinces.

This economic success facilitated by legitimate access to Thai space has allowed Old village Hmong to become increasingly involved in the cause of broader Hmong economic development, social integration and visibility/representation. They feel somewhat comfortable in the halls of power within Thai space and seek their place there among the country's leaders. In recent years, they have formed the Hmong Merchant Association of Thailand (HMAT), the Hmong Eighteen Clan Council of Thailand (HECCT) and the Hmong Women's Society of Thailand (HWST). Interestingly, unlike the preceding Hmong Association of Thailand (Samakhom Hmong Haeng Prathet Thai), which holds Red Hmong as important leaders), the HMAT and HECCT core leadership is composed almost solely of old village Hmong (most of which are Christian or Buddhist rather than Shamanist). Though each of these organizations has

its particular cause centered around Hmong ethnic improvement, these organizations' gatherings I've attended kept Hmong integration in the Thai nation as a constant subject, assuming the Hmong to be responsible, rational citizens as the normative stance. This echoes what Vandergeest has suggested was the shift from Thai citizenship based on difficult to attain standards of dharmic moral rectitude monopolized by the ruling class toward the present conception which sets modernity as the primary rubric for citizenship (Vandergeest, 1993, p. 142)

The Hmong Old village positionality is more mobile and can view space through the wide-angle lens of mobility throughout Thailand, even roaming internationally. Not only can Old village Hmong travel widely in geographic space, but they range socially and politically even serving in places of power. Hmong physical presence now spans the country from the obvious regions in the north to less expected parts like Bangkok and Phuket, as I've often seen highlighted in presentations at events sponsored by the HMAT (an organization lead by Hmong Old village). Members of the HMAT have traveled internationally for both business and leisure and do so on a regular basis. They are fairly easily granted passage, making their way to the US or China and so forth. Unlike the starry-eyed awe of a villager traveling for the first time, the frequent travelers among HMAT ranks approach travel with familiarity. One interviewee recounted experience with the extensive amount of time he's spent on business trips to the US state of Michigan, and offered me nuanced opinions of this destination, and tended to procedural details of his business as it interacted with the place rather than noting the novelty of the place in any naive way. Anticipating the opening of the Asian Economic Community (AEC) while speaking at an HMAT Banquet an ethnically Thai provincial official from Chiang Rai proposed that Hmong people are the perfect middlemen to connect Thailand to important areas of the



nascent AEC. He noted with excitement that Hmong people speak many of the languages and have family connections in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China.

Furthermore, there are concerted efforts to stress the development of Hmong people in Thailand. Promotional videos made for a HMAT Banquet event purposefully contrasted the traditional view that Hmong people are backward upland villagers with a modern representation of Hmong people who have taken their upland traditions to the modern context of urban Thai and international entrepreneurship. HMAT leadership acknowledge that many of its members have 'arrived' noting success in business, government, and civil society, including, law, textiles, beverages, entertainment, banking, engineering, etc. However, there are places they have yet to 'go'. A prominent Leader of both HMAT and HWST confided to me that there has not yet been a Hmong person on the Thai high court. He and others in the HMAT are working to send a Hmong person to the high court, in that some wealthy HMAT members are financially prepared and actively searching for bright young Hmong law students to sponsor through the long process of legal education requisite to serving in this coveted position. Interesting to note, despite assumed prejudices against Hmong people, these Hmong Old village leaders assumed it was possible for one of their own to occupy this coveted space of power, this is premised somewhat on their legitimate status as Thai citizens and would not have been possible in the past.

However, as noted in earlier studies, although most of these Hmong have been given citizenship they still feel discriminated against in some senses. This is even the case for wealthy Hmong among the Hmong Old village, despite their wealth or status among Hmong people they are not given the same respect or privileges as the Thai elite. They complain of being disrespected and treated commonly because they are Hmong. HMAT members have made postings supporting this position on the HMAT page of Thailand's more popular social media

platform "line." The postings showed a link to a Thai news report describing how a bus of Hmong people who (all holding citizenship and of higher-class status including government workers or *Kha Ratchakaan*) was pulled over and searched, they viewed this as discrimination based on Hmong ethnicity. It seemed the incident was tied with an implied prejudice against Hmong people (poor or wealthy) to carry contraband and illegal substances. Similarly, there was positive reaction when the government announced that it would reduce the number of *Dan Tamruad* (or police checkpoints) on national highways, several noted in postings that they often felt profiled for being Hmong and associated with drug trade. The reduction in these impediments was a welcomed change they hoped would reduce discrimination.<sup>2</sup>

### **Red Hmong (Hmong Liab)**

I shift now to *Red Hmong* or *Hmong Liab* (Hmong for "Red Hmong") which refers to Hmong who in the 1970s joined the armed insurgency against the Thai Government which was led by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and backed by the PRC, but later returned to normal village life in the 1980s. Because the CPT was backed by the Chinese, this group is often called *Hmoob Suav Liab* (Red Chinese Hmong) by their detractors. I opt not to use this somewhat derogatory term that includes 'Chinese' and instead call this group the *Red Hmong* to note their communist connections, which many of them remain proud of. I should be clear, however, that members of this group most often refer to themselves with the Thai term, *Hmong*

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2. Certainly, drug trafficking is something that warrants mention. Hmong from many groups have been linked to drug trafficking. According to informants this is something of an inevitable consequence of Hmong geographic context. Similar to Somsak's success as a produce dealer because of his heightened sense of mobility, young Hmong men in search of adventure and money use their knowledge of less traveled backroads and passages to transport drugs. They acknowledge that Hmong people tend to live near the border where drugs are trafficked. Histories of cross border trade and mobility make them the perfect candidates to transport these illicit commodities. What he did not mention is that former connections that the Hmong have had to drug trade (namely opium cultivation) in the past, might have predisposed some intergenerational connections with drug trafficking networks.

*Thai Phu Ruam Patthana Chart Thai*. This term meaning “Hmong Thai who join in developing the Thai nation” emphasizes both their ethnicity, patriotism, and commitment to national progress. This wholesome sentiment runs counter to the Othering accomplished with the ‘Chinese’ element evoked in the term *Red Hmong*.

In terms of the migration history into Thailand, this group is made up of the same Hmong found in the Hmong Old village category who were first to come in the nineteenth century from Laos into Thailand. Notably Nicholas Tapp wrote of events related to the Hmong involvement in the insurgency, noting the response of White Hmong to claims of a Hmong kingdom raising up a ‘vaj’ or ‘Huab tais’ (king or emperor) in the Thoeng district of Chiang Rai (1989, p. 78) in the 1960s. These Hmong were resettled through government programs lead by the military to several areas including Khek Noi in Phetchaboun; Phu Chi Fa, Chiang Rai; and Tak Province. Despite their past of armed opposition to the Thai government, they have been integrated into mainstream of Thai society. In fact, as I will explain most view their insurgency as a patriotic act which contributed to the status of Hmong in Thailand, ultimately improving Thailand more generally as a country. These Hmong were keenly aware of the inequality between Hmong people and the majority Thai population, the government had not built schools, hospitals, and roads in mountain areas yet the Hmong people there were now increasingly aware of their responsibility to pay taxes. They evince a righteous indignation at their treatment and have felt mostly justified in their joining of the insurgency.

I would like to pause here to consider a specific line of history within the broader cold war history which is the line of integration of Hmong and other peripheral peoples more firmly into the Thai State. It wasn't until after World War II when distance demolishing technologies-- aircraft, roads, telecommunications, and so forth--allowed for the Thai military to reach

mountain areas and meaningfully integrate them (Scott, 2009, p. 166; Keyes, 1971). Increased interactions with state authorities often gave Hmong people a sense of discrimination and hostility from Thai authorities and influenced many Hmong people to join the communist insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand (hereafter CPT). Although joining the CPT insurgency took the Hmong into the forest and outside of state legibility once again, this act prompted, as many former insurgents have reported, a reframing of formal Thai state interaction with Hmong people, in which the state begins to show respect to the Hmong. In this way, the armed struggle of black nationalists in the US is attributed to the granting of civil rights over non-violent methods (Churchill, 1998, p. 43) because their threat of violent opposition pushed the hand of those in power. During more than one interview with former CPT, I have been pointed toward the road and schools and reminded that none of these existed in this mountain area until after the Hmong CPT insurgency. Former CPT efforts to extend equality for Hmong have taken other forms. Some former CPT have worked to form Hmong organizations. The Hmong Association of Thailand, though made not entirely of former CPT, has some key members that were once prominent in the CPT movement. A former president of the Hmong association, Phor Luang Kerd, recounted an example of such efforts to encourage Hmong equality that the association successfully lobbied to have the derogatory term ເມືອວ "Meow" (meaning variously 'barbarian' or 'cat') replaced with the preferred term ມົງ "Monge" in official government documents and business. At first glance the fruits of this effort appear small, but the discursive story it tells fits in the narrative of progressive equality for the Hmong in Thailand and increased stability in Thai space for this set of Hmong people.

On the part of the government, the insurgency forced a concerted effort to bring the Hmong and other hill people under firmer state legibility and encourage their loyalty to the Thai

state. Previously, except for the appointing of a few Hmong leaders as Phraya in the early 1900s, this moment of CPT insurgency initiated the first real effort at formal recognition of Hmong people received in Thailand. Resettlement and royal projects were important to this effort. Now Hmong were becoming legible to and formally recognized by the state.

“As uplanders and highlanders alike fled into the forest or into the lowlands, five major refugee centers were established by 1971 in the provinces of Tak, Nan, Chiangrai, Petchaboun, and Phitsanalouk, in accordance with the policy spelled out by General Prapas at a news conference in 1968 that the hillpeople, in general should abandon their ‘nomadic’ existence” (Tapp, 1989, p. 36)

In my research communities of the Khek Noi, Phetchaboun and Phou Chi Fa (Doi Pha Mon), several villages were created during the period of the insurgency and shortly after to gather Hmong people in. Instead of the more traditional Hmong arrangement of fairly wide scattered settlements in the mountains, Kheknoi—now the most populous Hmong town in the country--or villages near Phou Chi Fa were government-built, off main roads, and closely gathered with very little land between settlements. Certainly, there were fewer places to hide and parameters could be surveilled. It would appear this increases government legibility of the Hmong. In Phou Chi Fa, Hmong families were mixed among both military and civilian Thai families often from the lowlands. The settlement was meant to be balanced for the reforming of Hmong behavior. The complaints of one of the original military officers to live in the area, hint that this reforming was somewhat unsuccessful from the original Thai military perspective. He asserted that the Hmong are still irresponsible (*mai raphitchorb*), selfish (*henkaetua*) people who overuse resources and only care about the propagation of their own. Evidenced, he noted, by their tendency to continue having many children.

After Russia aligned Vietnam became the Thai and Chinese governments' common enemy following the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, China's support for the CPT waned. This in combination with Thailand's order 66/2523 in 1980, which the Thai Government ordered CPT cadres to defect and eventually be given amnesty, diminished the CPTs capacity to continue an effective armed struggle. Thus, CPT members began leaving the insurgency in large numbers and returning to mainstream society under the amnesty promised. This shift of former CPT (Red Hmong) back into spaces controlled by the Thai government is marked by an assertion of Red Hmong's entitlement to Thai citizenship and legitimacy in Thai space. Every Red Hmong I spoke with on the topic expressed that they were always intended to be Thai citizens. They identified very firmly with Thai nationality and asserted that their insurgency was only a means to gain the same respect and access to resources and government services as their Thai compatriots (see, for example, Baird 2018). When they fought they fought with purpose and did not feel like traitors to their country.<sup>3</sup> And so this return was not a shameful return in which they hung their heads. In fact, they felt that even as insurgents they were patriots.

Certainly, the vast majority of this group remains in Thailand. They are mostly legible to the Thai state and have been integrated like their Hmong Old village compatriots. As such this group is now primarily concerned with social and economic development of their people rather than armed struggle. Similarly, very few, if any, *Red Hmong* are as concerned with cultural nationalist politics, as the Camp Hmong or Cave Hmong (see Baird, 2018). This reflects their relatively firm claim over the occupation of Thailand's space that their narrative provides.

Interestingly, though they hold citizenship and documentation, they are often the subject of Thai

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3. Though it is true that many enjoyed their life in the insurgency for the unprecedented level of equality they experienced. Insurgent camps they claimed, were largely self-sufficient and communally ordered.

suspicious owing to the communist insurgency of their past. Though from the under-nuanced Thai perspective this suspicion might be spread generally to all Hmong, the Red Hmong are aware of their specific legacy of assumed disloyalty though they consider themselves patriots. This might foster an over-compensatory tendency to prove one's loyalty or worth. Not only do the aforementioned narratives of Hmong unequal treatment and indignant insurgency sometimes combine to form ultra-patriotism, but several important leaders of this group have shown a tendency to stress their loyalty to Thailand, making sure to display photographs of Thailand's late beloved monarch Bhumiphol Adulyadej on the walls of their house, perhaps even more prominently than many Thais would. Relatedly, they have reverently narrated to me the visits of the king to their village as depicted in some of the photographs.

However, in an economic and social sense the Red Hmong as a group are sometimes slightly more precarious in Thai space than the Hmong Old village. Though Red Hmong make up some of the most prominent members of the Phu Chi Fa area, Red Hmong in Khek Noi have had less stable access to land than Hmong Old village, whom they've lost out to. In Khek Noi for example, Most Red Hmong have very little land to farm. Although they were promised land when they came out of the forest most of the land in the area near their village was taken by Old village Hmong before their own resettlement. Most report that they make their living farming ginger on rented fields in other provinces as far away as Nan. This likely lends to the narrative that Hmong in Thailand are the best Ginger farmers. A privileged observer might assume this is by choice, but Red Hmong have honed their ginger growing skill within a restricted structure. Lacking land in the Khek Noi area they have little choice but to rent fields outside the area. Families must travel to distant locations in order to find a field with a few important characteristics to ensure a successful ginger venture. Besides cost, soil drainage and field

elevation are important factors. Furthermore, fields are usually used only one or two years because ginger is susceptible to disease that builds up in soils. Thus, Red Hmong farmers will often leave Kheknoi for weeks at a time to complete farming tasks at their fields in places like, Nan, Lampang, Phayao, etc.

### **Camp Hmong (Hmong Soun)**

While the previous two groups would be considered Thai Hmong ("Hmoob Thaib" in Hmong), the next category *Camp Hmong* (Hmong Soun) are Lao Hmong in that they were born in Laos and later immigrated to Thailand after the second Indochina War. The word "soun" is short for the Thai term "soun obphayop" or refugee camp. This refers to the Hmong who came to Thailand after 1975 and lived in refugee camps along the border with Laos. Though they have lived with significant precarity during camp times and shortly after, many of these Hmong now have Thai citizenship despite often still being called Hmoob Nplog or Hmong Los Tsuas (Hmong Lao). This group is limited to those who lived in camps from 1975 to 1992. Most of these Hmong have by now left Thailand for third countries. Many Camp Hmong orient their future toward geographies of political reordering; ethnonationalists are common in this group. Their economic fortunes often seem less certain than their Thai born counterparts, but they often have overseas relatives who can help with capital investments. Furthermore, the lines between categories of Lao Hmong immigrants are especially blurred here in comparison with a few categories I have yet to discuss which include *Cave Hmong* and *New Hmong*.

Although the Thai government reluctantly received immigrants after 1975 (Supang & Plaensri 2011, p. 40), that Hmong refugees were recognized formally as refugees (somewhat at the behest of UN authorities) represents an important transition toward emphasizing formal categorization over localized connections as the modality governing Hmong immigrants in



Thailand. The formality of this recognition distinguished Lao Hmong from other Thai Hmong groups—including old village Hmong and Hmong CPT insurgents. Although virtually all Thai Hmong had come themselves or descended from those who passed through the territory which is modern day Laos their arrival was under a different regime of governance which had only recently begun making Hmong bodies legible. Lao Camp Hmong now arrived under a regime of a modern nation state which had begun formalizing the existence of Hmong people and categorizing them for government calculation especially since the CPT insurgency. As such, that these new immigrants fit a different category was significant and helped solidify the importance of category. The arrival of Camp Hmong (as well as other Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese immigrants) made the need for categorization clearer than in the past.

Hmong immigrant's formal categorization teetered initially between legitimate and illegitimate, but was eventually given stability before it was ended. The Thai government initially announced in 1975 that all Indochinese immigrants entering Thailand after August 1975 would be considered illegal immigrants (Supang and Tawin 2011:87). They had requested foreign countries consider receiving the immigrants. However, the UNHCR helped negotiate Thailand's acceptance of immigrants the next month. Again, with the influx of Indochinese refugees in 1977, the government threatened pushing refugees back to their original countries, but "after 1979's Geneva conference third countries began accepting Indochinese refugees" and the Thai government accepted refugees. However, the reception by third countries dwindled and the government threatened pushing new entries back at the border in 1980. Immigrants entering Thailand after the early 1980s (Supang and Tawin 2011:46) were ineligible for settlement to third countries. By 1988 Thailand was more decidedly cleansing refugees from state territory as they began patching relations with neighboring countries. Formerly, legitimate refugees either passed

to Third countries or were given citizenship erasing them as refugees. Those who did not follow these paths relied on blending in to the population or seeking protection from patrons and connections to military elites. In some cases, factions of the Thai Government--especially military--worked to grant them a form of secret or crypto-formality, which I will explain in my discussion of Cave Hmong.

Because the Thai government's formal position seems to have shifted from supporting Hmong insurgents in conflicts as recent as the Ban Rom Klao battle (Dec. 1987 to Feb. 1988) to cleansing them from state territory—when they changed battlefields to market places—the particular network of power relations Camp Hmong negotiated during and after the camps closed protected them against outright precarity. Upon dispersal of the camps, some Hmong political refugees who were not granted protection under formal refugee status became illegitimate inhabitants of Thai state territory. Thus, they have had to negotiate the restriction of their mobility. For many this precarity and restriction happened during the interim period between their arrival in Thailand until they gained citizenship in the years after camp closure or went to a third country, but this was not an immediate change for many. For those who never gained citizenship—as there still are many—this precarity continues into the present and can be seen in an individual's restricted mobility and nervous perceptions of space. However, as I will show here, some aspects of this restricted mobility are compensated for by utilizing existing cultural institutions and spiritual practices.

Beyond restricted mobility, Camp Hmong have faced precarity in the form of fear of targeted assassination. It is believed by many Hmong in Thailand that the Government of Laos is responsible for the killing of leaders of the insurgency while on Thai soil. The murder of PaKao Her in 2002 and Yang Kou in 2008 are just two examples of such actions. It is assumed

following the closing of WTK after 2005 that Thailand allowed for several assassinations of prominent Hmong figures formerly associated with the insurgency. Thai Government officials apparently opened borders to Lao agents. Some described a belt of land some 25 kilometers or Rasmi ຮ້າມີ in which Lao agents were allowed roam. Such murders were even noted in US state department cables. According to a US state department cable sent April 10, 2006, several Lao Americans were killed in Thailand (Embassy Vientiane [Laos], Apr. 10, 2006).

Life in refugee camps allowed for freedom of movement at times and restriction at others. Interviewees from Ban Vinai (the largest camp) recall that in the early days camp inhabitants were allowed to roam the area around the camp (in Pak Chom, Loei province). Later in their stay there, they were restricted from leaving the camp enclosure. However, freely at one time they may have been able to move, this was de facto freedom of mobility. They were not citizens of Thailand and had less legitimate claim to citizenship than their CPT of Old Village Hmong coethnics, they were less likely to possess a driver's license or register a car or motorcycle in their name. Although driving is a skill that can be learned later in life, the window had passed for many young Camp Hmong and skills became atrophied for older ones who had previously driven automobiles and motorcycles.

Not only were many Camp Hmong unlikely to have driver's licenses or car registrations, the prospect of traveling out on the road is simply as daunting. Interviewees recall that going on road trips before gaining citizenship and a driver's license would be constant risk. Certainly, they were concerned about being pulled over. They often decided to take back roads which are often less safe for lack of maintenance and mountain terrains. If one's car broke down or had any other issues, undocumented Hmong would have few places to turn for help, for fear of being penalized or extorted by police. This in contrast to the experience of Old village Hmong whom

I've watched happily dig their trucks out of enormous ruts in the road all while whistling a happy tune.

Two older Camp Hmong gentleman who had fought in Laos explained to me that they still had not received citizenship in 2015 despite living in Thailand since 1985. One explained, because he had mistakenly gone to work near the border on the day of his inspection he missed the opportunity for citizenship. In this position, he has not been able to get a driver's license. Though he had driven the most imaginable land vehicles during the war, he now only rides a motorcycle. Only his son has a driver's license and so he stays close to home only going to work in the field then returning home. He knows that if he leaves his subdistrict he is more likely to be apprehended.

So, without citizenship (*Sanchaad* in Thai) or documentation these older men use spiritual travel to ease their and other's spirits. Because of restricted movement their practice of shamanic ritual (*ua neeb* in Hmong) now often focuses on sending their spirits to travel the farther distances which their bodies cannot go. Though they both had been highly mobile and capable young men, as undocumented individuals they pine to see relatives and friends overseas, in Laos, and other provinces in Thailand. Somehow talking on the telephone is not enough. Instead in a shamanic trance, they spiritually reunite with distant friends and family members. One of them explained to me:

“When you don't have papers you just go to work in the fields and then you come home. You don't do anything else. Your family and friends...you can't go far to see them. You just go see the ones that are close. You can only talk to them on the phone [...] When you *ua neeb* you go far, when you need to you go the farthest, you go to heaven, you go to the clouds [...] It's like when you want to see to those who are far way like in Tak

Province, you need to *ua neeb* to go see them. You pass through the air on a horse you fly all the way over there. When you get down there where they are, you check to see if they are well and eating well or whether they have any aches and pains.”

Regarding a particular visit to a family member the other man explained:

“If we have friends in America then we can go and see them in America [...] I’ve already seen my aunt [...] she was sick. So a relative asked me to *ua neeb* and go see her so I *ua neeb* and go see her.”

This act is something that is more often done in proxy for others who are unable to visit family members according to these old fellows. He compared his ability to do this as something similar to scratching a friend’s back that cannot reach their own itch. Unsurprisingly they said that they more often asked to *ua neeb* to visit family and friends by Lao Hmong than Thai Hmong. Since Lao Hmong families have more often been separated by the mobility restrictions of formal illegitimacy.

This phenomenon is an interesting snapshot of social and geographical relations and precarity related to the shifting away from formal recognition of Lao Hmong legitimacy. Lao Hmong are far flung by this gradual ratcheting of formality and legitimacy in Thai space. These two men have obviously legitimate claims to political refugee status (both fought against the Pathet Lao then the Lao Government since the age of fifteen), were denied passage to stay here in Thailand while individuals like their aunts, who are only attached to their insurgent husbands or fathers, were given passage to a third country.

### **Cave Hmong (Hmong Qhov Tsua)**

This discussion of Camp Hmong brings up one important related category, *Hmong Qhov Tsua* or *Cave Hmong*. This name comes from their residence at Wat Tham Krabok Temple (WTK) which is named in Thai after the famous cave where the temple began. Generally, these Hmong were born in Laos and lived in refugee camps and are thus largely a subset of Camp Hmong. They were later forced to find a new place to live when the camps began closing in the early 1990s. Many of these people were hesitant to go to third countries, so they took up residence at the de facto refugee camp. Though they lived there under the cover that they were Thai Hmong who had come to Tham Krabok for treatment at the Temple's drug rehabilitation program, the settlement swelled to a few tens of thousands. Closure of the official camps in the late 1980s ostensibly cleansed Thailand of legitimate refugees. Again, in the early 2000s, Taksin's push toward further regional economic integration sent many Cave Hmong to third countries and to scatter from the WTK area ostensibly cleansing Thai space once more. Some in this group do not have citizenship. But many among those who were not allowed passage to a third country have often been given citizenship often under the guise that they were born in Thailand (Chambers, 2013).

Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan's market forward doctrine of "turning battle fields into market places" shifted the balance away from open support for keeping Hmong insurgents at the border. Similarly, recognizing Hmong (and others) as legitimate refugees by the establishment of the national government--including the military and civilian elements--was an obsolete commitment. Refugee camps along the border were broken up and their inhabitants were sent either to third countries, 'home' to Laos, or elsewhere in Thailand. Aside from the large group that traveled to third countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many took refuge at

WTK in central Thailand during the 1990s where they received patronage from the temple abbot (with his various military and state connections), but this option ended in 2003 when the Thai military inserted Red Beret special forces into WTK and facilitated the immigration of thousands of them to third countries and the dispersal of the rest. Unfortunately, the residue of Lao Hmong that were not actually living in WTK in 2003 (including family members that had temporarily left the temple for seasonal labor opportunities) and those that came after soldiers arrived were not considered eligible by Thai authorities for passage to third countries and have remained in this situation of continuing liminality and precarity.

WTK was not an official refugee camp and the Hmong there were not given formal refugee status. The official story from the temple that the Hmong were rehabilitating and from Thailand helped maintain an illusion that Thailand had cleansed its territory of insurgent elements. Actually, it seems very likely that military connections with WTK's abbot Chamroon Parnchand arranged for Hmong to stay at WTK. As I argue elsewhere (Chambers, 2013) certain powerful state factions recognized the legitimacy of Hmong claims to occupation of Thai soil. So instead of openly acknowledging that these refugees--who were reluctant to go to third countries--were still in Thailand--as formal recognition and establishment of a refugee camp would do, the refugees were secretly acknowledged by some factors of the government and given crypto-formality. Crypto-formality refers to a formality which is not fully voiced by all formal state organs nor interacts openly with formal state organs, nonetheless has some degree of governmental purchase.

The closure of WTK was the last moment when we saw the Hmong connections to authorities as useful to Lao Hmong as a group. After that moment, governmental categories like "illegal immigrant" or "Lao Hmong" would become more important than network connections to

elites in decisions regarding Hmong immigrants. This set the stage for the next place of Lao Hmong immigrant settlement at Ban Huai Nam Khao and Nong Khai where most people there were not granted refugee status or given passage to a third country and with most being sent back to the Lao PDR. After this time, the Thai government considered Thai space cleansed of the problem of Insurgent Lao Hmong that affected their relationship with Laos negatively. It seems Hmong at WTK were given some of the trappings of formal recognition of their refugee status without the formal recognition. In this sense, they were given crypto-formal recognition

In this fuzzy space of crypto-formality, Hmong people at WTK were looked at as a group in a refugee space. Some were treated as a refugee by virtue of being in the right place (WTK) even though their claims to refugee status were not as compelling. Inversely, despite legitimate claims by individuals not at WTK, they have been denied refugee status simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. This became apparent for several of my interviewees who were denied passage to third countries while at Ban Huai Nam Khao, though their life stories share similarities with their own family members who left to third countries a few years earlier. Or other young folks who came from refugee backgrounds and lived their whole lives at WTK but were denied refugee status because they had gone upcountry to work when the soldiers came to WTK they. Significantly, the rest of their families were allowed passage to third countries.

### **New Hmong (Hmong Tshiab)**

*Hmong Tshiab* meaning "new Hmong" is a recently created, more general category and thus is a less well-formed term than some of the previous categories. New Hmong refers generally to the Hmong who have come to Thailand after the closure of Wat Tham Krabok and do not have citizenship, as some of the Lao Hmong (Camp Hmong and Cave Hmong) now have.



Though some Lao Hmong now possessing citizenship might be called New Hmong. Some of these Hmong claim connections to the insurgency in Laos, as many are still in central Thailand. Many share similar lifestories as Camp Hmong or Cave Hmong. These are Hmong who had stayed at Ban Huai Nam Khao (known as *Dej Dawb* in Hmong) and were sent back to Laos in 2009, though it is believed they have not returned to Thailand (Supang & Tawin, 2011, p. 136)<sup>4</sup> many have come back. These people fall under the *New Hmong* category. Similarly, Hmong citizens of Lao PDR who have come to Thailand through work programs, overstaying visas etc. are considered New Hmong. On the topic of cleansing Thai space of problematic Lao Hmong, at present this group has no hope of gaining Thai citizenship or going to a third country. They await eventual cleansing. This policy has made any Lao New Hmong in Thailand essentially stuck. This blockage of flow is precisely the goal of the Thai Government (Embassy Vientiane, April 6, 2007) Firstly, based on the narrative that the deportation of Hmong believed to be only economic refugees at Ban Huai Nam Khao to Laos then somewhat secretively sending former insurgents to third countries (Embassy Bangkok, Oct. 30, 2007) formally emptied its space of political refugees (Hmong insurgents), Thailand can now restrict movement of Lao Hmong bodies into its space. That contamination associated with Lao Hmong in Thailand was not only a contamination because it embarrassed Thailand in the eyes of Laos, but its acknowledgement also allowed for a legitimation of Lao Hmong immigration into Thailand because it assumed there was a category of Lao Hmong who were unsafe in Laos, thus muddying the waters at the

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4. Here General Nipat Thonglek states that "An important factor was that since the beginning of the repatriation of the Lao Hmong back to Laos in May 2007 under the framework of the Joint LaoThai Committee on Border Security, there were none of the Lao Hmong who were repatriated to Laos that were smuggled back into Thailand again." I have interviewed several individuals who make credible claims to have lived in Ban Huai Nam Khao camp and have since come back to Thailand after an initial repatriation. To Gen. Nipat's credit, however, they returned to Thailand and remain in early 2019.

same time it attempted to clear them. Secondly, the UNHCR is currently not taking Lao Hmong applications for asylum. This even despite the very similar life histories of some of them to refugees who have already gone to third countries; some even come from the same families. But they came to Thailand from Laos after the door had been closed to Lao Hmong refugees. None of the Lao New Hmong I have spoken to have even been allowed an NI number which is the first step in the process of applying for UN refugee status. Because my request for an interview with the UNHCR staff at the Bangkok office was denied, I have been unable to determine the reasons for this. Considering their future geographies of mobility from within this positionality, Lao New Hmong have very little promise, thus they acknowledge that geography of their future mobilities is quite restricted. I imagine this was similar to what Camp Hmong and Cave Hmong felt in their situation before receiving citizenship, though they held some hope for their eventual citizenship or movement to a third country.

A very important group within this category of New Hmong are Hmong from Vietnam. It is most commonly understood and explained that Vietnamese Hmong have come to Thailand fleeing persecution in Vietnam. Viet Hmong are not required to live in Bangkok, but they tend to live in BKK because of its proximity to the UN office. So, some live in Saraburi and Lopburi. While many who believe they have a legitimate claim to bring to the UNHCR, there is a group which is no longer seeking protected status from the UN because they have already been rejected or they have no legitimate claim. According to the opinion of Viet Hmong at one community in Bangkok and elsewhere, although there had initially been success for Viet Hmong in gaining UN refugee asylum, based on informal surveys over my period of research this success seems to have tapered off more recently, with only a few gaining protected status in fits and starts. This was especially the case after 2012 when all Viet Hmong applicants were denied.

New Hmong mobility is a prime example of precarity in Thai space. Firstly, New Hmong have limited forms of documentation. Lao New Hmong have no documentation except work permits in some cases (but those are often expired). Viet Hmong might have UN documents, but it takes some time to receive this first set of documents. These documents indicate that they are currently being processed for protection by the UN. Those who are given UN refugee protection are given new documents for this status. Those that are rejected have one appeal process to pass through, but after a second rejection, their documents are no longer valid forms of protection. In such cases the Viet Hmong are again left in Thai space without documentation. However, because the Thai government did not sign the 1951 council on Refugees, even when one has recognition from the UN this positionality is still somewhat precarious even when they do have documents. Refugees under UN protection have been known to be taken by the Thai police and forcibly repatriated. As was the case with a group of refugees from China who possessed protection documents but were repatriated to the PRC

This omission on the Thai government's part has particular consequences for Lao New Hmong immigrants which I will discuss in a moment. Presumably, because Thailand can decide from which countries it will receive refugees, the government has decided that migrants from countries neighboring Thailand can only be processed in formal refugee camps in order to move to a third country. Refugees from further afield seem more subject to the UN processing. There are a number of North Koreans, Pakistani Christians, Vietnamese Montagnards, Uyghurs, Sudanese and other refugee groups who have reportedly been recently processed by the UN in Thailand. However, because there is no camp processing Lao Hmong, because Lao PDR borders Thailand, Lao Hmong cannot go to a third country. The government can decide to send refugees from Thai space at will as has been the case several times in the past few years. There is a

particular geography of the Lao New Hmong in Thailand. Firstly, the Lao Hmong stay in central and western Thailand. Despite the mobility usually ascribed to Hmong people, Lao New Hmong's travel is usually restricted.

From 1992 to 2004 WTK housed at least 13,000 Lao Hmong refugees in its forty-eight hectares situated along the steep cliffs that ring WTK's land. Several other estimates see that number as more than 30,000 at various times. The Hmong people that lived in the area in 2012 were only a small set of stragglers. Many of them have come to Thailand in more recent years and were involved in the Ban Huai Nam Khao repatriation episode in the mid-2000s. Several had connections with Chao Fa insurgent elements and thus fled Lao PDR forests within the current decade. Despite the Lao government's reassurances of a peaceful welcome, they remain particularly fearful of the possible persecution they would experience upon return to Laos. Despite claims that all the repatriated Hmong have stayed in Laos (Supang & Tawin 2011, p. 136)<sup>5</sup> many in the group have previously been repatriated only to flee Laos again (multiple times for some). Members of the most recent group who have left a repatriation village in Bolikhamsay province came after the suspected murder of a clan leader by Lao authorities, not to mention several other reported abuses. Despite intense difficulty, this group of several families remains scattered in small villages in central Thailand, unable to move to a third country and afraid to go home to Laos. They are in limbo. Furthermore, their movement in this area of central Thailand is restricted to certain areas of Saraburi and Lopburi province or other nearby provinces. In the

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recent past, such 'safe' areas afforded tenuous military assurances of protection from the police harassment that lies beyond designated boundaries. However, more recently even these areas have become subject to police encroachment and increasing fear.

Communities of New Hmong in rural central Thailand leave their new homes in central Thai villages usually for employment in a restricted set of rural provinces like Singburi, Prachinburi, Lopburi, Saraburi, and other provinces near home. They will work in those places in construction and agriculture for about a week then return home. Though the arrangement is risky it fits a pattern established since Hmong people lived at Wat Tham Krabok in the past. Hmong workers have recounted that Contractors in the area know Hmong people are hard-working, honest, and skilled; furthermore, their undocumented status forces them to take lower wages than most others. Besides working for lower pay, their lack of legal recourse makes them often subject to receiving no pay at all, even after weeks of work. Despite these risks, employment in central Thailand seems to have worked for Lao New Hmong in recent years as Thai police periodically tighten up enforcement of immigrant work restrictions in central Thailand and Bangkok even for those holding UN protection documents, except in Lopburi, where a particular set of military connections have protected New Hmong immigrants from police harassment (a protection lost once one crosses into Saraburi). In fact, the draw of jobs in rural central Thailand attracts many New Hmong living in Bangkok to travel to central Thailand for work opportunities and return to Bangkok periodically. Some participants in this cycle have recounted that they live in Bangkok for their children's education and travel to central Thailand to find work regularly. Aside from this necessary travel, most New Hmong in central Thailand stay near home. On most days, women in the communities in rural central Thailand, stay home with young children with

little to do but household chores and to, as I have been told more than once, ponder an uncertain immigration status.

Occasional trips for Hmong New Year celebrations or family trips are known to be made further northwest to Tak province or northeast to Phetchaboun province; however, most New Hmong I've met do not take traveling to the far north lightly. Very few would make trips to Thailand's far northern region including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and other provinces. Those whom I spoke with on this topic were usually primarily concerned with the perils of bus or train travel. The identification documents required to ride the train make it simply not a regular travel option. Furthermore, frequent stop-and-search procedures conducted by police and soldiers on the primary bus routes northward make this a very risky travel option. Similarly, taking a privately-owned automobile offers similar risks, and very few New Hmong have access to an automobile or connections to someone willing to take the risk to transport them. On temporary visits, once there, it is difficult to find a safe and affordable place to stay. New Hmong families are often reluctant to permanently relocate to the North unless they have strong enough family or clan connections

Going to Chiang Mai is not likely for Lao New Hmong. Although there are a number of Lao Hmong who have largely become citizens settled along the border with Laos, there are very few Lao Hmong who might be closely connected with the Lao New Hmong living in the central hub of the Chiang Mai area. There were only a few Lao Hmong families that were remnants of a short-lived Wat Tham Krabok-like (possibly crypto-formal) gathering of Lao Hmong at a place called Khum Naresuan in Pong Yaeng just outside of Chiang Mai city. Furthermore, new Hmong connections must be to individuals with strong political networks with local authorities (rather than national level factions in the government) ensuring to *รับรอง* (rap rong) or guarantee their

protection and reasonable livelihood scenario for them to warrant permanent resettlement. If they go North, they must have family or other connections ready to receive them there as a patron. But land is scarce and connections are expensive so without access to land, rural northern areas have less options for employment opportunities to draw resettlement. Also, important, is that interviewees have mentioned they are scared to live near the Lao border where they might be targeted for assassination or abducted and taken back to Laos, as mentioned in the cases of assassination mentioned earlier. Without citizenship like their Camp Hmong neighbors such a disappearance might go totally unnoticed, and would thus logically be more likely.

This however is not to say that there are no New Hmong in the North. I have interviewed New Hmong from Laos, Vietnam and Burma in the far north in areas near the borders of Burma and Laos in both the Northwestern province of Tak and far North in Chiang Rai. For example, one young undocumented Hmong man from Burma had lived in Tak for several years under the patronage of a local Red Hmong. I have met a young Hmong who was from Burma but was given patronage from a Red Hmong in Tak Province. This young man worked for his patron in exchange for his *rap rong* to local authorities. Viet New Hmong were not hard to find in the area. Furthermore, I met Lao Hmong in Chiang Rai near Phu Chi Fa. Their presence likely facilitated by the bordering condition of the area where illegal border crossings are a matter of course. Trails run across the border over the ridge of the steep mountainside that plunges from Thailand at its heights down to Laos where there is a village at the base of the mountain. Civilian Thais in the area show some ambivalence to performing border practices. A monk stationed at a Buddhist temple along one important cross border mountain trail once related to me how he sees Hmong people crossing over often. He thought of it as a natural consequence of the border. He was originally from Chiang Khong (an important border crossing area) so he had

a strong idea of having family and friends live on two sides of a border. Showing a consciousness of Thailand's border history, he lamented for a moment on the European influence in creating such an inconvenient border between Thailand and Laos.

Those Viet New Hmong who go to the north I found were often single men able to move about more freely. Those I met often left their families and took up with Lao Hmong women from neighboring villages just across the border. One of the men was reportedly a member of the community of Hmong in Bangkok but he had been kicked out for inappropriate relationships with the women in the community. Certainly, I was worried to press my questions with some Viet Hmong in situations where my interviewees might have been involved in criminal activity. I was assured by other Viet Hmong in Bangkok that the many of the Viet Hmong in northern Thailand were wanderers. Some had been denied UN protection status and moved to the north as a result. Some Viet New Hmong go north from Bangkok. Some Hmong in Bangkok told me that if they can't get asylum many of them go north seeking to blend in with Hmong communities there. Though some in the north claim to be totally honest with authorities about their undocumented circumstances, even forthrightly admitting being undocumented when stopped by police. Some come to the north because they were forced out of New Hmong communities in Bangkok. One Bangkok community forced one out for *tham poj niam* or euphemistically dealing inappropriately with the women of the community. There is significant community of Viet Hmong in one village of Northern Thailand. However, I was instructed by other Viet Hmong that if I were to visit this community I should always pass the bowl of food I was given to the next person to avoid being poisoned. I decided not to visit that particular community of Viet Hmong in the North, and so I cannot say much other than what I had heard that they had criminal connections.



I did however meet two Viet Hmong likely involved in illicit activity that involved frequent border crossing. I first met one of them on site where a Hmong movie crew was finishing the filming a feature film. He brazenly told me that he had come to kidnap the actress playing the film's heroine because he had heard she was a Vietnamese Hmong beauty. I assumed his use of the word *zij* reflected traditional Hmong meanings, not 'kidnapping' in the western sense. After claiming first that he was born in China and then second in Laos before finally untangling the lie enough to admit he was from Vietnam, he admitted he aborted his *Zij* (*kidnapping*) plan when he realized she was from a village near him in Vietnam and he had known her family. This first meeting set my hackles up initially, his likely illicit cross border activities (possibly including human trafficking or drug trade) were made all but obvious when he asked me clumsily whether I had access to EBay and whether I would be able to buy night vision goggles and chloroform for him. When I questioned him why he would need such unwholesome items, he told me that he had a special kind of work for which he needed them. If my assumptions are correct, that he has veered into illicit work is all the more tragic since he claimed to have begun his time in Thailand as a religious refugee. He was felt forced to separate from his wife and family as he reasoned the precarity of life as a refugee could not sustain family life.

## **Conclusion**

Though categories are always flawed and reductionist, considering the foregoing discussion of Hmong people within several endonymic categories, we can see the logic which produces significant differences in precarity and mobility among them. Those categorized as Thai Hmong—old village Hmong and Red Hmong—are more integrated and their standing in Thai society is fairly firm, Lao Camp Hmong and Cave Hmong often live with a specter of

precarity that affects their lives significantly. Lastly, New Hmong find themselves with little place to turn in negotiating their existence in Thai space. Furthermore, discussing these differences in light of Thai immigration regimes constructed by economic regionalization on the Southeast Asian mainland, one sees how the logic of cleansing Thai territory of problematic categories by the government at the formal level, not only allows for regionalization to march forward but creates a series of subjectivities which show some homogeneity in their levels of precarity and types of mobility. The closing off of pathways to formal legitimacy provided by network connections of the past have given way to stressing of formal category which viewed Hmong immigrants in narrower terms and with increasing disfavor over the years has gradually cut off options for new Hmong immigrants. So, I have answered my initial question about why immigrants from similar backgrounds--e.g. two individuals who were once involved in the post war insurgency in Laos--could end up at such different points of precarity--e.g. one now with citizenship the other living uncertainly in secret. The disparity can be explained not by complicated differences in the legitimacy of their claims to refugee status. Rather a simple general answer often explains the reason. The latter individual came to Thailand too late. However, questions about specific cases certainly remain.

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