

South East Asia Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsou20

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To cite this article: Ian G. Baird (2024) The Communist Party of Thailand's education for young children in Northern Laos and Southern China, South East Asia Research, 32:3, 283-303, DOI: 10.1080/0967828X.2024.2435293

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2024.2435293

Published online: 09 Dec 2024.

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SOUTH EAST ASIA RESEARCH
2024, VOL. 32, NO. 3, 283–303
https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2024.2435293

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The Communist Party of Thailand's education for young children in Northern Laos and Southern China

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ABSTRACT

Education is typically critically important for political movements, One important Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) policy was to make education accessible to the poor and disadvantaged, including upland ethnic minorities such as the Hmong and the Lua. Apart from expanding education for young adults outside of Thailand, the CPT also organized education for young children in northern Laos and southern China, near the border between the two countries. However, a dramatic shift in political alliances – and various other internal and external factors – resulted in the CPT having to withdraw from Laos in early 1979, and falling into rapid decline in the early 1980s. This article considers the primary education that the CPT provided along the Laos–China border, and the experiences of students and teachers. The circumstances of Hmong child students trapped in China during the 1980s, and their readjustment once back in Thailand, are also discussed. The CPT's education policies are particularly useful for understanding their ideas regarding ethnicity and language, but ultimately the approach of the CPT to ethnicity and language was not radical, and did not differ much from the approach of the government of Thailand.

KEYWORDS

Communist party of Thailand; education; children; China; Thailand; Laos

Introduction

In July 2017, I first learned that young Hmong children of Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) leaders in northern Thailand had been sent to study in Laos and China during the 1970s. Nhia Ja Xiong, a former CPT military commander (*phu kong*) in Nan Province (see Baird 2018) – a province where some of the most important CPT strongholds existed from the late 1960s until the early 1980s (Baird 2021) – told me about his daughter, Jai, who was one of those sent to study in China at a young age. Nhia Ja had been told that if military conflict became too heavy in northern Thailand, he could send his daughter to study in China, so he did. Later Jai and other students moved from the Lao side of the border to the Chinese side, going to Kunming (Baird 2021) and to Dehong Prefecture in Yunnan Province. Jai had some difficulties reintegrating into Hmong society once back in Thailand, and she ended up not living with Hmong people.

Other prominent CPT leaders also sent their children to study in northern Laos and southern China. For example, Comrade Lao Ya, a Chinese Thai CPT provincial

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committee member in the Khao Khor area of Phetchabun Province (*Khet 10*), sent two of his children. Comrade Uthit, whose wife was Hmong, sent two daughters to study in China, and Comrade Bunchan, from Bangkok, a political and military leader in Nan Province (*Khet 6*) sent two sons.[1] This story motivated me to look for and interview CPT children who had studied in Laos and China, as well as their teachers. The author is a white professor at a university in the United States. However, he lived in Thailand and Laos for many years, and speaks both Thai and Lao fluently.

I noticed the similarities with what Vatthana Pholsena has written with regard to young ethnic minorities living in Laos near the border with Vietnam, who had been recruited to study in Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s (Pholsena 2008; 2017). Again similarly, teenagers from thirteen to eighteen years old from South Vietnam studied in North Vietnam during the late 1960s (CIVC 1970). But in this article, the focus is on younger children.

My focus is on the life experiences of ethnic Hmong people who studied in northern Laos and southern China as young children, as well as information provided by one of their teachers. I am particularly interested in their memories, how the CPT chose to educate young children, and how the CPT's approach to primary education was influenced by their views about ethnicity and language. I contend that the CPT did not institute a radical education curriculum for younger students in northern Laos and southern China. In fact, the CPT's approach to ethnicity and language in education was in many ways similar to those of the government of Thailand. However, the CPT wanted students to both appreciate the importance of labour and learn to use their own labour productively.

Next, I briefly provide some background about the history of the CPT and Hmong involvement with the CPT. I then turn to my main interviewees, Chai Sae Lee, Tho Sae Yang and Khru Suphot. These accounts provide insights into the CPT's views regarding education for young children, and how two Hmong children remember their studies. These interviews are but a small subset of the hundreds of interviews I have done regarding the Hmong and the CPT since 2013, all in Thai language. This is followed by a discussion regarding the implications of the CPT's education experiment for better understanding of how the CPT leadership viewed ethnic identity and language. Finally, some concluding remarks are provided.

The CPT and the Hmong

The CPT, originally called the Communist Party of Siam, was established on 1 December 1942, although communist organizing in Thailand/Siam had started as early as 1927. Initially, the CPT was mainly active in urban ethnic Chinese areas (Communist Party of Thailand 1978; Tejapira 2001). The leadership of the CPT during its height – between the mid-1960s and early 1980s – was dominated by Thais of Chinese heritage (Chinwanno 1986). Many Hmong cadres embraced the CPT's ideology during that period, but they only rose up to mid-level positions within the Party because of their limited formal education (Baird 2022).

[1]Nhia Ja Sae Xiong, *pers. comm.,* Nam Tuang Village, Mae Jarim District, Nan Province, 2 July 2017.

Crucially, the CPT shifted their strategy in the late 1950s and early 1960s, so as to focus on rural areas, poor farmers and ethnic minorities (Baker 2003; Communist Party of Thailand 1978; de Beer 1978; Marks 1994). This included recruiting Hmong, a marginalized upland ethnic minority in northern Thailand with grievances against the government. As explained in Baird (2021), Jong Teng Sae Vang (Comrade or *Sahai* Sai Kham) became the first Hmong person to receive military, political and Thai language training from the CPT, beginning in 1960 when he travelled to a special CPT training camp located in northern Laos, along the border with China, called 'A-30', the 'Thailand Patriotic Front Training Centre' in northern Laos (Ching Ting 1970, 12). After basic training at A-30 for between three and six months, most returned to support the CPT in northern Thailand, although many subsequently travelled to either China or North Vietnam for additional political, military, or medical training (Baird 2021).

In the years that followed, many other Hmong teenagers followed in Jong Teng Sae Vang's steps, up until the border between Laos and China closed in early 1979, due to the serious political fall-out between China and Vietnam that subsequently negatively affected relations between Laos – which sided with Vietnam – and China and the CPT, which sided with China (Baird 2021).

Many of the early Hmong who returned to Thailand after studying at A-30 recruited other Hmong to study. They also provided secret political training to Hmong communities. They did not want to engage in armed conflict with the military, preferring instead to conduct critical political work first. However, their hand was forced, and on 8 May 1967 the first armed conflict occurred between Thai government officials and Hmong people receiving political training from the CPT, at Huai Chompu Village in a mountainous area in Chiang Rai Province in northern Thailand. This resulted in Hmong fleeing to the forest from their village, which authorities subsequently burned down (Baird 2021; see, also, Marks 1973; Race 1974).

Soon after, the Thai military started indiscriminatingly attacking Hmong villages in the mountainous parts of Chiang Rai, Nan, Phitsanulok and Phetchabun Provinces, mainly areas near the border with Laos, forcing many Hmong into the forested mountains (Baird 2021; Kerdphol 1986). The *Voice of the People of Thailand* (1969) CPT radio station announced, in White Hmong language, 'The Meo [Hmong] people of all nationalities have no alternative other than to rise up, take up arms, and fight against [the Thai government]' (Figure 1). And indeed, thousands did.

By 1969, a large portion of Hmong communities in the eastern part of northern Thailand were living in high mountain CPT stronghold base areas, together with CPT political leaders and combatants from various ethnic groups and parts of the country (Baird 2021) (Figure 2). On 30 August, the *Voice of the People of Thailand* (1969) announced that,

> The clique [Thai government] has consistently looked down upon the Meo [Hmong] people, but the Meo [Hmong] people are aware that the above-mentioned calls of the clique are all deceitful schemes. The U.S.-Thanom clique is attempting to deceive the Meo [Hmong] people into becoming its stooges.

During the 1970s, the lives and gender relations of Hmong people living in these stronghold areas dramatically changed, especially for women (Baird 2021; Baird and Yangcheepsutjarit 2022). The CPT was also continuing to gain strength, particularly after



Figure 1. Hmong in the CPT in *Khet 15*, Phetchabun Province, 1970s (Courtesy of Katoua Xiong).

the political crises that occurred in Bangkok on 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976, which led large numbers of university students to escape into the forest (Lertchoosakul 2012; Winichakul 2020). Many joined the CPT in the same strongholds where Hmong and others had already been living since the late 1960s. The CPT was at its military and political height, with thousands of armed fighters under their command and about a million sympathizers in the country (Marks 1994), especially after the Socialist Party of Thailand agreed to join the CPT's armed struggle on 7 May 1977 (Heaton 1982) (Figure 3).

However, the geopolitical circumstances that followed resulted in Laos shutting its border to the CPT in 1979. This was a serious blow, because the CPT lost their rear guard bases inside Laos and their land bridge for receiving arms and other supplies from China. After the People's Army of Vietnam ousted the Khmer Rouge from power in Cambodia in early 1979 (Baird 2020), China became focused on supporting the Khmer Rouge against the Vietnamese military. However, to transport arms to the Khmer Rouge along the Cambodia–Thailand border, they needed the support of the government of Thailand, which could facilitate the transfer of arms to the Khmer Rouge. With this leverage, the Thai government was able to demand that the Chinese stop materially supporting the CPT, in exchange for being allowed to use Thai territory to support the Khmer Rouge. The Chinese conceded and abandoned the CPT, despite the CPT having supported the Chinese position during the political upheaval with Vietnam (Chanda 1986; Chang 1983; Lee 1981; Stuart-Fox 1979). CPT radio, the Voices of the People of Thailand, based in Kunming, suddenly stopped broadcasting on 11 July 1979 (Heaton 1982).

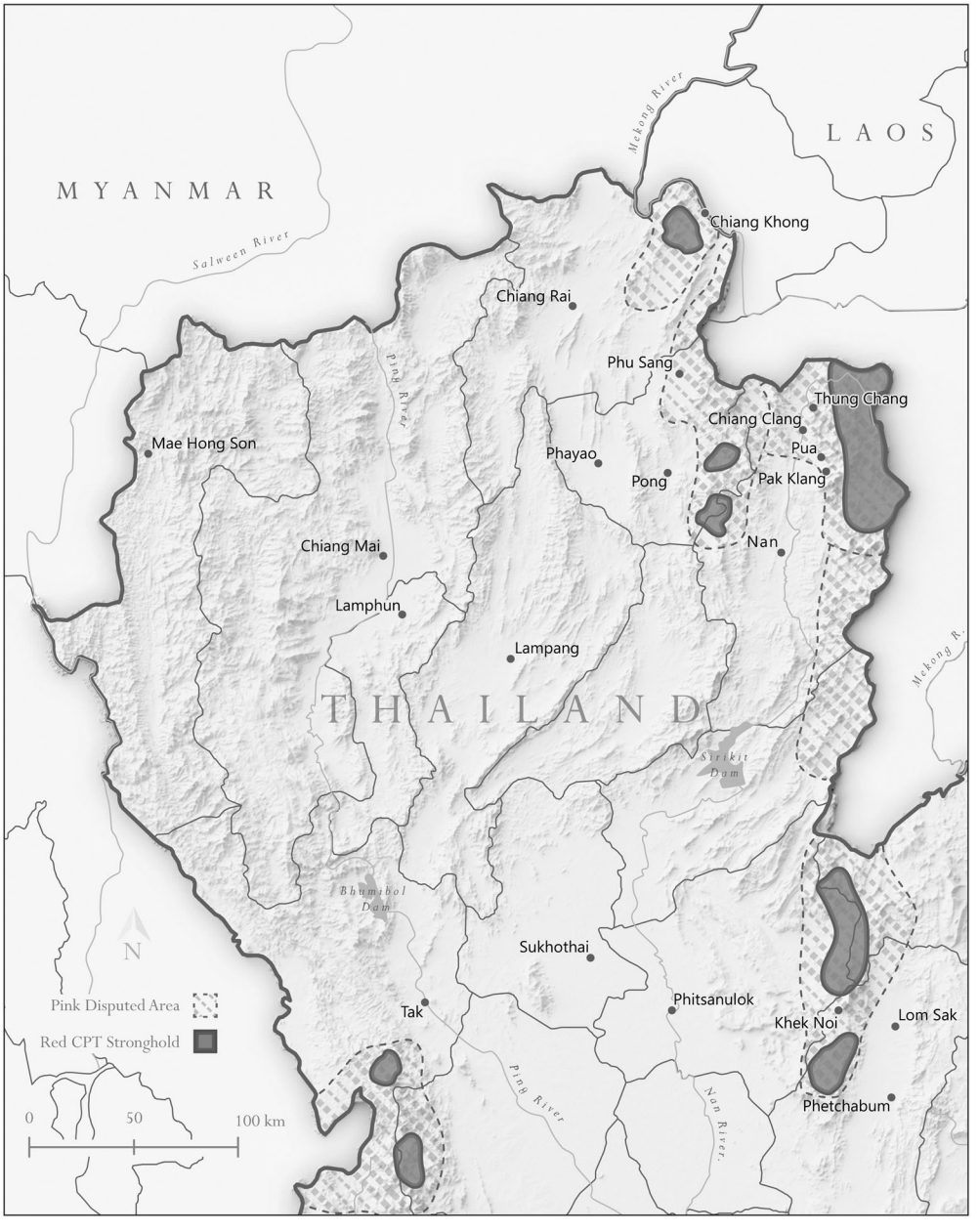


Figure 2. Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) strongholds in Northern Thailand (Ian Baird with the assistance of the Cartography Lab, University of Wisconsin-Madison).

These geopolitical circumstances also contributed to divisions within the CPT, which further demoralized the rank-and-file. Ultimately, most people in the CPT took advantage of government amnesties of 1980 and 1982 (Bangkok Domestic Service 1982a; 1982b; Bangkok Post 1982; Chutima 1990; Marks 1994; Siam Nakon 1980; The Nation Review 1983; Wedel 1982). By 1982, the CPT strongholds in northern Thailand had all disappeared, and most of those within the CPT had abandoned armed struggle.



Figure 3. Hmong in the CPT conducting military training in the Khao Khor (*Khet 10*) area, Phetchabun Province, 1970s (courtesy of Sahai Somphot).

The leadership of the CPT, which had been based in Nan Province, relocated to southern Thailand, and later to western Thailand, near the border with Burma. Finally, by the early 1990s, those still 'in the forest' quietly abandoned their last bases and reintegrated into Thai society without explicitly surrendering (Baird 2021; Ettinger 2007; Marks 2007; Rousset 2009).

Hmong youth stories

Chai Sae Lee

Chai Sae Lee was born in 1972 in Huai Han Village, Wiang Kaen District, Chiang Rai Province, a rural mountainous Hmong community near the Laos border. He was the first child of his father, Nor Daeng Sae Lee (later Mor Daeng), who joined the CPT in 1967, like most Hmong people nearby. He went to study medicine in China in 1971, and in 1976 he returned to Thailand.[2]

In 1974, when Chai was just two years and eight months old, he was sent to study in the Laos–China border area by six or seven Hmong CPT soldiers from the stronghold area where his village was located, known as *Khet 8*.[3] No other children travelled with him, and it took about a month to reach the border area and the CPT there.

[2]Nor Daeng Sae Lee, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Rai, November 1, 2020.
[3]Chai Sae Lee, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Rai, July 17, 2019

At the time Chai left Thailand, his father was in China studying medicine, and his mother was having trouble raising him and his younger sister by herself. There was also a considerable amount of bombing nearby. Therefore, the personnel leader (*jat tang* in Thai) agreed for Chai to travel to study. His younger sister stayed with his mother. The Hmong CPT soldiers who delivered Chai left him on the border with over ten other young children, including boys and girls, and people from the Hmong, Lua and Thai ethnic groups. His father told me that he had written, asking his wife not to allow his son to go away to study, but the letter had taken eight months to reach her, and by then Chai had already gone.[4]

Those at the border had a list of children who were allowed to enter China, but they had to wait for about a week until their names were called. Some ethnic Lue men from China accompanied them into China. At that time, Chai could only speak Hmong. He cried, and some Hmong in the group told him that they were going to meet his father, which helped console him.

Eventually, the children arrived at the school, which was focused on teaching the children how to speak central Thai. Most of the children were over two years old, and a few were three or four years older. Chai was in the second and last group to arrive at the school.

The school was in Wenshan Prefecture, in Yunnan Province, near the border with Vietnam. Chai was so close to the border that in early 1979 he heard the fighting between the Chinese and Vietnamese. Shan, Hai, and Cheng (2009, 190–192) reported that a significant number of high-ranking CPT cadres were based on the Chinese side of the Laos–China border, in Mengla District, Yunnan Province. Ching Ting (1970, 12) also reported that Thai-language training schools and guerrilla warfare training bases were established in Simao, in Pu'er City, and also in Kunming, Yunnan Province. There are, however, no known accounts of the school that Chai attended in Wenshan, or the overall education process.

About thirty students initially studied with Chai. There were more boys than girls. Chai did not know the ethnic groups of the other students. He felt that all the children were treated the same. They were taught that all the students and their teachers were friends. His teachers were Thai CPT comrades.

There were ten teachers at the school, three males and seven females. There were also four Chinese assigned to support the school. The Thai teachers mainly taught Thai language, arts, culture, history, health, agriculture and other subjects. Chai made friends and had toys to play with. As he was young, Chai does not remember his teachers well – he studied up to Grade 4 with them. Khru Weo was an art teacher, and Pa Phu and Lung Treu taught about food. Khru Jak taught history, and Khru Sing taught about agriculture. Some teachers were from northeastern Thailand. Others were Chinese Thais. He later realized that one male health teacher was Hmong, Khru Han. He had lost his leg during bombing in *Khet 7*, a mountainous CPT stronghold in Pong District, Phayao Province (see Fongthale 2013; Lee 2016), and so he had been sent to work at the school.

While Chai was in Wenshan, he only met his father once, at the end of 1976 or early 1977, when his father came to visit the school on his way back to Thailand. By that time, Chai could not remember him. However, the teacher pulled Chai out of class to meet his

[4]Nor Daeng Sae Lee, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Rai, November 20, 2023.

father, who showed him a photo he had of him when he was two years old. He used the photo to confirm to Chai that he was really meeting his father. By that time, Chai could only remember two Hmong phrases, *noj mov* (eat rice) and *pej xeem* (the people). Nor Daeng was shocked when he realized that he had to speak central Thai with his son.[5] In any case, two school administrators, Khru Weo and Khru Han, would not allow Chai to return to Thailand with his father, as Chai was not tall enough or old enough to leave. Nor Daeng stayed with Chai for three days before returning to Thailand by himself.

After Chai's father had departed, Chai wrote letters to him almost every week, between the time he was seven and twelve years old. When Chai had a problem with a teacher or other students, he would write to his father. However, he received no response, so he eventually stopped. Later, he learned that his father had never received any of the letters. The teachers told him to write, but never actually sent the letters. One of the teachers, Khru Song, simply wanted Chai to feel better through writing, even though he knew that the letters were not being sent.[6]

The first group of students studied at the school in Wenshan until they were seven or eight years old, and in 1977 they were sent back to Thailand via Laos. Interestingly, student height determined who could go. If a student was taller than an SKS, a Soviet-made semi-automatic carbine rifle, that person would be sent back to Thailand. Otherwise, the student would have to stay in China. Chai said that it was difficult if you were not a tall person. In any case, less than half of the students measured returned to Thailand.

In 1978, Chai was taken with the rest of the students to the border, with the intention of returning the students to Thailand. Chai waited on the Lao side of the border for someone in Thailand to come to guide them back to Thailand. While he was there, Chai studied how to forage for food in the forest, so that he would later be able to help himself and support medical units. When Chai was waiting on the border, Lao officials came and told the students and their minders that they would soon close the border with China. Therefore, the students could not make it back to Thailand overland.

Chai stayed on the border for eight months, between late 1978 and early 1979. Finally, when it became clear that the remaining students were not going to be able to return to Thailand, over twenty students were allowed to stay in China. The students were initially taken back to their old school. Chai told me that when he was in Wenshan after returning from the border, he saw some items that the Chinese had earlier given to the Vietnamese, and had then brought back to China after they attacked Vietnam.

Not long after, the students were relocated to Dehong Prefecture, near the Burma border in northwestern Yunnan Province. It took them a month to travel there by bus. Chai did not speak any Chinese, as he had only studied central Thai language, the main language used by the CPT. In Dehong, the students initially stayed in a military camp. There were also thirty to forty Burmese students studying at a school called 5/1. The Burmese students were linked to the Communist Party of Burma, which was also closely aligned with China, and were taught in both Burmese and Chinese. The children

[5]Nor Daeng Sae Lee, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Rai, November 20, 2023.
[6]Chai Sae Lee, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Rai, July 17, 2019.

were a little older than those from Thailand, and within a year, they were sent back to Burma. Chai and the other 'Thai' students stayed there until 1982.

In late 1982 or early 1983, the Thai students travelled to Kunming to study at Centre 4, near Dianchi, a lake behind Jade Dragon Snow Mountain (*Yulong xue shan*). It took about a month to travel there. It was decided that the Thai students needed to study Chinese, so that they could get along in China. The students had no idea that they could not return to Thailand.

Chai and the other students studied Chinese eight hours a day, and in the evening they studied Thai for two hours. There were only twenty or so students from Thailand studying primarily in Chinese language. Chai studied Chinese for three years, and he learned quickly. He passed the test to graduate from Grade 6 in Chinese. He was also able to pass the test that allowed him to study junior high school in Chinese. As with other students, he still thought that he was just Thai, not Hmong.

During 1984–1985, Chai studied at Dianchi Junior High School (*Dianchi zhongxue*) in Kunming. Instruction was only in Chinese. The Chinese government wanted him and other students to assimilate and be like other Chinese. He had just started studying when the Thai Embassy in Beijing contacted him. Ten students left the school first; others remained, as their parents had not yet contacted the Thai government to ask to reunite with their children. Chai was one of the ten, with the others staying up to five or six years before eventually returning to Thailand.

When in China, Chai never explicitly studied CPT policy. They only studied about CPT policy for two months when they were staying at the China–Laos border in 1978–1979. They learned for two hours a day, from an A-30 teacher who had not yet returned to Thailand. However, Chai said the lessons about socialism and capitalism were not very clear. Before then, the students had not heard anything explicit about the CPT. Later, they studied political ideology, including Karl Marx's ideas, when studying in Chinese language in Kunming. However, the students did not understand the difference between the CPT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), although they did hear about the ills of American capitalism.

Initially, after Chai left school, he stayed at the Yunnan Hotel in central Kunming. He was not allowed to study when he was there but had to wait almost a year until he finally obtained a Thai passport and a visa. It took so long because both the Thai and the Chinese governments had to confirm his identity. At first, Chinese officials interviewed him. Later, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing brought Thai Embassy officials to interview him. Information was collected about where the students had stayed in China over the years. Chai had not yet adopted a Thai sounding name, so they knew him as Chai Sae Lee. Chai still did not know he was Hmong. A week after meeting the Thai officials, he travelled by plane from Kunming to Beijing, where he was thumb printed and given travel documents. A week later, he flew to Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok, arriving on 4 April 1986.[7]

Upon his arrival, Chai was sent to the Kalunyathep Center in Chonburi Province, which the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) managed, and which had been set up after the government offered amnesties to people in the CPT. The intention was to resolve past differences that had existed during the conflict between the

[7]I was hoping to scan some of his photos but he said they had all been destroyed in a flood several years earlier.

government of Thailand and the CPT. Chai stayed there for a month, studying Thai culture and customs. He learned how to cook Thai food.

Chai first learned that there were different ethnic groups in Thailand when he was in Chonburi. Initially, he just thought that there were different regions in Thailand. He learned that two of the girls who studied with him in China were from southern Thailand, and that there were four boys from northeastern Thailand. He discovered that there were four people from northern Thailand, two girls and two boys, including him. It was only after he left Chonburi and travelled to Chiang Rai that he learned that he was Hmong.

Chai stayed at the ISOC Chiang Rai station for fifteen days, studying northern Thai culture. At that time, all four of those from the north were told that they were Hmong, but he was not sure what it meant to be Hmong. Chai's parents initially came to check if Chai was their child. They stayed for half a day and then returned to Huai Han Village. Later, a vehicle from the village came to pick him up on the weekend and brought him back there. He was fifteen or sixteen years old, but had no memory of Huai Han, since he had been gone for more than twelve years.

Chai admits that he was confused when he returned to his birth village. He did not understand what language people were speaking. However, his parents understood his situation better, and spoke with him mainly in Thai along with a little Hmong, which he did not understand. He spent two months in the village. He had an uncle who was near the same age as him, and he spent time with him and another Hmong teenager, who helped him study Hmong. Chai reported that he felt like he was in the 1999 movie, starring Bruce Willis, 'The Sixth Sense', since he suddenly realized that he was Hmong.

Two months later, Chai could speak some Hmong. When I met him in 2019, he told me he could understand Hmong, and speak some. However, he commented that Chinese and Thai have five tones, while Hmong has eight, and that this made learning Hmong difficult.

After spending a couple of months in Huai Han, Chai attended an unofficial Chinese language school elsewhere. He had graduated from Grade 4 in Thai at the age fifteen, but he had to test again in Thailand. He studied Mandarin Chinese from 5 to 7 am, at a school run by Taiwanese, and then from 8 am to 4 pm he studied Thai. Soon after, however, Lt. Col. Wirot Thongmitr, who had accepted the surrender of the CPT in *Khet 8* in Chiang Rai on 15 December 1982, found a place for Chai to study in Chiang Mai, so in 1987 he enrolled at *Rong Rian Seuksa Songkhraw Chiang Mai*, a school for disadvantaged ethnic minorities.

After graduating from high school, Chai studied agricultural technologies, including tractors, for two years at Maejo Agricultural College, Chiang Mai Province, where he received a Bachelor's degree in agri-business and promotion in 1998. However, he later worked for a Taiwanese company in Bangkok for eleven years. Then he worked exporting vegetables and fruits to Europe and China.

Chai ended up marrying Vilai Sae Yang, a woman who had had a similar experience in China, although she had returned after he had. She had been in the same group as him when he initially went to China. Her father was Chinese, and her mother was Hmong, but did not speak Hmong. They married in 2003, and had two boys, who were four and eleven years old when I interviewed Chai. He explained that the older one studied

Thai, Chinese and English, while the younger studied Thai and Chinese. Chai speaks Chinese with his children, and he previously spoke Chinese with his wife. His wife had graduated from a vocational college in China, but died suddenly in 2018 due to a brain haemorrhage. Chai explained that when she returned from China in 1989, his wife had not travelled to her village as he had. Instead, she stayed with her father's relatives in Bangkok, who could speak Chinese with her. Later, after a friend helped make contact, Chai sent her letters and photos, and they corresponded between 1991 and 1999. They wrote to each other in Thai and Chinese: if she wrote in Chinese, he would answer in Chinese, and when she wrote in Thai, he would respond in Thai. Chai told me that they married because they had similar experiences and therefore could understand each other. He had become closer to other students than to his parents.

Chai regrets missed childhood experiences with his parents and feels that his parents are like friends. He does not feel particularly close to them, unlike his four siblings. Some say that he does not love his parents, he confessed, but he reported that he loves them and shows it in different ways. For example, he never hugs his parents, although his siblings do.

Today, Chai teaches his children both Thai and Chinese, and he is proud that his Chinese is good enough to make Chinese think he is Chinese. Indeed, Chai told me that his children's teachers sometimes tell his children that their parents are Chinese. However, on the other hand, few people believe he is Hmong, although he is proud to be Hmong. He reported having more understanding about being Hmong now, and that most Hmong now accept him. However, he is sorry that he speaks more Thai than Hmong, and tends to revert to Thai.

Chai explained that having gone to China was like a double-edged sword. He feels that he now knows Chinese for business, and is glad that he has experienced another world. He does not think his parents were wrong to send him to China. He admitted that his parents are sometimes sorry that their oldest son does not follow Hmong traditions or think like other Hmong, and that family relations are not like those of others. He sometimes tells his friends that people must be prepared for differences between villages and beyond. His parents must understand.

Tho Sae Yang

The story of Tho Sae Yang is, in many ways, similar to that of Chai Sae Lee, although their experiences also differ in important ways. Due to fragmented memories, and the fact that Chai and Tho were quite young, their stories do not fully fit together. Tho is younger than Chai, but the two were childhood friends, and both of their fathers were leaders in the CPT's *Khet 8*, in eastern Chiang Rai Province. They especially spent time together in 1985–1986, not long before returning from China to Thailand (Figure 4). Tho's father was Wa Ger Sae Yang, whose revolutionary name was *Phu Kong* Lao Yee.

Tho does not remember who escorted him to Laos from Thailand. However, once he arrived on the Laos–China border, he went to a school set up near the A-30 training camp (see Baird 2021). He remembers there being twenty to thirty children attending his school, which was on the Lao side of the border. Many of the children were young, like him, but some were years older. He remembers hearing that there were two CPT schools for children in the borderlands; his was near Mengla. The school for older



Figure 4. Chai Sae Lee and Tho Sae Yang together with Khru Han in Kunming, 1985–1986 (courtesy of Tho Sae Lee).

children was called *Anuchon Daeng* (Red Youth). Tho remembers playing with the older students. At that time, all the students studied only in Thai. His teachers had mainly been involved in the 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976 protests. The children of some of these students also attended the school. He remembers an effigy of the King of Thailand being burned at the school, and that some people said bad things about the king. However, Khru Suphot, a teacher at the school, said that in general Thai royals were rarely spoken about.[8]

Unlike Chai, Tho realized that he was Hmong, but he did not know what being Hmong meant. He only knew that there were regions in Thailand, like the northeast and south, but like Chai, he did not know much about ethnic or linguistic differences. Only central Thai was spoken at school, although Tho was aware that there were some regional differences in accent. However, he told me that ethnicity and minority languages were hardly discussed. In retrospect, Tho believes that the CPT teachers were gradually trying to erase understandings about ethnicity amongst their students.

Tho ended up studying on the Lao side of the border for a few years, before being sent across to China. He stayed in China near the border for a short period. Tho heard fighting when he was studying on the Chinese side, but his teachers said that it was just an earthquake. In retrospect, he believes that there was fighting going on along the border. This was during a time when Laos-Sino relations had greatly deteriorated.

[8]Tho Sae Yang, *pers. comm.*, Bangkok, April 21, 2021.

Soon after, Tho travelled with his classmates to Kunming. He was then transferred by airplane to Dehong Prefecture, on the border with Burma. Chai was with him. They studied near an army camp. Tho remembers Chinese New Year being a big deal. There were reportedly eighty to one hundred students from various parts of Thailand, from quite young up to about fifteen or sixteen, studying there. Different groups of students were apparently brought together there.

Finally, after years of studying in China, Tho returned to Thailand with more than ten other students. The students from Burma who were in another part of the same school returned to Burma before he travelled to Thailand. Before leaving, however, they too spent time at Centre 4, near Dianchi and Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. The students at Centre 4 studied a little Thai, but there were not many Thai teachers there. Eventually, students only received instruction in Chinese. Tho studied with a child whose father was Chinese and had gone to Thailand to help the CPT. His wife was an ethnic minority from Thailand. Their child could speak Thai fluently.

Tho does not remember being taught politics at school, but the students did learn the names of the Chinese and Thai communist parties. It was only when he was at Centre 4 that he remembers learning a little about politics, such as what was right and what was wrong. He does not remember hearing much about the United States, although he knew that China had fought the US during the Korean War. Still, he remembered eating canned ham from the US when he was in Mengla and in Dehong. Some contradictions were unclear to him.

Before returning to Thailand, Tho stopped studying and was just waiting to travel. At that time he started getting into trouble and learned from older kids how to steal. His parents sent him a watch when he was in Kunming. He showed it off in photos taken of him. Finally, Tho returned to Thailand in 1986 at the same time as Chai. As with Chai, he initially stayed at the Kalunyathep Centre in Chonburi. Tho felt that they mainly tried to teach him how to be Thai. For example, he did not know how to put his hands up together and '*wai*' people, something very common in Thailand but not promoted by the CPT.[9] He also learned the Thai national anthem.

Tho is still able to speak Chinese, but he does not do so as much as Chai. Tho also admitted that he now speaks very little Hmong. He recounted that after returning to Thailand and living for a short period with his parents in Khun Klang Village in the mountains of Doi Inthanon in Chiang Mai Province, he went to study at a government-run social welfare school in Chiang Mai. It was only then that he started to learn that there were people from different ethnic groups in Thailand.

Similar to Chai, Tho felt different from other children and, as with Chai, was confused about his ethnic status when he was a teenager. He initially felt bad when others made jokes about him. He also felt – as did Chai – that his siblings ended up being closer to his parents than him. He feels more independent and that his ideas are different. He eventually studied to be an architect at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Tho has only visited China once since returning to Thailand, with his parents in order to translate for them. He does not contact the other Thai students who were with him in China. Still, he explained that ultimately he is not sorry that his parents sent him to China. He considers that it made him a better thinker.

[9]Although Khru Suphot did report that they sometimes did '*wai*' when at the school.

Khru Suphot

The accounts above relate to Hmong children who were sent away to study when they were young. This section provides the perspective of a teacher at the school near A-30 in northern Laos, Khru Suphot. However, Khru Suphot's memories sometimes differ from those of Chai and Tho, both of whom were Suphot's students. Born in 1942 in southern Thailand, Khru Suphot was a government school teacher in Yala, one of Thailand's southernmost provinces, between 1969 and 1977. He became increasingly involved in CPT politics as a teacher, and was in Bangkok during the infamous 6 October 1976 massacre. Later, he fled to the forest in *Khet 8* in Chiang Rai Province, where he underwent three months of political and military training. He was then assigned to set up a CPT school in northern Laos near the border with China. He accepted the assignment, although he had actually wanted to be a soldier.[10]

The school was established near A-30 in a safe area close to the Laos–China border, where no bombs were being dropped. There was a hospital nearby. There were a few sub-camps of CPT allies close by, such as for the Socialist Party of Thailand. Suphot explained that the school he opened was for students from three-and-a-half to sixteen years old. It was named *Rong Rian Ruam Wong Phan* in Thai. Older students studied and worked, while the younger ones only studied. They did not have much curriculum initially, so they had to borrow Lao and Vietnamese books to teach. Since they did not have many books, they had to rely more on memory. He emphasized that the strategy for teaching was not to provide a lot of theory, but to emphasize practically learning how to do things. Five or six teachers with previous teaching experience helped develop a particular curriculum for the school. Pa Poo, the wife of a high-level CPT leader, of Chinese descent, was the school's principal.

Suphot remembers that male and female students stayed in different basic dormitories, which male and female teachers oversaw. One teacher, Khru Han, was Hmong. They sometimes did half-day activities in the morning to help students learn to 'love labour', and then in the afternoon students would actually use their own labour productively, such as for raising pigs and chickens. They wanted students to appreciate labour and to know how to productively use their own labour. School operated from Monday to Friday. One key aspect, emphasized Suphot, was that they were not supposed to make contact with people outside of their camp. He also emphasized that a key goal of the school was to look after the children of key cadres so that the cadres could work more effectively. The idea was to bring students from all classes together, but not to focus on theory much for younger children. He claimed that the goal was not to make everyone the same. He felt that nobody was oppressed. He admitted that ethnic difference was hardly mentioned, but he said many did know about those differences. He taught mathematics and science.

Khru Suphot travelled to China with the students when relations between Laos and China deteriorated in late 1978/early 1979. He reported that there were forty to fifty students in China, plus another thirty smaller children. At that time, some teachers went with the children, while others returned to Thailand. He explained that only older students who could look after themselves were allowed to make the trip back to Thailand

[10]Khru Suphot, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, April 17, 2021.

when the CPT was forced to withdraw from Laos. Once in Kunming, they re-established *Rong Rian Ruam Wong Phan* school, which was given the code number A2. There was also a kindergarten for younger children. He also continued on to Dehong when the students were sent there. He finally returned to Thailand in 1982 to take advantage of the government amnesty. The Party allowed anyone to leave.

Suphot flew from Beijing to Bangkok, but unlike Chai and Tho, he was not required to stay at a centre. He was later allowed to return to teaching at a government school, although it took some time for everyone to agree.

Thinking about CPT education

It seems likely that the CPT saw ethnicity and linguistic diversity as obstacles to solidarity among the people. Solomas and Back (1995) reviewed Marxist perspectives on race and ethnicity, and pointed out that both Marx and Engels referred to the societal pertinence of racial or ethnic relations, although they did not theorize about how these relations might have been specifically associated with the development of capitalism. Moreover, some have criticized Marx and Engels for holding some of the same sort of ethnic and racial stereotypes that proliferated during their time. Some have suggested that Marx's focus on class resulted in him paying inadequate attention to racial and ethnic difference. However, it is also true that Marxism has been the foundation of some important research and activism related to race and ethnicity (Solomas and Back 1995, 407–408). Notable examples include Robinson's (1983) ideas about Anderson's (2010) consideration of Ireland. The CPT's view of race and ethnicity was crucial, and it appears that their official view was that people of all races and ethnicities should be considered equal, and that the ultimate goal was a classless society. Thus, they were certainly against ethnic-based oppression and discrimination (Communist Party of Thailand 1978), but this does not mean that they supported the idea of ethnic diversity. They saw diversity as an issue that they needed to manage, but not one that they specifically wanted to promote. This is also in line with Lenin's thinking, that the proletariat could take explicit positions of support for a national (ethnic) culture, but that the Party should oppose ethnicity-based oppression.

The story of CPT children's education outside of Thailand raises questions about the CPT's understandings and policies related to ethnicity and language, and about China's support for communist movements in South East Asia. First, it is well known, and unsurprising, that a key policy of the CPT was to promote equality between different ethnic groups (Communist Party of Thailand 1978), a policy that was especially popular amongst discriminated ethnic minorities such as the Hmong (Baird 2021) and Hmong women (Baird and Yangcheepsutjarit 2022), and was one that has been applied by other communist movements operating in minority areas. The CPT supported the right of ethnic minorities to express their ethnic differences from those from the ethnic majority in the country, and their teachings and recruiting tactics during the late 1960s and 1970s suggest that this was the case (Baird 2021; Baird and Yangcheepsutjarit 2022). However, ethnicity was hardly mentioned by teachers or students. Furthermore, teachers did not mention any ethnic, linguistic or religious differences in Thailand – to the extent that Chai and Tho knew little about these differences until they returned to Thailand.

This situation suggests something different, including that while the CPT did explicitly support ethnic equality with the Hmong and other ethnic minority groups (Baird 2021), the CPT leadership probably felt that the ideal situation would be if all ethnic groups eventually became assimilated so that they could be truly equal. In other words, they spoke about ethnic difference with teenagers and adults who had already experienced discrimination in their lives, and had already consciously taken on Hmong ethnic identify and language. However, for children, such as Tho and Chai, who were young enough to be fully shaped through a particular education regime that occurred away from their families and communities, it was deemed best not to promote or even mention ethnicity or ethnic difference at all. Instead, the idea was to simply promote unity between people from all ethnic groups in Thailand by pretending that there was no ethnic difference, and to promote the nation-building process associated with everyone simply identifying based on nationality, with everyone being Thai and everyone speaking one language and dialect – central Thai. This further suggests that the CPT viewed ethnic difference as an obstacle to nation-building, and that ethnic equality could be supported when necessary, but should be suppressed, something that was possible when dealing with small children. The same was true for language, with central Thai being promoted.[11] In some ways, this is similar to the 'integrative and assimilationist' policies that the government of Thailand had long been promoting (Keyes 2002, 1164).

It seems likely that the CPT leadership did not want their frontline leaders overly burdened by childcare and related matters, to free up their time so that they could fully concentrate on their work with the CPT. It was also somewhat prestigious to send children to China, which was presented as the pinnacle of knowledge within the Maoist communist world. Going there provided opportunities for education, but also potentially to make contacts with key CCP leaders. However, the CPT probably believed that it would be easier to promote solidarity amongst people from different ethnic groups and create a strong unity and national identity with the CPT if they could mould children to take on socialist values from a young age. Indeed, communist philosophers have long seen ethnic, linguistic and religious differences as being linked to false consciousness, and as obstacles to promoting the idea of the 'new Socialist man', even if not always explicitly stated (Chen 1969). While Marx thought that capitalism would eventually lead to the vanishing of 'national differences', he believed that socialism would result in the extinction of differences even more rapidly (Heder 2001). Unfortunately, however, little has been written about the inner workings of the CPT's highest political thinkers, or how their ideas affected their approach to education.

Mao Zedong's theory of ethnic struggle was important, and Mao attempted through his theorizing of national struggle to address the question of how classical Marxist-

[11]There are considerable overlaps between the situation of the CPT and experiences associated with the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP), another communist party that operated in an ethnically diverse country. The MCP was a vocal advocate of ethnic equality and stated often that ethnic groups with more resources (such as the Chinese, the group from which the MCP drew well over 95% of its membership) should give to those with less. However, the (understandable) historical materialist orientation of the MCP's ideology basically held that once material needs were met, people would naturally evolve into New Socialist Men and Women, the characteristics of which just so happened to overlap with the identity of those who were in charge of the Party. Hence, despite the MCP's professed commitment to equality and despite some attempts to actually implement it, the MCP had no detailed ethnic policy and no provisions for conducting 'mass work' differently among different ethnic groups (Marc Opper, *pers. comm.,* November 2020).

Leninist ideas of political economy intersected with China's particular need for constructing a multiethnic national sovereignty without abandoning the universality of Marxism-Leninism. Essentially, Mao's theory was that Chinese communists should treat the question of national and ethnic liberation in China as a subset of the larger project of class conflict. Indeed, Mao believed that at the core there was no struggle but class struggle (Mao 1963). This strategically meant that Mao saw the goal of constructing a multiethnic Chinese nation-state as being about mobilizing and transforming the so-called 'backward' nationalities so that they would become modern members of the proletariat subjects under the CCP. Mao's desire for Chinese national unity led to the theorization of a revolutionary transitional phase unlike what Marxist theorists outside of China proposed. This stage of 'new democracy' was imagined as a transitional phase in which interclass and interethnic unity would be promoted before moving into a fully communist society. Mao, for example, proposed the construction of ethnic self-autonomous prefectures under CCP leadership as being a crucial element within this transitional phase (Leibold 2007). However, the creation of autonomous regions in China was actually largely based on the Soviet Union's system of managing ethnic diversity. Indeed, the CCP's system for classifying minorities was apparently lifted verbatim from Stalin's writings about socialist autonomy.[12] Keyes (2002, 1183) wrote, for example, about many Soviet experts coming to China to help classify the country's ethnic groups beginning in the 1950s, and Tapp (2002) has described the mammoth ethnic classification project initiated in China with strong Soviet influence in the 1950s. Michaud (2009) points out that a key motivation of this work was to try to avoid secessionist movements from emerging. Thus, although secession was not permitted, the Chinese and Soviet models were similar, including minority-specific public policies (Sun 2020, 14). Having largely followed the Soviet model of ethnic classification and the recognition of autonomy, China's autonomous system can be characterized as 'latent' or 'nascent', ethnofederalism (Hale 2004, 167).

At some point, however, pro-Soviet Vietnam and Laos diverged from China, as neither country established autonomous areas for ethnic minorities after they gained full sovereignty. It appears that the CCP still hoped that ethnicity would gradually disappear. They recognized that it was useful to engage with ethnicity initially, to gain the support of minorities, before eventually moving beyond ethnic differences, which they believed ultimately to be unconducive to societal unity and solidarity. The CPT had a similar idea, since they closely followed Chinese Marxist political philosophy. They were practical, and so were not draconian in enforcing this, but educating children so that they would not think about ethnicity is likely to have been a way to move beyond this transitional phase.

The idea to take young children far away from their homes and teach them only Central Thai language, also indicates that the CPT wanted to promote 'an ideology of monolingualism', rather than multilingualism (Zhou 2008). As with ethnicity, following the Maoist idea of having a transitional period, the idea was to initially support the use of minority languages, to gain the support of ethnic minorities such as the Hmong, but the education experience may have also been intended to move beyond that to only using a single language, central Thai. As Zhou (2008, 5) explained, the goal was that 'linguistic

[12]Marc Opper, *pers. comm.,* November 2020.

convergence of dialects and languages leads to consolidation and convergence of different ethnic identities as a single national identity, and finally various national identities as a unified national identity', something common for both communist and non-communist state-building projects. The CPT believed in a singular nation state of Thailand. Indicative that the CPT might have been trying to promote unity is that although the young students were sent to study in China, and were there for years, they were not taught Chinese language until after the policy changed to support more integration of the students into Chinese society, which began in about 1982–1983. Moreover, they only taught that a single Thai identity was linked to the single language of Central Thai.

Conclusion

One of the key conclusions of this article is that while the CPT did value education for the people, ethnic diversity was not part of the CPT's education curriculum along the Laos–China border. However, the CPT sent people of all ethnic groups to special schools in Laos and China, with one of the goals being to promote ethnic equality, with ethnic oppression being seen in relation to class differences.

In addition, the CPT – like many political movements of the time – was focused on the nation of Thailand, and so promoted a Central Thai language monolingual approach in schools, as a way to encourage ethnic and national unity and reduce class differences. The CPT's promotion of Central Thai as the lingua franca was not very different from the government of Thailand's approach at the time. Both were focused on the postcolonial nation state.

Overall, the CPT's approach to educating young children in northern Laos and China was not radical, and it did not include a lot of explicit politics. When it came to ethnicity and language, its approach was surprisingly similar to the government of Thailand's approach, although it was more focused on making sure that students appreciated the value of labour.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Chai Sae Lee for his assistance, along with his father Nor Daeng Sae Lee (Mo Daeng), and also to Tho Sae Yang and Khru Suphot. Thanks also to Nhia Ja Xiong for information about his daughter. Thanks to Edwin McKeithen for helping to ask some follow-up questions of Nor Daeng Sae Lee in November 2020. Thanks also to Haiying Li (Misuo) for assisting with some information. Thanks to Takahashi Katsuyuki, Edwin McKeithen, Steve Heder, Marc Opper, and Nicholas Zeller for comments on earlier versions of this paper, and for the useful comments provided by two anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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