Veterans from Laos: War, Remembrance, Ritual, Rank, Racism, and the Making of Hmong and Lao America

by

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Abstract

Hmong and Lao veterans of the Secret War in Laos in the United States have become less active in anti-communist activities, especially since the Hmong former general, Vang Pao, was charged in 2007 with attempting to overthrow the Lao government. Although the charges were eventually dropped, interest in veterans' groups and "US National Defense" groups has increased in recent years, as attention has shifted from trying to find a way to return to Laos victoriously, to seeking recognition from the US government for their contributions during the Secret War. Hmong and Lao veterans have used these groups to gain recognition within their own communities, and with American society more broadly; to gain military rank; to connect their service to the US government in Laos with their current lives in America; and crucially, to indirectly gain legitimation or to respond to racism that they have experienced in the United States. Some veterans are simply hoping for recognition; others would like to receive burial or other financial benefits.

Keywords: Hmong, Secret War, Laos, Veterans' groups

Introduction

In May 2012, we were in Anchorage, Alaska conducting research. We had been put in contact with some local Hmong from the Cha clan. One of the Hmong we met was Touger (pseudonym). He intrigued us with comments about his involvement in veterans' organizations and talk of revolution and return to Laos. A few days later, we resumed our conversation in Touger's home, where he showed us a number of laminated membership cards. The first was for one of the Hmong veterans' organizations that has emerged in the US in recent years: SGU

Veterans and Families Development of the USA. Another was for the United States National Defense Corps (USNDC). As we discussed his association with these groups, he made it clear that the two organizations were closely related. He also associated both with his membership in the resistance organization that General Vang Pao led, the United Lao National Liberation Front (ULNLF), in Lao, the *Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat* or simply *Neo Hom* (Baird 2013; 2014; Hillmer 2009). We were surprised, since these organizations are legally separate and have significantly different stated goals. The *Neo Hom* was a diaspora political organization established in 1981 explicitly to politically and militarily oppose the communist government of Laos.[1] However, none of the veterans' organizations are explicitly involved with these activities; they seek recognition and financial and burial benefits for veterans from the "Secret War in Laos" (1961-1975) in the United States. Furthermore, we saw no apparent connection between Hmong and Lao veterans' groups and the USNDC, an organization apparently supplying honor guards for military funerals and defending the US against security and natural disaster threats. Of course, many former leaders and members of the *Neo Hom* were present-day members of the veterans and national defense organizations. However, upon investigation it became clear that a complex nexus of organizational politics linked to high levels of Hmong and Lao American membership has emerged in recent years. Many Hmong and Lao veterans of the Secret War in Laos, their wives and children, and others seeking recognition through other avenues, have joined these organizations. Further confusion has been caused by the advent of national defense organizations, established by white Americans with no association to the Secret War, but

[1] In 2004, the name and official objectives of the organization changed to the United Lao Council for Peace, Freedom and Reconstruction (ULCPRF) "*Sapha Hom Lao*". This reincarnation of the *Neo Hom* focused on non-violent reconciliation but is generally opposed to the Lao PDR government (Baird 2013).

speaking about raising money for gaining benefits or recognition for Hmong and Lao veterans from the United States government.

After our visit with Touger, we studied Hmong and Lao veterans' organizations and national defense organizations, especially their significance to Hmong and Lao communities in America. Why and how have these organizations emerged and proliferated? What are their objectives? How are they significant to Hmong and Lao communities in America? How and why is memory, rank and ritual important? Has racism affected the way veterans' organizations and national defense organizations emerged? How should we understand the role of these organizations in identity politics and the making of Hmong and Lao America? How has the process of creating organizations led to factionalism and accusations of corruption, mismanagement, and usurpation?

As the first published piece about the politics of Hmong and Lao veterans' and defense organizations in the US, this chapter cannot cover every alliance and split that has transpired. We will, however, provide a general history of the development of the above-mentioned organizations, and an overall picture of the ways these groups interact with the Hmong and Lao communities in the United States, especially elderly first-generation former immigrants, now mostly United States citizens.

We have largely compiled the information included here through conducting detailed semi-structured interviews between 2012 and 2016. In particular, the first author did over 50 interviews during this period, and the second author conducted about a dozen. Since then, the first author has also conducted another dozen or so interviews and has kept up with attempts to build new memorials and advance new veterans' legislation in the United States. We have also benefited from observations made through attending various veterans and memorial events in

Minnesota and Wisconsin, and we have systematically kept track with media reports regarding Hmong and Lao veterans' issues in the United States.

We begin by providing brief overviews of the "Secret War in Laos" and the postwar Hmong and Lao political and military resistance to the government in communist Laos, information crucial for understanding present-day Hmong and Lao veterans and national defense politics in the United States. We then review the emergence of both Hmong and Lao veterans' organizations and U.S. national defense organizations increasingly populated by Hmong and Lao people. We then discuss the politics associated with rank and ritual, and how all of the already mentioned types of organizations are linked to present-day understandings and practices, both discursively and materially. In our concluding remarks, we state that the development of these organizations by Hmong and Lao in the United States are tied to political resistance in the past, but more significantly represents a crucial shift. Many have gone from trying to defeat communism and return to the homeland in Laos, to trying to legitimize themselves and their families as worthy and loyal American citizens (C. Y. Vang, 2010; H. Vang, 2010). We also argue that the emergence of veterans' groups can be seen as a response to pervasive racism, while at the same time it can be seen as a form of agency for those subjected to racism or otherwise looking for recognition and legitimation.

The Secret War – A Brief Summary

The Hmong migrated from southern China to parts of Southeast Asia beginning in the early nineteenth century, initially only occupying highland areas. In the waning months of World War II, France sent paratroopers into Laos to recruit those willing to fight against the Japanese who had seized their former colonies (Hillmer, 2009). Hmong *tasseng* (district chief) Touby LyFoung, himself educated by the French, decided that in fighting for the French the Hmong

would also be defending their own interests. However, other Hmong, led by Faydang Lo, whose family had lost the title of *tasseng* to Touby, sided with the Japanese (Lee, 2015).

Divisions also occurred within the Royal Lao Government. After Japan's surrender on August 15, Prince Phetsarath, viceroy to King Sisavang Vong, contacted all Lao provincial governors, insisting that none allow any interference by foreign powers in Lao affairs. The king, learning of these instructions, given without his consultation, dismissed Phetsarath on October 10. The prince and his two brothers, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, declared a new government and (rhetorically) deposed the king. Their Lao Issara (Free Laos) movement was, however, no match for the French troops who returned to Laos in 1946. Quickly defeated, the three princes fled to Thailand (Conboy, 1995). In 1949, Prince Souvanna Phouma accepted amnesty and returned to Laos, becoming prime minister in 1951. The early 1950s saw large-scale conflicts developing between Communist and non-Communist Hmong and greater economic and military investment by the United States. The French raised up "Indigenous Mixed Commando Airborne Groups," including about 1,000 Hmong. Despite American and French aid, Viet Minh forces came very close to seizing the royal capital, Luang Phrabang, in April 1953 (Hillmer, 2009).

On May 7, 1954, the French surrendered to Communist forces after the disastrous battle of Dien Bien Phu. Though the postwar Geneva agreement called for the withdrawal of all Vietnamese forces from Laos, they remained in the Pathet Lao-designated provinces of Houaphanh and Phongsaly. Over the next several years, the United States sought to use financial assistance to influence Lao domestic and foreign policy, and also provided military assistance to strengthen security (Dommen, 2002).

In August 1960, Captain Kong Le, a paratrooper in the Royal Lao Army (trained by American Marines under the designation "White Star"), led a pro-neutralist coup d'état (following a previous coup in December 1959 bringing conservative Phoui Sananikone to power), blaming foreigners for corrupting Lao politicians. This coup triggered tremendous concern and concerted action from US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the government of Thai military dictator Sarit Thanarat, and conservatives in the Lao military, led by General Phoumi Nosavan (Sarit's cousin), which established an opposition government based in Savannakhet, southern Laos, with Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak as Prime Minister. They agreed to send Bill Lair, a CIA officer and key advisor for the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP) since 1951, to support Lao people willing to serve as an anti-Communist guerrilla force. One key leader was Vang Pao, a Hmong lieutenant colonel in the Royal Lao Army who rose to become a major general and commander of Military Region II. Khmu, Heuny (Nha Heun), Iu Mien, and other ethnic minorities in Laos also joined the effort (Conboy, 1995).

Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Units (PARU) trained guerrilla forces in northern Laos, but the 1962 Geneva Accords led to the withdrawal of US military trainers and covert support (at from all outside powers. As many as 8,000 Vietnamese remained in Laos, claiming to be Pathet Lao; US personnel moved their operations across the Mekong to Udon Thani in Thailand. Kong Le resisted overtures from the Pathet Lao, entering into an uneasy truce with Vang Pao (Conboy, 1995).

On September 23, 1963, a secret meeting was held between Lao Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and US President John F. Kennedy, in which the former requested aid from the US to indigenous forces. JFK put the CIA in charge of secretly supporting guerrilla operations in Laos, though under the formal leadership of the US Ambassador (Helms, 2003).

Relations between Vang Pao and the Lao military were sometimes strained because of his minority status, the tremendous influence he wielded, the large amount of American financial and military support he received, the speed with which he rose through the ranks, and his willingness to put his troops in difficult battlefield situations. Vang Pao kept fighting, perhaps ill-advisedly, even as American support waned (Warner, 1998).

Although they engaged in some of the fiercest fighting and took some of the heaviest losses during the war, Hmong soldiers have sometimes claimed a disproportionate role for themselves. One often hears that they were recruited to fight on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, save downed American pilots, and guard American radar installations in Laos. First, according to former CIA Laos's chief of station Hugh Tovar, "the Hmong didn't fight in the Ho Chi Minh Trail… [T]he trail itself essentially plugged into Laos further south."[2] They did, however, interdict Vietnamese convoys along Colonial Route 7, a strategically important road (Hillmer, 2009). Second, while the Hmong rescued thirty or forty downed planes in the early stages of the war, and guarded the Phou Pha Ti installation in northern Laos, neither of these duties were foreseen when Vang Pao was first contacted by Lair.

Lao veterans often feel resentment toward Hmong veterans taking credit for their own efforts or the efforts of other minorities such as the Khmu. According to former USAID staffer Ernie Kuhn,

> "The Lao put up one hell of a fight...made an awful lot of sacrifices...and don't get much credit... There were entire [Special Guerrilla Unit] battalions comprised solely of various Lao Theung ethnic groups. There were T'ai Daeng groups amongst them. The officers were almost

[2] B. Hugh Tovar, *pers. comm.,* phone call to Mount Pleasant, PA , August 16, 2007.

uniformly [Hmong], but of the first four SGU units...at least two were predominantly if not fully [Khmu]."[3]

Well-known Hmong scholar Dr. Yang Dao, the first Hmong from Laos to receive a Ph.D. in France, has frequently stated that 40 percent of the soldiers in Military Region II were non-Hmong, something rarely acknowledged in the United States today.[4]

Moreover, when North Vietnamese forces pressed hard against forces in Military Region II, Vang Pao relied not only on Thai "volunteer" forces, but a completely ethnic Lao battalion, SGU 9, recruited from Savannakhet, as well as Volunteer Battalions 24 and 27 under the commands (respectively) of Colonel Khongsavan and Colonel Douangtha Norasing. Southern Lao battalions from Military Region IV were also sent to Military Region II during the war, suffering heavy casualties in battle. Moreover, most of the actual fighting along the Ho Chi Minh Trail was conducted by ethnic Lao and Mon-Khmer language speaking minorities.[5] In southern Laos, there were Heuny (Nha Heun), Brou, Brao and ethnic Lao SGU units (Baird, 2010; Briggs, 2009; Conboy, 1995;).

Though peace was brokered in February 1973 and a Provisional Government of National Union was established, including Royalist, Neutralist, and Communist representatives, Communists gradually gained the upper hand. The US was disengaged, and its former allies cut off. In October 1974, Communist forces near Sala Phou Khoun abandoned all pretense of cooperation and marched on the strategic town. Vang Pao led a counterattack and did so again in February and April 1975. Ultimately crossing swords with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who accused him of endangering the ceasefire, Vang Pao resigned. In the face of an encroaching

[3] Ernest Kuhn, *pers. comm.,* Stafford, VA , February 25, 2007.
[4] Yang Dao, "How did the Hmong people get involved in the Secret War of Laos (1961-1975)?" Talk, University of Wisconsin-Madison, May 12, 2012.
[5] Ernest Kuhn, *pers. comm.,* Stafford, VA, February 25, 2007.

enemy, in May 1975 he and two to three thousand of his men and their families were evacuated by air from Long Cheng to Nam Phong air base in northeastern Thailand (Conboy, 1995).

Hmong and Lao Political and Military Resistance to Communist Laos

By mid-1975, many politicians and members of the military were sent to "re-education" seminars. Those considered the greatest enemies of the Pathet Lao were sent to camps in remote parts of the country. Most had no idea what they were facing when they left their homes, but many were subjected to harsh treatment for many years. Some, including the king himself, most of his immediate family, and a number of senior military officers and politicians, died in the harshest of these camps in Vieng Xay District, Houaphanh Province (Kremer, 2003; Thammakhanty, 2004).

Over the next few years, tens of thousands fled Laos to neighboring Thailand. They were put in various refugee camps along the border with Laos. Many spent years in these camps, although large numbers gradually migrated to third countries such as the United States, France, Canada, and Australia (Baird, 2019; Scott, 1989; Thompson, 2010). Those who remained often resisted resettling, hoping to return to their homes in Laos, settle in Thailand, or assist the ongoing resistance against communism. Some feared third country resettlement, while others had no desire to leave until they reunited with relatives inside Laos.

The majority of veterans who migrated to the US and elsewhere suffered from various forms of anxiety and depression caused by the war itself, and the stress associated with being refugees in a strange land, or a combination of factors. They lost not only the war and their homeland, but also their lands, their lifestyle, and their status. Men who had been commanders and soldiers all too often became factory workers or janitors. While their children developed a

facility for the language and an understanding of American social and cultural norms, many veterans never became fluent in English and continued many of their customs and practices.

Some who suffered in the camps eschewed politics upon resettlement; others became extremely bitter, determined to continue fighting against the communist Lao government. Several insurgent organizations were established, most importantly the aforementioned *Neo Hom*. Others included a neutralist-aligned organization led by Kong Le, and another rival largely Hmong insurgent organization, the Ethnic Liberation organization of Laos (ELOL) or the *Chao Fa*, led by Zong Zua Her and Pa Kao Her (Baird, 2014; Yang, 2006). Other groups set up forest bases in various parts of Laos, engaging in guerilla operations against Lao communists and their Vietnamese supporters. Insurgent groups received financial, technical, and training support from sources including the Thai military, political groups established in third countries, especially the United States, and private anti-communist organizations and individuals in the US, Japan, Taiwan, France, and elsewhere. Thai refugee camps, especially Ban Vinai, became important "islands" of refuge and centers for recruitment and funneling of outside funds. The Chinese government also trained and armed a large number of insurgents, seeking to destabilize Laos and force its enemy Vietnam to expend scarce resources defending the government in Laos (Baird, 2013; Baird, 2014). The armed insurgency remained strong until Chatchai Choonhavan was elected as Prime Minister of Thailand on August 4, 1988, and soon after the government of Thailand adopted a more conciliatory stance with its communist neighbors at the end of the 1980s, and no longer tolerated insurgent groups using Thai soil to launch operations into Laos. Although pockets of armed resistance continued through the 1990s, 2000s, and in small numbers even now, especially among the Hmong in central and northern Laos, the insurgency has declined significantly. It was especially weakened when Vang Pao and a number of his

collaborators were arrested for planning to overthrow the government of Laos in 2007. Although the charges were eventually dropped, the arrest sent a clear message that the US government would no longer ignore the activities of Vang Pao and other anti-Lao communist leaders in the US (Baird, 2013; Baird, 2014; Hillmer, 2009).

Hmong and Lao Veterans Organizations in the United States

The first Hmong or Lao veterans' organization in the United States was the "Lao Veterans of California" (H. Vang, 2010), founded in 1991 by Lt. Colonel Wangyee Vang. According to Wangyee, Vang Pao did not initially join the organization. Later, however, when Wangyee visited him at his home in Santa Ana, California, Vang Pao relented. In 1992, Wangyee established the first national-level veterans' organization, "Lao Veterans of America" (Lao Veterans of America, 2002). Wangyee worked closely with Vang Pao, reporting to him regularly. The membership of Lao Veterans of America grew rapidly, apparently peaking at about 7,000 members nationwide,[6] although Shoua Yang (2006) reported that there were 13,000 due-paying members, and that there were 36 chapters around the country. During this period, Lao Veterans of America was closely linked with the *Neo Hom*, which Vang Pao led.

In 2002, Lt. Col. Moua Gao was reacquainted in Minnesota with a US officer he knew in Laos as "Major Nelson." Nelson suggested it would be difficult for the Hmong to gain US government recognition with the name "Lao Veterans of America". It was eventually agreed that "Special Guerilla Unit" (SGU) would link the organization to its direct support from the CIA, making the US connection clearer. Moua Gao shared this message with Hmong leaders, including Vang Pao. Despite Wangyee's objections, a new veterans' organization, "SGU

[6] Lt. Col. Wangyee Vang, *pers. comm.,* Fresno, CA, March 13, 2015.

Veterans and Families" was established.[7] The split was also apparently affected by a financial accountability controversy within Lao Veterans of America (Yang, 2006). Wangyee continued to lead Lao Veterans of America. One significant aspect of this rift was the removal of the designation "Lao" from being linked to veterans' activism in the United States. Indeed, Vang (2010) has written about how Hmong veterans' politics is associated with the assertion of Hmong American identity, something that worked better for "SGU" than "Lao veterans", at least discursively.

Further division ensued when it was discovered that all veterans' organization in the US required registration at the state level. Therefore, when a Lao Veterans of America branch registered in Wisconsin in 2002, it was legally independent from the national headquarters in Fresno. The organizations effectively split, to Wangyee's dismay. Nor Tou Lo, President of Lao Veterans of America Wisconsin when he was interviewed in 2013, reported a membership of about 2,000, but as some older people had died, it had declined to 1,500.[8] However, most recently, that number has declined further to about 500 (Uhlig, 2019).

Lao Veterans of America in Wisconsin has been somewhat successful garnering state recognition, but not in securing substantial material benefits. Still, members of the organization can obtain special Lao Veterans of America Wisconsin license plates and have an American flag draped over their coffins.[9]

In the mid-1990s, another veterans' organization emerged, though its membership has not been exclusively military. The "Lao Hmong American Coalition" was established by Yang Chee, a Hmong man from Denver, Colorado, after US Brigadier General Harry Aderholt contacted him

[7] Lt. Col. Moua Gao, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, April 15, 2015.
[8] Nao Tou Lo, *pers. comm.,* La Crosse, WI, April 7, 2013.
[9] Nao Tou Lo, *pers. comm.,* La Crosse, WI, April 7, 2013.

about organizing a veterans' event in Colorado. Yang Chee wanted to establish a veterans' group unaffiliated with anti-Lao government political activities and structured to include sections for youth, education, religion, veterans, and others. Yang Chee felt that veterans should be recognized because of their direct involvement with the United States.[10] Dr. Yang Dao in Minnesota supported the organization and advised the group until Yang Chee stepped down in 2003.[11] A number of Hmong leaders unaligned with Vang Pao or Wangyee also provided support. Vang Pao was invited to attend the organization's inaugural event in Colorado in 1995, but backed out at the last moment, offending a number of US military people. Later, Vang Pao strongly opposed the Lao Hmong American Coalition, probably because of its links to Dr. Yang Dao. Yang Dao, an ally of Vang Pao in Laos, had earlier joined *Neo Hom*, but decided to leave the organization and support reconciliation with the Lao communist government.[12] Thus, the political positions of Lao Veterans of American and the Lao Hmong American coalition directly clashed (Yang, 2006).

The Lao Hmong American Coalition hosted their first gathering in Boulder, Colorado on July 22, 1995. Many high-ranking US military officers attended, as well as a large number of Hmong veterans and their families. The organization began promoting the cause of Hmong veterans; on November 13, 2001, the US Congress officially recognized July 22 as Lao Hmong Veterans Day. Each year, the group celebrates this date (Lao Hmong American Coalition, 2013), although other organizations run by Vang Pao supporters do not recognize it. Yang Chee claims that the Lao Hmong American Coalition was the first veterans' group to specifically refer to the

[10] Yang Chee, *pers. comm*., phone call to Denver, Colorado, April 15, 2013.
[11] Dr. Yang Dao, *pers. comm.,* Brooklyn Park, MN, April 5, 2013.
[12] Dr. Yang Dao, *pers. comm.,* Brooklyn Park, MN, various discussions from 2011 to 2013.

"SGU". Yang Chee, never a veteran himself, was the President of the group from 1995-2003.[13] Since then Hmong in Wisconsin have led the organization.[14]

Interest in veterans' issues intensified after Vang Pao died on January 6, 2011. A few Americans who knew Vang Pao well encouraged his family to request Vang Pao's burial as an American military hero at Arlington National Cemetery.[15] Although it does not appear Vang Pao himself ever expressed a desire for burial at Arlington, the controversy surrounding the request and the US government's lack of approval became big news amongst Hmong veterans. Permission was not given because Vang Pao was not officially an American soldier, but a key general in the Royal Lao Army. Still, at least 28 foreign nationals have previously received the honor of being buried there (Quincy, 2012). In addition, some argued that he should have been considered an "American soldier", since the SGUs he commanded were trained, funded and advised by the CIA.[16]

Not surprisingly, much of the energy previously put into anti-Lao communist political organizations such as the *Neo Hom* has been directed into veterans' activities since Vang Pao's 2007 arrest. That is, before Vang Pao was arrested, Vang Pao often argued that the Hmong had been used and discarded by the Americans (see Hamilton-Merritt 1993), but later the narrative shifted to being more about how Hmong sacrificed for America. A significant number of Hmong and Lao veteran groups have emerged in recent years. For example, Cha Lee Moua in Sacramento established "SGU Vietnam Veterans" in 2011 after General Vang Pao died.[17] This

[13] Yang Chee, *pers. comm*., phone call to Denver, Colorado, April 15, 2013.
[14] Lee Neng succeeded Yang Chee as the leader but stepped down in 2009 due to illness. Dr. Chava Lee was elected the new leader. His only competitor was Joua Long Yang from Michigan. In 2011, he defeated Paul Lor from Colorado. He left the position at the end of the 2013. At the time, there were apparently 2,000 members in the organization throughout the country, of which he claimed, "99% are veterans and their families." (Dr. Chava Lee, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, November 22, 2013).
[15] Charlie Chang, *pers. comm*., Fresno, CA, March 15, 2013.
[16] Charlie Chang, *pers. comm.,* Fresno, CA, March 15, 2013.
[17] Cha Lee Moua, *pers. comm.,* telephone call to Sacramento, CA, March 28, 2013.

group has created branches in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, and elsewhere, although Cha Lee Moua is no longer the leader of the group.[18]

Hmong-dominated veterans' organizations have received by far the most attention and media coverage over the last few decades (The Associated Press, 2013; Chin, 2012; Corica, 2013; Doyle, 2013; Fresno Bee, 2013; Kalin, 2013; Magagnina, 2013a; Magagnina, 2013b; Moua, 2013; Sheboygan Press Media, 2013; Vang, 2012), but ethnic Lao have also begun to be noticed. Col. Khao Inxixiengmay, from the Twin Cities in Minnesota, was one of the first to set up a Lao veterans' group. After noticing that Hmong but not Lao were receiving recognition, in 2006 he met with US Congresswoman Betty McCollum (D-Minn). She advised him to avoid accusing the Hmong of exaggerating their military role, but instead to advocate more for the Lao. He established the "Royal Lao Veterans of America" organization in 2008,[19] based in Minnesota, but operating nationally (Royal Lao Veterans of America, 2013). According to Col. Khao, since all the major veterans' organizations had been dominated by Hmong veterans, he set up an organization profiling the contributions of ethnic Lao veterans. He claimed 500 members in 2013, mainly ethnic Lao and from various Mon-Khmer language speaking ethnic groups collectively known as "Lao Theung." There are no or very few Hmong members.[20]

Elgin, Illinois is home to one of the US's largest ethnic Lao communities and also "Lao American Veterans Association of Illinois" (*Samakhom Nak Lop Kao Lao American – Illinois*), established in 2010.[21] All 56 members are also members of the one of the national defense organizations described below, the United States National Defense Corps (USNDC). This group

[18] Bounchanh Chang, *pers. comm*., Green Bay, WI, March 15, 2015.
[19] Col. Khao Inxixiengmay, *pers. comm.,* Brooklyn Park, MN, April 6, 2013.
[20] Col. Khao Inxixiengmay, *pers. comm.,* Brooklyn Park, MN, April 6, 2013.
[21] Prior to that, Col. Hatsady registered a branch of Lao Veterans in America in Illinois, possibly as early as 1985, but it was dissolved in 2011 (Em Ramankoun, *pers. comm.,* Elgin, Illinois, December 30, 2014).

has become quite active and successful, especially in gaining recognition. For example, the State Legislature made July 19 "Lao Veterans Day" in Illinois. (On July 19, 1949, the French colonial government handed Laos partial control over its military.) The group also dedicated a memorial stone and plaque placed in the veteran's park in Elgin on July 19, 2014.[22] The ceremony's highlight was the participation of then-Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth (D-Illinois), who was born in Thailand but served in the US military, losing both her legs in combat during the Iraq War.[23] Like Hmong memorials, the Lao Veterans' memorial in Elgin emphasizes Lao veteran support for the US war effort, including rescuing American pilots.

In addition, Khambang Sibounheuang, a Lao veteran from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, established a quasi-veterans' organization, the "Royale Lao Airborne" (RLA) on September 3, 2001. Unlike other groups, RLA focuses on conducting drills and parachuting from airplanes. It has members in several states, including some white members. Khambang previously represented Kong Le's neutralist post-1975 anti-Lao communist resistance organization in the US and was involved in unsuccessful attempts to rescue "Missing in Action" American military personnel allegedly inside Laos in the 1980s.

Many other Lao veterans' organizations have been established in recent years. For example, we heard of a Lao pilots' association, and another devoted to veteran police from Laos. The rise in Hmong veterans' organizations is paralleled by similar increases in both Lao and Hmong membership in national defense-type groups. Some groups have only been organized to bring veterans together, not to participate in advocacy. Others, however, have been lobbying for various types of recognition and material support from federal and state governments in the United States.

[22] They raised US$12,000.
[23] Em Ramankoun and other members of group, *pers. comm.,* Elgin, Illinois, December 30, 2014.

As described above, in the early 2000s Vang Pao supported "SGU Veterans and Families", the offshoot of Lao Veterans of America, eliciting conflict with Wangyee Vang. Between July 2004 and November 2006 SGU Veterans and Families was led by Lt. Col. Moua Gao, the son of the famous Hmong Colonel Cher Pao Moua, key field commander for the *Neo Hom* in Laos in the 1980s. Some veterans complained that Moua Gao made insufficient progress to gain recognition for veterans. He noted that veterans from the Philippines took over 50 years to gain recognition from the US government.[24] After Moua's term ended, Chue Chou Cha succeeded him. However, by 2008 Chue Chou was also a leader in a "national defense" group. He was asked to step down when his two-year term ended in 2008, just as Moua Gao had. Eventually forced out of the organization, Cha established the similarly named "SGU Veterans and Families Development of the USA".[25]

"National Defense" Organizations and the Hmong and the Lao in the United States

A number of quasi-national security volunteer organizations have been established in recent years, and like their predecessors, these groups have splintered and expanded in number. The first is "The United States Volunteers" (USV), which focused on providing funeral rites for veterans. One of its founders, "General" James Graham, also established the "United States Joint Force Multiplier Command" and the United States National Defense Force Support Command (USNDFSC). Colonel Joe Potter was also an early member of USV, and both Potter and Chue Chue Cha belonged to the USNDFSC. Potter then departed, forming the United States National Defense Corps (USNDC).

Both authors had limited knowledge of these groups prior to meeting Touger in Alaska, but after our conversation, we deeply investigated them further, starting with the USNDC. Its

[24] Lt. Col. Moua Gao, *pers. comm*., St. Paul, MN, April 15, 2015.
[25] Lt. Col. Moua Gao, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, April 15, 2015.

website, with an ".org", not ".gov" suffix, strongly implied an association with the US government. Its motto, "Prepared to Protect," suggested USNDC members remain vigilant against terrorist attack, ready to respond in the wake of natural disaster, and willing to serve in honor guards for veterans' funerals. The USNDC was established, the site claimed, as "a Provisional Military Reserve Corps pursuant to, and in compliance with, National Security Decision Directive #259, issued by President Ronald Reagan" and "Presidential Decision Directive 39" (National Defense Corps., n.d.); this statement has since been removed. The former (February 4, 1987) vests "the Federal Government and the States and their political subdivisions" with the power to form civil defense programs, while the latter (June 21, 1995) articulates the federal government's anti-terrorist policies. Neither make explicit provision for organizations like the USNDC. Yet a senior Hmong member in Milwaukee told the first author in 2013 the USNDC was established by President Ronald Reagan and is therefore fully recognized by the US government. He also linked the group to the US government because of its annual FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]-endorsed training.[26]

Examining individual USNDC state brigades, we noted the vast majority of personnel were Lao, Hmong, Cambodian or Vietnamese. We wondered why the USNDC had such a disproportionately Southeast Asian membership. These peculiarities led us to delve further. Information about James Graham, the apparent originator of the "national defense" model, is almost all second-hand. Efforts to find him were unsuccessful. The Better Business Bureau of Southern Missouri listed Graham as the owner of the United States National Defense Force Support Command, Inc. (established November 10, 2003), though its web link and phone are inactive. The organization is described as offering "training courses for military personnel

[26] Douglas Chuedoua Vue, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, February 24, 2013.

only… This company… has no written contract or agreement with FEMA," suggesting the USNDFSC might have given the false impression that such a contract or agreement did exist (Better Business Bureau, n.d.).

According to Joe Potter, Graham was an NCO who lied about being in the Special Forces. A now-defunct web site accused Graham and his United States Joint Force Multiplier Command of "lying about their status. . .The USJFMC is not part of the federal government, yet it claims a Pentagon address." It "claims the section of law (32 USC 109) as giving their organization authority [but] 32 USC 109 only allows for state governments to create State Defense Forces, and the USJMFC has no connection to any state government" (POW Network, n.d.). Potter further alleges that Graham recruited him as his deputy, made him an honorary general, and offered him two honorary doctorates.[27] Several Hmong veterans insisted that Graham had been indicted or imprisoned, but no such evidence could be found. Many Hmong veterans are also unhappy with Potter. According to a former SGU secretary, Potter was never in Laos during the war. He just "tried some Graham things on the Hmong."[28] In any event, Potter left the organization and in 2009 established the similarly named United States National Defense Corps (USNDC). Somewhere along the way, Chue Chou Cha left Graham and joined Potter. It appears that both Graham and Potter have engaged with what Ma Vang (2012: 685) has referred to as "the rescue and inclusion of displaced [Hmong] subjects into the nation-state." That is, they have gathered those imagined to be unassimilated rescued refugees and repackaged them as defenders of the United States.

Still other groups have emerged since the split, such as the United States Army Defense Corps (USADC), whose "commanding general" is "Lt. General Vang C. Thao" from Madison,

[27] Col. Joe Potter, *pers. comm.,* phone call to Colorado Springs, CO, April 10, 2013.
[28] Anonymous, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, April 3, 2013.

Wisconsin. Although Vang Pao was the only Hmong to reach the rank of general in Laos, in recent years a number of Hmong in the Midwest have emerged as generals associated with these defense organizations. This has caused considerable confusion.

Having established a rough chronology of how national defense groups have evolved, we now explain how Hmong and Lao veterans and others have become so attracted to them. Vang Xang and Yang Long, Hmong veterans in Minnesota, remember that Moua Gao, the first president of SGU Veterans and Families of the USA, met Col. Potter while visiting relatives in Colorado. Potter told Moua that Hmong veterans could join the United States Volunteers (USV).[29] When Moua showed interest, Potter said he would help the Hmong if he could meet Vang Pao. With Vang Pao's blessing, Moua set up a USV brigade. Potter was invited to a July 4th celebration in St. Paul where Vang Pao was present. Potter told the general more about USV, including how members could earn honorary ranks. Vang Pao consulted his old American CIA associate Bill Lair, who counseled Vang Pao to be wary of organizations awarding ranks other than those earned in Laos, so "Vang Pao backed off from Potter a little bit," said Vang Xang.[30] Yet even Vang Xang joined Moua's chapter, because USV representatives promised that if any member ran into any kind of legal trouble, they would come to their defense. However, after Vang Pao's arrest in 2007, when no USV support materialized, Hmong members forsook the organization.[31]

After the split between Graham and Potter in 2008 or 2009, both the Defense Force and the Defense Corps persisted, recruiting Hmong, Lao, and other Southeast Asian veterans and

[29] A web site for the United States Volunteers Joint Service Command still exists but does not look recently updated. It is strikingly similar in stated purpose and membership to the USNDFSC and USNDC. http://www.usvjsc.org/pages/home.html, accessed February 18, 2016.
[30] Xang Vang, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, March 28, 2013, Long Yang, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, June 6, 2012.
[31] Xang Vang, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, March 11, 2016.

non-veterans, offering honorary ranks, uniforms, decorations, and an apparent connection to the US military. Individuals in Wisconsin, including Chong Va Thao and Chao Vang, remained with the Defense Force, while Chue Chou Cha worked with Potter and the Defense Corps.

Cha and Potter departed their respective organizations and started their own (perhaps intentionally) similarly named ones. According to several Hmong SGU members, Potter offered Cha a generalship if he brought enough of his SGU members into the USNDC. While the evidence is circumstantial, members of the original SGU group are suspicious of the timing of Cha's exodus from their organization, his creation of a second SGU group with a strikingly similar name, and members of that new group joining the USNDC in large numbers.

According to several Hmong veterans, the original SGU group charged members US$100 for a lifetime membership and US$50 to process their paperwork. "I have been working for [the original SGU group] for three and a half years," said one man. "[W]e asked. . .members for money—twenty dollars apiece—only once", to print SGU service duty books sent to help lobby Congress for benefits. However, Chue Chou, he says, asked his members for money numerous times. In 2011, he brought in the legal team that won benefits for Filipino veterans who had fought for the US during World War II. (The decision was overturned on appeal.) "He invited all the Hmong people in town to listen to what the lawyers said. He said, "Now we need $600 from each person. Next year each member is going to get $40,000 straight from the government. I think he collected over $300- or $400,000 from all over the United States." Others say Cha also solicited SGU from other countries. Then the legal team announced that they could not promise to sue. "We found out it's not right to sue the government."[32] Mrs. Vue (pseudonym), a former

[32] Anonymous, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, April 3, 2013.

member of Cha's USNDC brigade, supports this critique. She originally enjoyed membership in the organization but left because she could not afford "all the requests for money."[33]

Despite disagreeing with his critics on many issues, Cha agrees that he formed his own SGU group. This was necessary, he claims, because the original SGU group is a 501(c)(3), which by law precludes it from lobbying for veterans. His group is a 501(c)(4) which Cha says can legally lobby Congress.[34] However, Chue Chou also worked with Potter through the USNDC to forward this same agenda. The partnership, however, was short-lived. On August 6, 2010, Potter demoted Cha to LTC, dishonorably discharging him for "insubordination, lack of following direct orders, not responding to financial requests multiple times, breaking numerous promises and deadlines to provide financial records and failing to present his case to the [Board of Directors] panel hearing."[35] Some see this discharge as justified, others the result of squabbling over power.

Potter says Cha hid his separation from the USNDC. A March 2012 *Minneapolis Star Tribune* article describes Cha only as "national chairman of the Special Guerrilla Unit," but in a photo, he wears numerous ribbon bars he could only have obtained through the USNDC (Brunswick, 2012). However, Cha disaffected many supporters when he tried to sue the government.[36] Indeed, on March 12, 2012, USNDC Colonel David Vue informed Chue Chou he was resigning from SGU Veterans and Families Development of USA, Inc. because "I disagree with your decision to [pursue a] lawsuit against the U.S. Government for our SGU benefit."[37] Cha also sold a version of the DD-214, a form US military veterans use to apply for benefits.

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[33] Anonymous, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, April 5, 2013.
[34] Chue Chou Cha, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, March 14, 2013. Though this distinction is not quite accurate, a 501(c)(4) has no limitations on its ability to lobby, whereas a 501(c)(3) has significant limitations. It is sometimes advised that a 501(c)(3) create a 501(c)(4) version of itself to avoid legal trouble.
[35] Letter from Joe Potter to Chue Chou Tchang, August 6, 2010, given to second author by Xang Vang.
[36] Col. Joe Potter, *pers. comm.,* phone call to Colorado Springs, CO, April 10, 2013.
[37] Letter from David Vue to Chue Chou Tchang, March 18, 2012. Letter provided to second author by Xang Vang.

Potter, too, was circulating a version of the DD-214, which he called the "Asian Allies Registration Form" and circulated, he says, free of charge. He says he sent this form to American Secret War veterans Harry Aderholt, Richard Secord, and Bill Lair, who all approved it.

Despite the turmoil between the two groups to which Touger belonged, he and other Hmong and Lao veterans joined both their own veterans' group and a national defense group, perhaps, thinking it was best to cover all bets if one organization managed to win benefits or recognition.

Members of the original SGU Veterans and Families group accuse Chue Chou of stealing their membership records, importing their members wholesale into his organization. Whether an accurate depiction or not, Cha's tactics of forming a new SGU group while collaborating with the USNDC definitely blurred the lines between organizations and ranks. The original SGU group only recognized ranks awarded during the war in Laos; all the national defense organizations award ranks, uniforms, medals, etc. valid only within their respective organizations but that veterans, non-veterans, women and even teenagers could earn. However, scores of reports to both authors, on-line forums, and our own observations confirm that members of both the Defense Force and the Defense Corps attend various community functions in their respective uniforms. They state only that they are a "major" or a "colonel" or a "general" without stipulating that these ranks are honorary and only valid within the limited sphere of their respective organizations.[38]

This has raised many questions within the Hmong and Lao communities. Are "national defense" groups committing fraud against vulnerable elders, their widows and families? Are they

[38] See, for example, http://www.hmongza.com/index.php?/topic/61801-general-chongvang-thao-fake-or-real/, accessed March 9, 2016 and http://www.pebhmong.com/forum/index.php/topic,267307.msg3656857.html?PHPSESSID=9e2678cad760d994f88c15407b059e40#msg3656857, accessed March 14, 2016.

misunderstood by outsiders who have not studied the groups sufficiently? Alternatively, are "national defense" members willing partners, joining the organizations as a form of wish/status fulfillment? A former secretary of the original SGU group believes that most members understand what they are doing and what the limits of their ranks are. "Some of the older ones, some of the younger ones who are not highly educated...just love to be the boss. They love to have their names called 'general' ... [S]ome of the younger ones who are educated...don't want to join and they just stay away."

Once the lawsuit failed, he says, "quite a few people. . .left the USNDC."[39] Many others, especially those further removed from the controversial events in the Twin Cities, remain. The opportunity to raise ranks from Laos attracts many, as does annual training, which helps link past military service in Laos to present-day service in the US.

A commonality between these national defense organizations and anti-Lao government organizations of the past, particularly the *Neo Hom*, is that both issued ranks to members. The *Neo Hom* did this to raise funds for supporting the insurgency Laos (Hammond, 1989; Yang, 2006). It is much less clear how the funds generated by the national defense organizations are used, and by whom. Indeed, the income generated from membership fees and the cost of medals and special uniforms, have become a source of community concern. The similarity in this regard has not gone unnoticed. As Long Yang told the second author, "I think Potter and the USNDC [imitated] Vang Pao."[40]

It appears that higher-ranked veterans from the Secret War are most critical of national defense groups. Major Chong Jeh Vang, the head of SGU Veterans and Families branch in Wisconsin, told the first author he is embarrassed when he sees people parading around in

[39] Anonymous, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, April 3, 2013.
[40] Long Yang, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, June 6, 2012.

uniforms and ranks that they did not earn in Laos. He wondered why the US government allowed people to wear uniforms and medals they did not earn.[41] When the first author met Col. Lee Tou Pao in Santa Ana, California, he also disavowed the national defense corps groups.[42]

For many elderly Hmong, and even individuals like Potter, these veterans' groups facilitate a continuation of Cold War politics, an ongoing struggle for legitimacy and power, and authority to lead veterans, promising some form of assistance or recognition. In the Hmong community in particular, claiming the imprimatur of Vang Pao and Bill Lair seems a requisite first step. Xang Vang, Chue Chou Cha and Potter all claim that Vang Pao and Lair selected them to fight for veterans. There is scant evidence, other than documents all have, bearing Vang Pao and Bill Lair's signatures which may or may not be legitimate.

There is also evidence to the contrary. The second author attended a July 2008 meeting led by Potter at the Minnesota State Capitol. Potter invited Bill Lair, who was in town visiting Vang Pao. During the meeting Potter and his associates, all wearing uniforms, told their Hmong audience they had a plan to win benefits for Hmong veterans. Lair, invited to join Potter for breakfast before the meeting, told numerous individuals, including his longtime friend and biographer Roger Warner, that the men were "fake soldiers" and should not be trusted. Potter often referred to himself as Vang Pao's personal advisor, but according to Long Yang, Vang Pao invited Potter to California and held a *baci* (string-tying ceremony) for him prior to his hip surgery merely as a courtesy. Beside the breakfast before the ill-fated State Capitol meeting, Lair never had a conversation with Potter until March 2010, when Long Yang says he arranged for

[41] Chong Jeh Vang, *pers. comm.,* Madison, WI, December 23, 2015.
[42] Lee Tou Pao*, pers. comm.,* Santa Ana, CA, March 18, 2013.

the two to meet.[43] The second author also phoned Bill Lair in the spring of 2013, inquiring about Potter and Chue Chou Cha. Lair denounced both men, insisting he did not support them.[44]

One major question that this all raises is why so many Hmong and Laos older men and their families have been willing to follow older white men such as Graham and Potter? Might it be because they represent the CIA agents that worked with them in the Secret War in Laos, and supported them during and after the war, such as Bill Lair? Mai Na Lee (2015) has also noted how some Hmong people in Laos became closely linked to single white men. Most recently, some Hmong in the US have variously speculated about whether Jerry Daniels really died, even though he died due to a gas leak in his apartment in Bangkok in 1982, and was buried in Missoula, Montana (Briggeman, 2017). To some degree, they may be seeking outside legitimation for veterans' issues. One thing that seems evident is that the power of the Hmong and Lao leaders of different veterans and defense force groups is at least somewhat dependent on their abilities to negotiate with outsiders to gain various types of recognition for veterans.

The Politics of Rank and Ritual

The proliferation of veterans' and national defense organizations corresponds to interest in rank and ritual. On one hand, groups like Lao Veterans of America, SGU Veterans and Families, and Royal Lao Veterans of America only recognize the ranks veterans earned in Laos. The new national defense organizations typically recognize the ranks of Hmong and Lao veterans, but also promote them to higher ranks. They are hybrid organizations, recognizing both service in Laos and the United States, though the legitimacy of those ranks is not equal or uniformly regarded.

[43] Long Yang, *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, June 6, 2012.
[44] James William Lair, *pers.. comm.,* phone call to Meridian, TX, April 13, 2013.

Indeed, one of the most attractive features of the national defense organizations is their granting of ranks. Veterans from Laos can join with their previous ranks, but members are also admitted based on educational qualifications. For example, the first author was told that anyone with a Master's or PhD who pays the US$35 annual membership fee could enter at the rank of Major, and his rank would increase quickly if active with the organization.[45]

Ritual is another important role of national defense organizations, including conducting last rites for deceased veterans. These ceremonies are a primary function of both veterans' and national defense organizations. A Hmong US Army veteran from Wausau, Wisconsin told the first author in 2014 that one problem with uniforms worn by veterans and national defense organization members is that they frequently—and inappropriately—mix decorations from different branches of the military. Hmong witnesses have also reported that when national defense organization representatives appeared at the funerals of deceased veterans, it often had more to do fundraising than honoring the dead.

These groups encourage communities to remembering—that is, to commemorate and honor—the service of veterans in Laos during the Secret War. As time passes and more Hmong and Lao veterans die without receiving what may be seen as their proper due, pressure has grown—especially since the death of Vang Pao—to reify some form of public recognition. While memorials in places like Fresno, California; Arlington, Virginia; Sheboygan, Wausau and La Crosse, Wisconsin; Elgin, Illinois; and St. Paul, Minnesota have been erected, growing appetite to honor individual soldiers both dead and still living has fueled both the growth of veterans' groups and opportunities for rivalry, corruption, misrepresentation, and fraud (Vang,

[45] Douglas Chuedoua Vue, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, WI, February 24, 2013.

2013). It has also animated State and National and legislative efforts to gain various types of recognition and veterans' benefits, including the right to be buried in US military cemeteries. These efforts have yielded some successes for recognition, but efforts to obtain clear veterans rights had largely been unsuccessful (Center for Public Policy Analysis, 2013; Heraldonline, 2013; Holub, 2013; Laventure, 2010; Nakrin, 2013; Nelson, 2014; Rodriquez, 2013; Simon, 2013; Simon, 2014; Ulhig, 2012; Vodden, 2013; Xiong, 2012), until March 23, 2018, when the Hmong Veteran's Service Recognition Act was signed into law (Suab Hmong News, 2018). This landmark bill permits states to extend burial rights to both Hmong and Lao veterans from the Secret War in Laos in federally recognized veterans' cemeteries (Patinkin, 2018; Yaccarino, 2019). However, it has emerged that only about 50 percent of the veterans who would potentially benefit have been found to be ineligible, since the law only applies to those naturalized as US citizens since 2000, not those who became citizens earlier (Zehn, 2019). In addition, other financial benefits have not been yet been approved. Thus, the struggle continues.

The Veteran's Narrative: A Response to Racism in the United States

Over the years, Hmong and Lao veterans have promoted particular narratives regarding their service to the United States particularly directed at the public. A complex history has thus often been reduced to a simple narrative that Americans can easily understand, and which different groups have contributed to constructing, including Americans who variously served in Laos and Hmong and Lao veterans themselves. Although soldiers in the Royal Lao Army and even the SGUs were officially part of and under the command of the Royal Lao Government, not the US government, veterans frequently emphasize their service to the American government. The most common phrase employed by Hmong veterans is "We were America's secret, CIA army" or "We were America's surrogate soldiers." They emphasize their role in protecting US

radar bases and rescuing American downed pilots. Moreover, they say they "guarded the Ho Chi Minh Trail", and occupied a large number of North Vietnamese troops, thus preventing them from fighting and killing American soldiers in Vietnam.

These statements are all at least partially or arguably true, but veterans viewed things differently when they were in Laos. As Cha Lee Moua put it: "I didn't know I was an American soldier until. . .I came to America."[46] Other Hmong and Lao veterans we met acknowledged that when they were in Laos, they did not feel that they were fighting for America, but for Laos or their Hmong homeland, or to protect their villages and families against communism.

The social, cultural and political circumstances leading to the emergence of this particular veterans' discourse are important. First, many veterans and their families have experienced both explicit and more subtle forms of racism since coming to the US (Lor, 2016), which contributed to some becoming nostalgic for Laos (Vang, 2010b). Perceived by many white Americans and Americans with other racial backgrounds as economic migrants benefiting from welfare benefits and other government services, many veterans have sometimes been asked questions like, "When are you going home?" Even worse, some have been explicitly yelled at, "Go back to your own country." These sorts of encounters have motivated many to recast their veterans' stories to show that they came to the US because they fought on the American side during the Vietnam War. As one Lao veteran in Illinois put it, "We want to make it clear that we are not just illegal Mexican immigrants. We came here because we fought with the United States."[47] His statement clearly indicated that he had been affected by racist comments in the past, and that is why veterans are trying to create a narrative that allows for more acceptance of Hmong and Lao people. If many Hmong and Lao immigrants had not faced racism, this veterans' narrative would not be so

[46] Cha Lee Moua, *pers. comm.,* phone to Sacramento, CA, April 6, 2014.
[47] Em Ramonkoun, *pers. comm.,* Elgin, Illinois, December 30, 2014.

important in America. However, as Espiritu (2006) has warned, these sorts of counter-narratives are dangerous, because at the same time as they advance the status veterans from Laos, they also tend to imply that other immigrants groups that are not veterans from Laos, including immigrants from various Latin American countries, are not legitimate inhabitants of the United States.

It is interesting, however, that veterans' organizations such as the ones that have emerged in the United States have not been organized in France, Canada, or Australia, though perhaps this can be explained by their smaller numbers and by those countries' more accessible health and social services.

One excellent account highlighting this "legitimizing" narrative is from a famous anthropologist from University of California-Santa Cruz (Tsing, 2013). She wanted to interview Hmong wild mushroom collectors in California about their involvement and interactions with the global trade in wild pine mushrooms. She found, however, that when she went to Fresno with a Hmong research assistant, she could not simply interview Hmong people about mushroom picking. Instead, her research informants frequently insisted on explaining their roles as veterans during the war, emphasizing their service to the United States government. Only then could she effectively interview them about mushrooms.

The development in the United States of Hmong and Lao veterans' organizations should be seen within a unique social and political context, including the racial realities of American society.

Conclusion – Identity Politics and the Making of Hmong and Lao America

Large numbers of organizations established all over the United States are entangled with groups and individuals previously involved in anti-Lao communist government political organizations, or who remain involved in such organizations today. Many veterans and their

families have also joined national defense organizations, in which many members are veterans from Southeast Asia, but are able to raise their ranks within these organizations. Together, these ranks, recognition certificates, uniforms and decorations have been conflated in the minds of many elders. Some are embarrassed that Hmong and Lao people parade around in uniforms only valid within the confines of a small private group with no ties to any branch of the US military. Others, however, have embraced the opportunity to make their service to the United States clear to all. Still others, too young to have served in Laos, see membership in these organizations as a way to earn leadership positions and follow in the footsteps (or ride on the coattails) of their elders.

While questions remain regarding ethics and practices of various individuals and groups, whether Hmong, Lao, or white American; our research leads us to conclude that many Hmong and Lao Americans have embraced these groups as a way to create ties for themselves and their families to the United States, including American veterans (C. Y. Vang, 2010). They have also done so to counter various forms of racism and prejudice, even if this resistance is done subconsciously. People have also established and joined these groups to impress their families and their communities, since it is often hard for elders to connect with their more Americanized descendants. Furthermore, many Hmong and Lao veterans from Laos have linked their past military service in Laos to present-day service in the United States. The recognition and legitimation desired by so many is clearly a significant social phenomenon playing an important role in Hmong and Lao American communities, whether one agrees with all the ideas and practices that have come with them or not.

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