

## Different Hmong Political Orientations and Perspectives on the Thailand-Laos Border

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Borders mean different things to different peoples. By now this is widely understood within academia, but there is still the propensity to assume shared essentialized perceptions of borders amongst groups based on ethnicity. Indeed, in Southeast Asia we frequently hear of cross-border solidarity largely based on ethnic and linguistic affinities.<sup>1</sup> In this short essay my goal is to partially upend such assumptions by illustrating how one particular border—between Thailand and Laos, in the relatively remote border between Mae Charim District, Nan Province, in northern Thailand and Nam Phoui District, Xayaboury Province in northern Laos—took on quite different meanings during the 1980s and 1990s. These differences existed not only between lowland and upland peoples, or between those in one ethnic group or another, but also between peoples who self-identify as being in the same ethnic group, and who speak the same language: Hmong.<sup>2</sup>

This essay demonstrates that different groups of Hmong people have considerable agency when it comes to the ways they view the same border. The shared history and

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<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, the Kachin/Jingpo cross-border signs of support in Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> A few hundred years ago, ethnic Hmong people began migrating to the south from modern-day Yunnan Province in southern China, fleeing conflicts with Han Chinese, or in search of fertile land to conduct swidden cultivation. The Hmong (frequently referred to as the Miao in China) crossed into present-day Vietnam from China. From there some crossed into what is now northeastern Laos and some traveled further west until they crossed into present-day northern Thailand. For more information see Robert D. Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: the “Miao” Rebellion, 1854-1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994) and Mai Na M. Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

language between various groups of Hmong have not prevented Hmong people in Laos and Thailand from aligning themselves with differently oriented political groups, thus leading to quite varied conceptualizations of the border. The Hmong in the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), being focused on the nation-state of Thailand, were never interested in challenging the existence of this border. Meanwhile, the Hmong in the Chao Fa Democratic Party, who were interested in establishing a Hmong state, viewed challenging the border as necessary for achieving their political goals.

### **The Hmong in the Communist Party of Thailand**

The CPT was first established in the 1930s, but it was not until the 1960s that it significantly expanded. It was also at this time that the CPT began focusing its recruitment efforts on rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Armed conflict began in northeastern Thailand in August 1965, and expanded to northern Thailand by mid-1967. Within a couple of years, the CPT had established “liberated” areas in a number of high mountain areas in northern Thailand, particularly along the border between Laos and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> Large numbers of Hmong people in northern Thailand joined the CPT in the mountains.<sup>5</sup>

Six liberated areas were established in Nan Province, Thailand. *Khet #6*, the southern-most liberated zone was located in a Hmong-dominated area of Mae Charim district, adjacent to the border with Laos. Between the 1960s and 1979, being adjacent to the border represented an important advantage for the CPT, since it allowed them to obtain supplies from China via Laos, send people to study in Laos, and establish storage areas and training schools on the Lao side of the border.

However, the situation greatly shifted in 1979 as the CPT became embroiled in the ideological and political conflict between the Chinese and the Soviet-aligned Vietnamese and Lao governments, siding with the Chinese. The Lao government ordered the CPT to remove all its facilities from Lao territory on short notice, and the border was closed to the CPT.<sup>6</sup> Thus, whereas being adjacent to the border had been a great advantage to the CPT for well over a decade, it suddenly became a potential liability. In fact, political tensions between the Lao communists and the CPT became so tense that there were concerns that the Pathet Lao might attack CPT bases on the Thai side of the border. Therefore, some CPT offices were relocated from eastern Nan Province to *Khet #7* in Pong District, Phayao Province, located somewhat farther away from the border.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tejapira Kasian, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas A. Marks, “The Meo Hill Tribe Problem in North Thailand,” *Asian Survey* 13, no. 10 (1973): 929-944; Ian G. Baird, “The Hmong and the Communist Party of Thailand: A Transnational, Trans-cultural, and Gender Relations-Transforming Experience,” in *Memories, Networks and Identities of Transnational Hmong*, ed. Ian G. Baird, Prasit Leepreecha and Mai Na Lee, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>5</sup> Marks, “The Meo Hill Tribe Problem in North Thailand.” Jeffrey Race, “The War in Northern Thailand,” *Modern Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (1974): 85-112.

<sup>6</sup> Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (London: Harcourt Press, 1986): 479.

<sup>7</sup> Chaturon Chaiseng, personal communication, Bangkok, July 12, 2017.

In 1979 and the early 1980s, the CPT suffered a number of additional blows, including China's decision to shut down the CPT's clandestine radio station in Kunming, China, and to cease providing material support to the CPT (Marks 1994; Baker 2003). This decision was made to appease the Thai government, which supported China in transporting arms and other supplies to the Khmer Rouge, who had regrouped along the Thailand-Cambodia border after the Vietnamese had invaded Cambodia and ousted them from power soon after invading at the end of 1978.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a Thai government decision—first in 1980 and again in 1982—to offer amnesties to all people within the CPT who surrendered to the government, also took a heavy toll on the CPT. Moreover, even after the Chinese stopped providing support, for ideological reasons the vast majority of the CPT still refused to realign themselves with Laos and Vietnam. Together, all these circumstances undoubtedly led to increased tensions within the CPT leadership and rank-and-file. By 1983, most of the CPT in northern Thailand had given up to the government.<sup>9</sup> The liberated areas in Nan Province, including *Khet #6*, were dissolved, and Bee Sae Vang, Chue Khai Xiong, and Ko Yang led most of the soldiers and civilian population to surrender.<sup>10</sup>

However, one group of CPT, made up of over fifty soldiers, about seventy families, and approximately five-hundred people decided not to give up. Although led by Comrade Su, who was Hmong, most members of the group were ethnic Lawa (Lua). They relocated to a place called Na Mao, on the Thai-Lao border, and initially took refuge on the Lao side of the border. However, the CPT was still not welcomed by the Pathet Lao, due to their previous support for China, and so they were forced to cross back over to the Thai side of the border. They held out in the border area until 1990 when they finally decided to surrender.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Chao Fa**

Another group that had a significant amount of interaction with the Thailand-Laos border in the Mae Charim District, Nan Province area was the Chao Fa Democratic Party, a messianic group made up of Hmong people, most of whom originally came from Laos and are followers of the religious beliefs of Shong Lue Yang, also known as the “mother of writing,” because he was said to have dreamt the alphabet of the Pahawb

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars: Clashing Armies and CIA Covert Operations* (Kansas City: University of Kansas Press, 2013): 399; Nayan Chanda *Brother Enemy*: 479.

<sup>9</sup> Kerdphol Saiyud, *The Struggle for Thailand: Counterinsurgency 1965-1986* (Bangkok: S. Research Company Co., Ltd., 1986); Thomas A. Marks, “The Meo Hill Tribe Problem in North Thailand,” 929-944.

<sup>10</sup> Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim District, February 13, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Hmong script.<sup>12</sup> This group, under the leadership of Zong Zoua Her in Laos and Pa Kao Her in Thailand, became one of the main insurgent groups fighting a guerrilla war against the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) government after 1975.<sup>13</sup>

The group was involved in fighting in the vicinity of the Phou Bia Mountains, the tallest peaks in Laos, after 1975, and later fought in Xayaboury Province in northern Laos, particularly in the Doi Yao Pha Mon area adjacent to Thailand's Chiang Rai Province in the early 1980s, after receiving training and military backing by the People's Republic of China beginning in 1979.<sup>14</sup> They were based at Lao Oo Village, in the Phu Chee Fa area in Thoeng District. However, they relocated their operations to the border with Laos in Chiang Kham District, Phayao Province in the mid-1980s, and then to Mae Charim District, Nan Province in around 1988.<sup>15</sup>

In 1988, the Chao Fa in Thailand, led by Pa Kao Her, established its base near the border with Laos in the remote forested mountains of Mae Charim District, with Thai military support, since the Thais still had poor relations with the communist Lao PDR government and wanted the anti-communist Chao Fa to destabilize Laos and also provide intelligence to the Thai military. The Chao Fa leadership set up their camp at Nam Kong. At that point, the CPT at Na Mao were being led by a number of people, including two Hmong men known by the revolutionary names of Comrade Su (Nhia Ja Sae Xiong) and Comrade Ka (Chong Pai Thao).<sup>16</sup> According to Comrade Su, most of the under one thousand people Pa Kao Her had brought to Nam Kong came from Ban Vinai Refugee camp and had little military training.<sup>17</sup> According to Yang Thao, the military leader of the Chao Fa, they started conducting raids inside Laos. Colonel Khamphanh was a Pathet Lao leader. The Chao Fa wanted to attack his unit, but because he was based inside Na Ven Village, an ethnic Lao village in Phiang District, Xayaboury Province, they had no choice but to attack them, which they did on October 31, 1988. The Chao Fa also became angry with the villagers because they threw a bomb from inside the village and injured two Chao Fa. Fighting continued for seven hours. In the end, 41 Pathet Lao soldiers, including Colonel Khamphanh, and some civilians were apparently killed, while only two Chao Fa were injured. The Chao Fa were reportedly able to obtain important intelligence documents for the Thai military, including telex messages.<sup>18</sup> While Yang Thao felt that the Chao Fa were justified in what they did, Comrade Su thought that the Chao Fa would not be able to win over the hearts and

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<sup>12</sup> William A. Smalley, Chia Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang, *Mother of Writing. The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Ian G. Baird, "The Monks and the Hmong: The Special Relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province, Thailand" in *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia*, edited by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke (London: Routledge, 2012): 120-151; Ian G. Baird, "Chao Fa Movies: The Transnational Production of Hmong American History and Identity," *Hmong Studies Journal* 15, no. 1 (2014): 1-24.

<sup>13</sup> See Ian G. Baird, "The Monks and the Hmong," and Ian G. Baird, "Chao Fa Movies."

<sup>14</sup> Ian G. Baird, "Chao Fa Movies."

<sup>15</sup> Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, Minnesota, July 11, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Yang Thao, personal communications, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.

the minds of the people by being so brutal with civilians.<sup>19</sup>

### **Visions Clash – The CPT and the Chao Fa in Mae Charim**

When the Chao Fa realized that their base at Nam Kong was not far from the CPT base at Na Mao, they approached the CPT, first to negotiate an agreement not to commit any acts of violence against each other. Even though they subscribed to different political beliefs, they had both been previously supported by the China, although neither anymore, so they at least had that in common.<sup>20</sup> In 1988, the two sides met and agreed not to shoot each other if they met in the forest. Pa Kao Her, Bijou Thao, and Yang Teng represented the Chao Fa, while Comrade Su, Comrade Chai, and Comrade Lawang represented the CPT. The verbal agreement from the two sides did not specify any borders between the two groups, so they could come to meet each other.<sup>21</sup>

In 1989, about a year after the two groups first met, the Chao Fa decided to move their base about one kilometer from Na Mao, claiming it was easier to enter Laos from there than from Nam Kong. Soon after, according to Comrade Su, the Chao Fa reportedly devised a plan to recruit some of the Hmong people from the CPT group. To start with, Zong Chai Lo, Pa Kao Her's deputy, asked Comrade Su and Comrade Chai to provide some military training to their soldiers. Initially, the two were hesitant, but because they were Hmong, just like the Chao Fa, they did not want to upset them. The CPT eventually hesitantly agreed but once they realized that many Chao Fa believed that spirits would protect them from bullets, through conducting a ritual that involved waving a regular wash cloth to prevent bullets from getting through, they became increasingly wary. Moreover, when seven Chao Fa showed up for training, they claimed that they could not lay down in battle because if even one of them did so all would end up being shot. The Chao Fa also burnt fake money in rituals after their soldiers went to battle. These kinds of beliefs went against standard military principles and the Maoist atheist orientation of the CPT. Therefore, Comrade Su and Comrade Chai felt that they could not train the Chao Fa and they discontinued the plan.<sup>22</sup>

Not long after, the CPT decided to move their camp from Na Mao further south in order to get away from the Chao Fa. However, the Chao Fa again moved their base closer to the CPT base, leaving the CPT leaders unsure of what to do. The Chao Fa then asked the Hmong in the CPT group to join them. However, the CPT Hmong were not interested in the Chao Fa's cause, which was to create a religiously inspired Hmong state, or federal system with a Hmong state. Therefore, when the Chao Fa proposed that the two groups join forces to establish a Hmong autonomous territory, or "Hmong state," one which would straddle the border and include some territory in Thailand and some in Laos, the CPT leaders made it clear that they were not interested in pursuing such a goal. They were focused on Thailand as a country, not on establishing

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<sup>19</sup> Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Ian G. Baird, "Chao Fa Movies"; Chris Baker, "An Internal History of the Communist Party of Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33, no. 4 (2003): 510-541.

<sup>21</sup> Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

an ethnic enclave. Their geographical imaginary was different. However, the Chao Fa prepared a written agreement in Thai that initially claimed that the CPT group was joining the Chao Fa. They proposed that the territory be from Nam Wa South and include all of Nam Phang Sub-district to Sop Mang, to which Comrade Su and other CPT leaders did not agree. They asked the Chao Fa to change the wording of the letter so that it was clear that they were not joining together. The Chao Fa leaders were not happy. Essentially, the CPT did not want to join with the Chao Fa.<sup>23</sup>

According to Comrade Su, the Chao Fa remained determined to recruit from the CPT group, but realized that regular means would not work. Therefore, they were apparently determined to make the CPT angry with the Lao military so that the CPT would have a reason to join the Chao Fa. They decided to do this by attacking some of the CPT themselves and pretending that the attackers were from the Lao military. The first part of the plan involved three Chao Fa visiting Comrade Su's swidden field. One of the three was a former CPT comrade in Phitsanulok Province. They stayed for three nights and pretended to be their friends. Soon after, Pa Kao Her reportedly ordered that the local Chao Fa-supporting families provide some rice to supply his soldiers during an upcoming mission into Laos. However, the rice was not consumed during a mission into Laos. Instead, it was used to feed Chao Fa soldiers sent to attack part of the CPT group in Mae Charim. The attack started at five in the morning when seven people, including women and children, were still sleeping in Comrade Su's swidden house. There were seven attackers, all heavily armed. Comrade Su was not there. AK-47s were fired into the house, and a grenade was tossed through a window, killing Comrade Su's youngest son, Daeng. A Hmong man named Lao Wang was shot as he ran ten meters outside the house with a pistol. A rocket-propelled grenade was fired at the house, destroying it. The children were able to flee, but one woman and one man were injured, and two males died. Those who escaped did not know who the attackers were.<sup>24</sup>

The next day, after the dead were buried, Comrade Su went to Na Mao. The Chao Fa's camp was located between the border and Comrade Su's swidden field, and he asked Zong Chai Lo why the Lao soldiers did not attack his camp before coming to his swidden field, since it was closer to the border.<sup>25</sup> Zong Chai Lo did not answer clearly, which made him suspicious.<sup>26</sup> He then met Ka Chue Chang, who was the commander of the northern Chao Fa soldiers.<sup>27</sup> According to Comrade Su, Ka Chue asked Comrade Su why he did not shoot the Lao soldiers who killed his son. Comrade Su immediately thought that Ka Chue was lying and that the Chao Fa were actually behind the attack that killed his son. Comrade Su did not say or do anything immediately, as he was demoralized, but just a couple of days later he and his followers decided to nego-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> According to Yang Thao (personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018), the Chao Fa were actually located inside Laos, although Comrade Su believes that they were located inside Thailand (personal communication, Nam Tuang Village., Mae Charim, February 13, 2017). In any case, they were very close to the border.

<sup>26</sup> Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, June 19, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.

tiate to surrender.<sup>28</sup> Yang Thao admits to meeting with Comrade Su and other CPT in Mae Charim, and for attacking Na Ven Village in 1988, but probably not surprisingly, he denies that the Chao Fa attacked the swidden house of Comrade Su.<sup>29</sup>

In any case, both agree that from 1992 to 1993, the Pathet Lao communist military determined that the force that had attacked Na Ven Village was located in Mae Charim and attacked the Chao Fa base, causing considerable casualties, including the deaths of Bijou Thao and Ka Chue Chang (stepped on a landmine in 1992) and forced the Chao Fa to dissipate and relocate. Many followers of the Chao Fa fled to various Thai Hmong villages.<sup>30</sup> The Thai military also reported that it was no longer supporting the Lao insurgency, including presumably the Chao Fa, beginning in 1990.<sup>31</sup> Yang Thao, the military commander of the Chao Fa, claimed that he left Mae Charim in 1994, and he came to the United States in the early 2000s after the Chao Fa leader, Pa Kao Her, was assassinated in Chiang Rai Province.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusions

This story illustrates how people from the same ethnic group, and who spoke the same language, came into contact with each other along the Thailand-Laos border on the Thai side of the border in Mae Charim District, Nan Province. Despite being ethnically and linguistically close, the two sides were quite different politically. The CPT Hmong were Maoists with a strong communist political orientation. They viewed the border as a place where they could be protected in the mountains, but unlike the Chao Fa who were interested in Lao politics, they were only interested in Thai politics, and were thus quite nationally oriented. There were still some tensions between the CPT and the Lao government, due to past politics, but the CPT did not have any political objectives related to Laos. Neither did they desire to create any sort of Hmong state. Today, the former CPT Hmong live in official villages in the same general area of Thailand along the Lao border, where they are now officially known as “*Phu Ruam Patthana Prathet Thai*” (those who join together to develop Thailand) and are fully recognized by the Thai government.

The Chao Fa, on the other hand, were not communist-oriented, even though they received Chinese military support to fight against Laos between 1979 and the mid-1980s. Instead, they were self-styled “freedom fighters” inspired by messianic beliefs with the goal of establishing a Hmong state or Hmong autonomous area.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, they saw the border in a very different way than the Hmong CPT. They wanted to fight against the communist government in Laos in particular, and they were interested in establishing a Hmong autonomous area on both sides of the border, which fit with

<sup>28</sup> Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Comrade Su, personal communication, Nam Tuang Village, Mae Charim, February 13, 2017; Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, MN, April 8, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> *The Nation*, “Official Says Aid to Lao Resistance Cut Off,” Foreign Broadcasting Information Service, July 18, 1992; Baird, “The Monks and the Hmong.”

<sup>32</sup> Yang Thao, personal communication, St. Paul, Minnesota, July 3, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Baird, “Chao Fa Movies.”

their religious and political beliefs. The Chao Fa are no longer in Mae Charim. Many have died. Some live elsewhere in Thailand and some have made it to the United States as political refugees. The relationship between the former CPT in Mae Charim and the Thai and Lao PDR governments have dramatically improved. They live in the border area peacefully and interact with the governments on both sides of the border without any notable problems. Indeed, the circumstances have shifted dramatically since the late 1980s.

Thus, the point of this short essay is to demonstrate that even peoples from the same ethnic minority groups such as the Hmong, who have similar linguistic and cultural characteristics, may end up viewing particular borders, even the exact same ones, in very different ways, due to major differences in political orientations and objectives.

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