

## **Chao Fa Movies: The Transnational Production of Hmong American History and Identity**

**By**

**Ian G. Baird,  
University of Wisconsin-Madison**

**Hmong Studies Journal, 15(1): 1-24.**

### **Chao Fa Movies: The Transnational Production of Hmong American History and Identity**

#### **Abstract**

Films made by and for particular social and ethnic peoples can reveal a great deal about identity issues. Here, I examine the cultural production, the content, and the socio-cultural and political significance of three Chao Fa-inspired Hmong films produced at Khek Noi, Thailand by Hmong American producers working with largely Hmong Thai actors. The first two, *Chao Fa 1* and *2*, were directed in 2009 by Kou Thao. The third, *Vaj Tuam Thawj – The Legend of Chao Fa*, was put together by Jimmy Vang, in 2010. Even though these Chao Fa films are fictional, they attempt to depict events and circumstances that are familiar to many first generation Hmong Americans, and they can muster strong emotions from people who see them as depicting factual history. In addition, just like many other American youth, many 1.5 generation Hmong are tied together by shared media experiences, including Hmong movies. Thus, the Chao Fa movies are important for producing and reproducing, reinforcing and dispersing ideas related to Hmong American identity and culture. They tell stories of the Hmong being oppressed by many different groups, and this history suggests why many Hmong—not only the Chao Fa—have long desired the type of independence and freedom from prejudice and discrimination that they imagine would come if the Hmong only had their own nation state.

**Keywords:** Film, movie, transnational media, Hmong, Thailand, Laos

## Introduction

The low budget movie, *Chao Fa 1*, produced by ethnic Hmong people for a Hmong American audience, begins in 1975 with the mother and father of the male hero, Kongpheng Her (Koob Pheej Hawj), being killed by ruthless Lao communists who were ordered to kill all Hmong who did not agree to cooperate with the new regime. Kongpheng, who is a young man, barely escapes with his younger brother. Trying to flee to Thailand, they come across another group of Hmong in the forest with the same intention. They travel together. Soon after Lao communists attack the group, killing the mother of Pa Ying (Paj Yeeb), one of the Hmong female stars of the movie. They escape and later Kongpheng and Pa Ying gradually fall in love. Later they meet a group of Hmong Chao Fa soldiers, all with long hair, black Hmong outfits and red bandanas and belts. They ask Kongpheng if he wants revenge for what was done to his parents. They also ask if he loves his homeland, his nation. The ethno-nationalist perspective of the film, and the movement that inspired it, are undeniable. That is, the Chao Fa promoted the idea of creating a space, either an area with considerable autonomy or a nation state, dominated by the Hmong ethnic group. After some consideration, Kongpheng decides to stay in the forests and mountains of Laos and fight for the Chao Fa.

This is the way that *Chao Fa 1* [spelt “Caub Fab” in Hmong RPA] Hmong resistance fighters in Laos began, directed and produced by a 1.5 generation Hmong man named Kou Thao (Kub Thoj), from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The two disk DVD production was released in 2009, and was an immediate success in the Hmong American movie market. *Chao Fa 2* came out later in the same year. A third Chao Fa movie, *Vaj Tuam Thawj – The Legend of Chao Fa*, was produced in 2010 by another 1.5 generation Hmong American from St. Paul, Minnesota: Jimmy Vang.

These movies appealed to Hmong Americans for a few reasons, which I examine in this paper. First, the film was almost entirely set in Laos, thus appealing to nostalgic first generation Hmong Americans, the main consumers of Hmong American movies, but also 1.5 generation Hmong who, like other Americans, have been influenced by shared media experiences. Although 1.5 generation Hmong now have less interest in Hmong movies, these films were part of their upbringing, along with Indian Bollywood and Hong Kong Kung Fu movies dubbed into Hmong. Second, the films deal with an historical period, and personal experiences close to those of so many first generation Hmong immigrants to America. In that many Hmong refugees were themselves soldiers of the Secret War (1961-1975), the story about the war in Laos and their role in it has emerged as a key part of the personal life narratives of first generation Hmong Americans with a desire to gain acceptance in the USA (see, for example, Tsing 2013). Third, the films are action movies, with lots of fighting and battle scenes. As Jimmy Vang, stated, when interviewed by Minnesota Public Radio shortly after the release of *Vang Toua Ter (Vaj Tuam Thawj)*, “The action packed, the fighting, the shooting, the Kung Fu stuff is just to make the movie exciting” (Kerr 2010). Fourth, many Hmong simply watch the films because they are in the Hmong language.

Of particular interest to me, however, is that the films deal with a topic of considerable interest to many first generation Hmong Americans, and to a lesser extent amongst second and third generation Hmong Americans: in having their own Hmong nation state. Mai Na Lee (Maiv Nag Lis) (2005) crucially contributes to understanding this feeling amongst many Hmong, through addressing the 'dream of the Hmong Kingdom' during French colonial Laos, demonstrating how many Hmong have historically desired a Hmong Kingdom. Dr. Gary Yia Lee (Lis Yias) also discusses Hmong feelings of what he calls "transnational alienation":

"Whatever their origin may be, the Hmong have always felt like homeless orphans, with small groups separated from each other, or villages every so often on the move, without a true home of their own, living in remote mountains away from other people, without roots and the feeling of belonging. Everywhere, they are a minority, often looked down as backward unkempt hill tribes." (Lee, G.Y. 2006: 2)

It is this feeling that seems to have led many to desire some sort of "Hmong state", or at least significant autonomy in some other type of political jurisdiction. This is front and center within the Chao Fa movement, whether as portrayed in film or in real life. This is what I am referring to when I mention Hmong ethno-nationalism.

For all the above reasons, and undoubtedly more, oral stories about the Chao Fa have long been of interest to Hmong Americans, some of whom have remained involved, or at least attentive, to transnational Hmong politics. This is indicated, for example, by Vang (2011). I have also found it to be the case through conducting dozens of interviews with Hmong people in various states in America between 2008 and 2014. I do not want to imply that everyone or even most people have been significantly affected by the Chao Fa films, but a large number of Hmong Americans have seen at least one of the movies. Moreover, many Hmong have heard vivid, or at least vague, stories about Hmong resistance in Laos, but these stories had never been told to them through the medium of full-scale, albeit low budget, action films. As Houa Lor, a Hmong American, wrote when he reviewed *Vaj Tuam Thawj*,

"I've heard so many stories like this from my parents and to see it acted out on screen, made me relive my father's stories. This has happened to hundreds of Hmong trying to escape for freedom. Thus, many can connect with the content, it makes sense to them" (Lor 2010).

Indeed, Hmong American culture has been affected by Hmong movies, including those related to the Chao Fa, through the production and reproduction of group historical memory.

In this article I examine the cultural production, the content, and the socio-cultural and political significance of three Chao Fa-inspired Hmong films produced at Khek Noi, Thailand by Hmong American directors working with largely Hmong Thai actors; films that were all marketed to Hmong American audiences.

Even though the Chao Fa films are fictional, they attempt to depict events and circumstances that seem familiar to many first generation Hmong Americans. This being the case, it is essential to provide an overview of the history of the Chao Fa movement since 1975. Of course, I will not be able to provide a full account of this important history, but at least doing so basically is essential. I then turn to the site of cultural production, Khek Noi Village in Khao Khor District, Phetchabun Province, Thailand, the hub of Hmong American movie-making. Here I present some of the content of the three movies. This is followed by some background information about an important influence on the production of the Chao Fa movies, a book by a Thai author called, *Chao Fa, A History that Could be*. I also provide some information about the reaction of various people to the Hmong cultural production, as I refer to it, of the Chao Fa films. I then discuss some of what I find to be particularly interesting about the movies, through interpreting and comparing some film content. I conclude by making the argument that the Chao Fa movies are not only significant for documenting a part of history for Hmong Americans, but are also playing a role in actually producing and reproducing cultural group memories associated with the Chao Fa movement.

### **The Chao Fa: A Brief History**

It seems necessary to begin this section by explaining the meaning of the term “Chao Fa”. It is generally used to refer to ethnic Hmong insurgents fighting against the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) government and Lao People’s Army (LPA) and their Vietnamese communist allies and supporters. This resistance began with the communist take-over in Laos in 1975 and is continuing up to now, albeit at a low level and with few remaining fighters.

It is not uncommon for people in Laos, or Hmong people in the USA, to use “Chao Fa” to refer to all the Hmong who resisted communist control in the second half of the 1970s, regardless of their particular political or military affiliations (see Thao 2010; Baird 2010b). In reality, however, Chao Fa specifically refers to a group of Hmong resistance fighters following the religious teachings of the Hmong leader, Shong Lue Yang (Soob Lwj Yaj) (Baird 2013; Hillmer 2009), also known as *The Mother of Writing*, in the sense of ‘source’ (Smalley et al. 1990). The term initially emerged to refer to this group of people in the late 1960s.

On September 15, 1929, Shong Lue Yang was born to a Hmong farming family in the rural mountainous village of Fee Tong, on the Vietnamese side of the Laos/Vietnam border. As a young man, it is claimed that he had a kind of epiphany, coming from spirits from the heavens, and over a number of weeks he reportedly learned the letters of the Pahawh Hmong alphabet in dreams, accessing one new letter each night until a complex Hmong script—unlike any previous known—was created (Smalley et al. 1990) in 1959.<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that there are some in the Hmong community who believe that the script was developed much earlier in China.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brother of Pa Kao Her, *pers. comm.*, November 28, 2011.

In any case, as a messianic figure, Shong Lue Yang preached his religious philosophy and taught the Pahawh script to other Hmong living nearby. As his reputation spread, more people came to study with him. After some time, the communist Vietnamese authorities learned that Shong Lue was gaining followers, and some officials became concerned that he could represent a threat to Vietnam's security, since his narrative was linked to Hmong messianic-style ethno-nationalism. Threatened with arrest by the authorities, Shong Lue and some of his followers fled across the border into Laos in the early 1960s, where there was more freedom to spread the teachings. Over time, Shong Lue's following expanded in Laos, as his reputation as a savior of the Hmong spread. One of his closest disciples was Pa Kao Her (Paj Kaub Hawj), who came from Phou Kheng village, in Pha Vin Sub-district, Nong Het District, Xieng Khouang Province, Laos,<sup>2</sup> two hours walk from Shong Lue's village in Vietnam. Pa Kao's mother was Shong Lue's cousin. Zong Zoua Her (Zoov Zuaj Hawj) was another important follower of Shong Lue Yang's teachings. Pa Kao and Zong Zoua joined the Royal Lao Army in the 1960s, and became active in what became known as the "Secret War in Laos", a US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) supported effort against the communist Pathet Lao forces and their North Vietnamese backers beginning in 1961 (Conboy 1990; Dommen 2001; Hillmer 2009; Baird 2010a). In February 1973 a ceasefire was declared and a coalition government was formed involving the right-wing and neutralist government in Vientiane, and the communist Pathet Lao government previously based in Sam Neua and Phongsaly, northern Laos<sup>3</sup> (Evans 2002).

Zong Zoua Her gained notoriety in the early 1970s when he was rapidly promoted to the rank of Major by General Vang Pao (Vaj Pov)—the right-wing Hmong chief of the Royal Lao Government's (RLG) Military Region 2—after he was able to recruit a large number of Hmong to join the army, relying on the teachings of Shong Lue Yang to persuade Hmong to join the military and fight under him. He obtained the rank of Major in recognition of his recruiting, but despite the success of Shong Lue's teachings for drawing thousands of young Hmong men into Vang Pao's Secret anti-communist army, based in Long Tieng, northern Laos, Vang Pao and other RLG leaders became concerned with Shong Lue's messianic tendencies, increasing popularity and influence amongst the area's Hmong population, and particularly his claim to be a Hmong king.<sup>4</sup> Some felt that Shong Lue's popularity represented a challenge to Vang Pao's and the RLG's authority. Others claimed that Shong Lue was linked to communist spies, even though he had previously fled from the communists in Vietnam. Finally, in February 1971 Shong Lue was assassinated by a Hmong assassin under the orders of Vang Pao, after ethnic Lao members of the RLG heard about Shong Lue and asked how many kings there were in Laos.<sup>5</sup>

In mid-1975, as the Pathet Lao gradually took control of the country, using student protests against allegedly corrupt right-wing politicians and the US government as a

---

<sup>2</sup> Pao Kao Her was apparently born on February 2, 1933 (Tou Her, *pers. comm.*, November 20, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Sam Neua and Phongsaly provinces were allocated to communist control as part of the first Geneva Accord agreement that led to France's departure from French Indochina (including Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), following France's devastating defeat on the battlefield of Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam in 1954 (Evans 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Lt. Col. Vang Neng, Troy, North Carolina, *pers. comm.*, November 1, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Lt. Col. Vang Neng, Troy, North Carolina, *pers. comm.*, November 1, 2014.

pretext to gain increased control over the country, the Hmong population that had supported Vang Pao's Secret Army, including many of Shong Lue's followers, became concerned about retaliation against them. The RLG was gradually marginalized by the communists, but after Vang Pao and other top Hmong military leaders and their families were hurriedly evacuated out of Long Tieng by American CIA planes in mid-May 1975 (Morrison 1999; Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Hillmer 2009), the vast majority of the Hmong who had sided with the Americans were left to fend for themselves. Some gave up to the communists, but others, for various reasons, fled into the forests. With some guns and ammunition left over from the Secret War, they began fighting against the Lao communists. By 1976, the Hmong resistance had expanded, and had taken control of large parts of the countryside populated by Hmong people in north-central Laos, especially in areas surrounding Phou Bia, the tallest mountain in Laos, and the main stronghold of the resistance. There were various different rag-tag Hmong resistance groups living in the forests at this time, led mainly by former soldiers and officials of the previous government, but the main two resistance organizations were led by Sai Shoua Yang, a Hmong local sub-district chief before 1975, and Zong Zoua Her, who was based at Phou Bia. Later, Jane Hamilton-Merritt (1993) depicted the Chao Fa followers of Shong Lue Yang's teachings as irrationally running into communist gunfire due to an unfounded belief that spirits would protect them. We need to be careful about this sort of narrative. While the Hmong and many other ethnic groups in mainland Southeast Asia have a long history of claiming invulnerability during messianic movements, it does not appear that Hamilton-Merritt interviewed any actual Chao Fa during the preparation of her book. Instead she mainly relied on sources close to his rival, General Vang Pao, whose "United Front for the Liberation of Laos" (UFLL) (*Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat* in Lao), was an organization with political reasons for discrediting the followers of Shong Lue Yang's teachings. Pa Kao Her had a complex relationship with Vang Pao, one that soured in the late 1970s, when Pa Kao Her learned that Vang Pao had ordered the assassination of Shong Lue Yang in 1971, through hearing that the actual assassin was boasting of having shot Shong Lue when staying at the Ban Vinai refugee camp at the time Pa Kao Her arrived there in 1978. Prior to then he was unaware of who killed Shong Lue, with some believing that the Lao communists were responsible.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Pa Kao travelled to an important anti-communist meeting organized by key Reagan-era American anti-communists in Angola to represent the anti-communist opposition in Laos, and earlier travelled, with the support of retired General John Singlaub, to a key anti-communist meeting in Dallas, Texas, where he claimed to be the one really fighting communism on the ground in Laos, whereas Vang Pao was instead living in America.

A loose coalition of Hmong resistance groups emerged at this time, and these fighters began being referred to by their communist enemies as "Chao Fa", a Lao term meaning roughly the "god of the sky". In fact, the term was largely meant to refer to Zong Zoua Her and his followers, as they believed that Shong Lue's teachings could protect them from their enemies, although they were not about to jump in front of guns to test these powers out. However, the label of "Chao Fa" was also broadly applied to Sai Shoua Yang's group, and other Hmong resistance groups, even though they followed more typical Hmong

---

<sup>6</sup> Brother of Pa Kao Her, *pers. comm.*, November 28, 2011.

religious Shamanistic practices. Although the Hmong resistance initially rejected the “Chao Fa” label, over time they came to accept it, and then to even embrace it.

On July 18, 1977, the Lao PDR government signed an important political agreement with the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Brown and Zasloff 1986; Evans 2002). This officially established a “special friendship” between the two parties and governments, and opened the door for the influx of tens of thousands of Vietnamese troops to repress the resistance to the Lao PDR government that had developed in many rural parts of Laos, including the Phou Bia area (Evans 2002; Baird 2012). By late 1977 the Vietnamese had moved their large guns into position at places such as Muang Cha<sup>7</sup>, not far from Phou Bia, and began pummeling Hmong resistance positions, including those controlled by Sai Shoua Yang and Zong Zoua Her. The Hmong were skillful fighters when they engaged in small arms combat in the forests, but since they only had access to small arms, they could not effectively respond to being heavily bombed from a number of kilometers away. Therefore, members of the resistance and their families, who had been conducting swidden cultivation in the hills that they had taken control over in 1975, had little choice but to flee their bases and mountain refuges. Many were rounded up by Lao and Vietnamese forces sent in after the Hmong positions had been attacked and scattered. Large numbers also fled, hoping to escape to Thailand by crossing the Mekong River. Many died along the way, due to illness, malnutrition, and starvation, as well as from being attacked by communist forces. Many also drowned or were shot as they attempted to cross the Mekong. It was a traumatic and devastating experience for so many Hmong (Thao 2010; Vang 2010; Hillmer 2009; Yang 2008). Some Hmong resistance fighters and their families were able to regroup. Sai Shoua Yang and many of his followers escaped to Thailand, but many of Zong Zoua Her’s Chao Fa followers were able to evade the communists and continue resisting from hidden strongholds on Phou Bia mountain.

It was recognized, however, that resisting from Phou Bia, without gaining outside support, would be difficult, so on March 3, 1978 Zong Zoua’s close associate, Pa Kao Her, crossed the Mekong to Thailand with 15 other Hmong Chao Fa, including his younger brother.<sup>8</sup> They spent a short amount of time at the Nong Khai refugee camp, and then Pa Kao was transferred to the main Hmong refugee camp in Thailand, Ban Vinai. After spending a few months there, he was able to make connections with Thai security forces and leave the camp to start developing armed resistance against the Lao PDR government from within Thailand. Pa Kao Her<sup>9</sup> and his supporters established resistance bases along the border in Thailand adjacent to Laos’ Xayaboury Province, in north-western Laos, and over time they were able to penetrate deep into Laos, meeting up and coordinating operations with followers resisting from the mountainous forests of northern Laos. Groups of insurgents from other ethnic groups also resisted the Lao PDR government (Jonsson 2009; Baird 2012), although not generally in as large numbers, or for as many years as the Hmong.

---

<sup>7</sup> Muang Cha is mentioned in Vaj Tuam Thawj as being a communist base near Phou Bia Mountain.

<sup>8</sup> Pa Kao Her’s brother, *pers. comm.*, November 28, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> The name that Thais knew him as when he was in Thailand was Cheng Sai.

The Chao Fa received a particular boost to their cause in late 1978 and in early 1979 when China invaded Vietnam, ostensibly to teach Vietnam a lesson for invading Cambodia and ousting the Khmer Rouge from power (Chanda 1986). Although China had also positioned a large number of troops (allegedly 100,000) along the border with Laos, in preparation for a potential war with Vietnam's close ally, after sustaining heavy human and material losses during their month-long invasion of northern Vietnam, they opted to not invade Laos. They did, however, decide to work to destabilize Laos, thus necessitating a heavy Vietnamese troop presence in Laos, an action that they hoped would divert Vietnamese military and other resources from development activities. As part of this effort, it was arranged through the Thai military—including Special Col. Sudsai Thephasadin from the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC)—for large numbers of Hmong Chao Fa fighters to travel to China to receive military training, arms and other supplies needed to militarily resist the Lao PDR government and their Vietnamese allies (Baird 2013). The Chinese also convinced Pa Kao Her's group to name itself the "Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos" (ELOL) (*Ong Kan Pot Poi Thook Son Xat Son Phao You Nai Lao* in Lao), in order to politically resist the Lao PDR government in the name of liberated Laos' upland ethnic minorities. The Chinese continued to support the ELOL and other resistance organizations until it softened its opposition in the mid-1980s (Baird 2013; 2012). The Chao Fa also received considerable support from Tham Krabok, a Theravada Buddhist temple in Saraburi Province, whose abbot was Luang Pho Chamroon Parnchand, an important supporter of the Hmong resistance against communism until his death in 1999 (Baird 2013; Chambers 2013).

Even after the Chinese stopped supporting the ELOL, the Thai security services along the border with Laos continued to support Pa Kao Her and others in the resistance. Pa Kao and other Hmong insurgent groups also assisted the Thais in fighting against the LPA in border clashes at what became known as "three villages" in 1984, between Uttaradit Province in Thailand and Xayaboury Province in Laos, and in 1987 at "Rom Klao", between Phitsanulok Province in Thailand and Xayaboury Province in Laos. However, in 1988, newly elected Thai Prime Minister, Chatchai Choonhavan, initiated a major foreign policy shift for Thailand, and advocated for the "Battlefield to Marketplace" policy, which eventually resulted in the Thai government officially withdrawing support for anti-Lao PDR government insurgents, including Pa Kao Her and his Chao Fa supporters (Baird 2012). Still, some elements in the military still tacitly supported their cold war allies, and heavy fighting continued (Baird 2013; Peterson 1990), but over time that support diminished, and by the early 1990s the Thais were becoming less and less tolerant of insurgents operating from Thai soil. This led to the Chao Fa, which by then had abandoned the name ELOL and had rebranded themselves as the "Chao Fa Democratic Party", to attempt to become more established inside Laos' Xayaboury Province, so as not be based on Thai soil.

However, these groups faced serious resistance from the LPA, and by the mid-1990s the Chao Fa were being seriously threatened, thus leading many to flee back to Thailand. Others were killed in battle, or gave up to the LPA. Some continued fighting in the forests.

By the early 2000s the Hmong Chao Fa resistance was much diminished. There were also internal divisions, especially after Pa Kao Her's long-time deputy, Moua Nhia Long



(Muas Nyiaj Looj), split from Pa Kao's group in the late 1990s. After Pa Kao Her was assassinated, presumably by agents of or hired by the Lao PDR government, in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand on October 23, 2002, the movement was in disarray, with Chao Fa military operations along the border basically coming to an end.

Some Chao Fa fighters and their allies continued to resist farther inside Laos, including in the Phou Bia area and elsewhere in central and northern Laos. However, many groups of Hmong, including those allied with both the Chao Fa, and others linked to Vang Pao's and General Thonglith Chokbengboun's UFLL, found it increasingly difficult to hold off the LPA, and most ended up leaving the forests in the late 2000s, either giving up to the Lao PDR authorities, or fleeing to Thailand in small groups. Today, there are still a small number of Hmong Chao Fa living in the forests of Laos, but they are no longer strong enough to conduct many offensive operations, and now predominantly try to defend themselves against periodic LPA attacks. The most prominent resistance group still living in the Phou Bia area is led by an older Hmong man, Pa Chong Her. He apparently took over military leadership of the Hmong Chao Fa on Phou Bia after Zong Zoua Her died there in around 2000.<sup>10</sup> According to Pa Chong Her's supporters in the USA, who run the Congress of World Hmong People's, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, Pa Chong Her has not given up because unlike those supporters of Vang Pao, who almost all left the forest after the general died in the USA in early 2011, he remains ideologically committed to the teachings of Shong Lue Yang, as well the idea of some sort of Hmong State, or at least autonomous area of Hmong control.<sup>11</sup> In any case, Hmong resistance against the Lao PDR government is at its lowest level since 1975, and seems likely to continue to diminish.

### **Khek Noi: The Hmong Movie Making Hub in Thailand**

Due to conflict in Laos, well over one hundred thousand Hmong fled the country to Thailand between 1975 and the early 1990s. Most ended up in refugee camps in northeastern and northern Thailand, especially the largest of the camps, Ban Vinai, near Pak Chom in Loei Province (Vang 2010; Hillmer 2009). Most of those who fled to Thailand initially hoped that they would one day be able to return to a non-communist Laos. Indeed, many became insurgents with hopes of making that happen, but as the years passed, many resigned themselves to resettlement in third countries, especially the USA, and France, Canada, Australia and others to a much lesser extent. Over one hundred thousand Hmong ended up emigrating to the USA between 1975 and the mid-1990s. The last substantial group of Hmong refugees was sent mainly to the USA in 2004-2005 from Tham Krabok Temple in Saraburi, Thailand (Chambers 2013; Baird 2013).

This large Hmong refugee population were initially spread all over the USA, but over time secondary migration resulted in a greatly changed Hmong human geography, with California supporting the largest population of Hmong of any state in the USA, followed by

---

<sup>10</sup> It is unclear how Zong Zoua Her died. He was apparently an opium addict, and some believe that his opium was poisoned, thus causing his death. It is also possible that he may have died of natural causes or some other unidentified illness.

<sup>11</sup> Congress of World Hmong People's, group meeting, St. Paul, Minnesota, *pers. comm.*, September 2013.

Minnesota and Wisconsin in the Mid-West, and with small pockets of Hmong in a number of other states (Pfeifer *et al.* 2012). Many of the initial refugees to the USA did not speak much or any English. Their cultural norms were also quite different from those of most Americans. Thus, it was often difficult for these first generation migrants to adjust to their new circumstances in the USA. Many also longed for the homeland that they were forced to abandon (Vang 2010; Hillmer 2009).

Not surprisingly, after some time in the USA, some Hmong from the 1.5 generation, who were either born in Laos or Thailand, but came to the USA as older children or teenagers, became keenly interested in producing video films targeting Hmong America. But few of these early Hmong film makers had much capital. Nor did they have access to commercial marketing networks. Because many older generation Hmong still felt extremely nostalgic about their former life in Laos, there was considerable demand for films whose stories were situated in Southeast Asia, especially Laos (Schein 2002; 2004; Lee, G.Y. 2006; Lee and Tappe 2010). There was a desire to re-experience and reproduce memories from Laos in film. Louisa Schein (2004) usefully analyzed Hmong American narratives related to transnational marriages based on the famous "Dr. Tom" movies produced in the 1990s, and Gary Yia Lee examined Hmong media, with a special interest in "imaginings and nostalgia for the geographic spaces left behind after 1975 by those Hmong who now live in Western countries" (Lee, G.Y. 2006: 3). There are still, however, many aspects of Hmong film-making that await investigation, such as the overall Hmong film industry in Khek Noi and Thailand more broadly.

Although Hmong films were popular in the US, making Hmong films in America was problematic for a few reasons. First, production costs were much too high for most low-budget Hmong film-makers. Moreover, the physical geography and settings in the USA could not convincingly substitute for Laos. Therefore, few Hmong film-makers were able to produce substantial films in the USA, at least early on. In addition, in the 1980s and 1990s most Hmong Americans dared not return to Laos due to political concerns and the continuing insurgency, and even if they were willing to visit, making Hmong films for a Hmong American audience was still not a realistic option. Therefore, some young Hmong American film-makers started to explore options for making films in Thailand. Eventually, after a few films were made at Tham Krabok temple in Saraburi Province and other places, film-makers started to make the vast majority of Hmong films produced for the Hmong American market at the largest Hmong community in Thailand, known as Khek Noi, in Khao Khor District, Phetchabun Province, at a place that I call "Hmollywood", a term that many Hmong I have mentioned the term to have endorsed.

Khek Noi exhibited a number of advantages that made it attractive for Hmong film-makers. First, the physical landscape around Khek Noi is mountainous, and beautiful. There are some National Parks located nearby. Thus the physical environment was suitable for locating film production for stories that were situated in Laos. Second, some Hmong from Laos who did not go to third countries as refugees ended up in Khek Noi, thus providing Hmong Americans with contacts there. Third, because Khek Noi is a large community of over 10,000 people situated in a dozen villages, with almost all the population being Hmong, the Hmong there are considered by first generation Hmong Americans to speak

clear White Hmong.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the population represents a large pool of good Hmong speakers with the potential to serve as actors in Hmong movies. Over time, as more and more movies were made in Khek Noi, many Hmong Thai living there became familiar with film-making. Their organizational, acting and directing skills improved. Thus, a pool of good quality Hmong workers gradually developed for making Hmong movies. Many Hmong Thais have since become well-known actors, such as Wee Thao and Chue Yang, to name just two, while others have taken on other roles in the film-making industry. Some Hmong have even become skilled at editing films, such as a Hmong named Meng, who lives nearby. Crucially, the Hmong at Khek Noi were not particularly wealthy, as many were resettled to Khek Noi after spending years in the forests fighting as soldiers for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Therefore, they could be hired for relatively low costs, which was important for the low-budget productions that the Hmong Americans made, even if it did create some tensions between the Hmong American directors and the Thai Hmong working for them.

Because I intend to write about the Hmong film-making industry in Khek Noi in more detail in a separate paper, I will not go into great detail about Hmong film-making at Khek Noi here. However, it is necessary to explain a few fundamental aspects of how film-making is done there, and how films are marketed in the USA. First, although the films are made in Thailand, they are never marketed there. Because of lax copy-right enforcement in Thailand, it was deemed overly difficult to make them profitable, initially as VHS cassettes in the 1990s, and more recently as DVDs, for the market in Thailand. As soon as a few copies have been sold, cheap boot legs would emerge on the black-market, thus making it hard to sell legitimate copies. Sometimes Hmong in Thailand can only access these films from friends and relatives in the USA. Second, the films have historically been marketed in the USA through networks of Hmong American retailers, rather than through large mainstream movie outlets. Moreover, there are two times each year when most Hmong movies are sold to retail customers. The first is during the Hmong New Year, which occurs at different locations between October and January each year. The second is during Hmong 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations, another important time for organizing large Hmong festivals that include Hmong vendors selling videos.

With the above background in mind, I now examine the three Chao Fa films of particular interest here.

## **The Chao Fa Films**

### ***Chao Fa 1 and 2***

Chao Fa 1 and 2 are two separate films, each about 90 minutes long, but they are two parts of the same story. Both were filmed at Khek Noi. The producer, Kou (Kevin) Thao, entered into a partnership with a Thai named Thom, who had a company called Asian Media. The credits for the films claim that Thom wrote the scripts, but according to Pao Pawrabat—the award winning ethnic Thai responsible for coordinating the movie's stunts,

---

<sup>12</sup> There are, however, also Green Hmong speakers living at Khek Noi.

and also an actor in Chao Fa 1—the scripts were not well developed. Rather, they were largely improvised during filming.<sup>13</sup>

One of the interesting things about Chao Fa 1 and 2 is that they used various languages. The Hmong often spoke Hmong, but Kongpheng sometimes spoke Lao. There were also actors from northeastern Thailand who spoke Lao, and the white actors spoke some Thai and English. Pao Pawrabat was the only central Thai who played a role in the movie, although he was coached to speak Lao.<sup>14</sup> English sub-titles were included, but interestingly, because some passages of the films are entirely in Lao, it would be impossible for someone who only spoke Hmong to fully follow the films. However, most first generation Hmong refugees can understand at least some Lao, especially those who were once soldiers in Laos. This is the most important indicator that the target audience for the films was first generation Hmong Americans.

The main actor in Chao Fa 1 and 2, Chart Her is a Hmong from Chiang Rai Province in Thailand. After the first two Chao Fa movies, Kou Thao and Chart were unable to come to an agreement for making another film. Therefore, Kou Thao's third Chao Fa-inspired movie did not include Kongpheng as a character. Moreover, after Chart married a Hmong woman from America, he was able to access enough capital from his father-in-law to make his own Chao Fa movie, *Chiv Keeb Caub Fab: The Beginning of Jao Fa*, which was released in 2011. I will not discuss this film in detail here, since it builds on earlier Chao Fa films, and was produced by a Hmong Thai rather than a Hmong American. Pao Pawrabat assisted Chart with organizing the stunts for the film, apparently to the disappointment of Kou Thao.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Vaj Tuam Thawj – The Legend of Chao Fa***

Vaj Tuam Thawj – The Legend of Chao Fa addresses similar themes as Chao Fa 1 and 2, but there is much less Lao and Thai spoken in the movie, and the English subtitles are not as well done as in Chao Fa 1 and 2. But because of the greater use of Hmong language in the film, it is more accessible to Hmong-only speakers than Kou Thao's films.

Much like Chao Fa 1 and 2, the film presents the idea that Lao communists are trying to wipe out all the Hmong on Phou Bia Mountain, this time with the help of the “23<sup>rd</sup> North Vietnamese National Army”. In particular, the danger of those who believe in the Chao Fa flag, which is thought to be protecting the people, is discussed. A communist general commented, in the movie, “Then we have to kill whoever carries this symbol then burn and destroy it.”

Unlike Chao Fa 1 and 2, Vaj Tuam Thawj depicts an effort by the Lao communists to get Hmong military officers who fought with the Americans to go for “re-education” training (see Thammakhanty 2004; Bouphanouvong 2003). One of the Chao Fa soldiers in

---

<sup>13</sup> Pao Pawrabat, Bangkok, *pers. comm.*, June 14, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Pao Pawrabat, Bangkok, *pers. comm.*, June 14, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Pao Pawrabat, Bangkok, *pers. comm.*, June 14, 2012.

the film, Kab Tuam (Ka Toua), is almost taken away, but he escapes into the forest at the last moment, and begins to fight for the Chao Fa.

While Chao Fa 1 and 2 present the Chao Fa flag as being sacred, in Vaj Tuam Thawj, both the Chao Fa flag and the sacred Pahawh script are presented as sacred items. The Lao communists are shown desperately trying to obtain these items from the Hmong, in order to reduce the success of Hmong resistance.

Another important lesson presented in Vaj Tuam Thawj relates to a Hmong woman, Pa Nhia (Paj Nyiag), who is brainwashed by communists as a young person, but later realizes how cruel the communists really are, and regrets that she initially believed in them. Here, the idea of Hmong ethno-nationalism is promoted, as in Chao Fa 1 and 2. The idea of the Hmong “preserving our ethnicity” is stressed through the film. Similarly, in Vaj Tuam Thawj, the hero of the film states, “Being a nation (ethnicity or race) is like a tree. If the roots are not firm, when the wind comes or the water floods no matter how tall the branches are...” Again Hmong ethno-nationalism is crucial to the story line.

During my separate interviews with Kou Thao and Jimmy Vang, I learned that there is some disagreement regarding who came up with the original idea to make the Chao Fa films. According to Jimmy, he did due to observations he made when he was in Thai refugee camps, and also due to his reading of the book, *Chao Fa: A History that Could be*, in Thai as a teenager in Thailand (see below). He told me that he did not make his film before Kou Thao because Thom from Asian Media wanted the film to be short, and Jimmy wanted to wait to make a longer more complete version. Jimmy claims that he told Thom about the idea, and that Thom in turn told Kou Thao.<sup>16</sup> However, when I later asked Kou Thao about who gave him the idea for making the Chao Fa movies, he claimed that Jimmy was not the first to come up with the idea.<sup>17</sup> It seems possible that Kou Thao forgot hearing about the idea from Thom, who has since passed away.

### ***Chao Fa – A History that Could be***

When I first started conducting research regarding the Chao Fa films, I expected that the main influences on these Hmong movie-makers would be stories that the producers heard from other Hmong or their own memories. This was indeed part of the story, but when I interviewed Jimmy Vang in St. Paul, Minnesota in 2012, he told me that his main influence was actually a Thai-language book which was later translated by the author into English (Panasuwan 2000), and was titled *Chao Fa: A History that Could be*.<sup>18</sup> Written using the pen name Piriya Panasuwan, the actual name of the author is Pongkaset Suwannakoon. The book was first released in Thailand in 1982, and was printed at least a dozen times in Thai, as well as in Japanese and a couple of times in English. It won a Thai National Book Award in 1983.<sup>19</sup> According to Jimmy Vang, he read it in Thai as a teenager in the 1980s at the time he was living in Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. He also heard about the Chao

---

<sup>16</sup> Jimmy Vang, *pers. comm.*, November 11, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Kou Thao, telephone interview, *pers. comm.*, February 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Jimmy Vang, St. Paul, *pers. comm.*, November 11, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Pongkaset Suwannakoon, Chiang Mai, *pers. comm.*, June 1, 2014.

Fa when he was staying at Nam Yao refugee camp in Nan Province between 1976-1984. Since he spent many years as a refugee in Thailand, he did most of his education in the Thai language, which resulted in him becoming literate in Thai. The book particularly inspired him to tell the history of the Chao Fa.

The book *Chao Fa* actually differs considerably from the *Chao Fa* films. That is because most of it deals with fictional accounts of Hmong life during the Secret War in Laos before 1975. Only a small part of the book, the very end, discusses the Chao Fa rebels that emerged to resist the communists in Laos after 1975. In fact, considering the author's background, the emphasis of the book is in many ways not surprising. However, one important similarity between *Vaj Tuam Thawj* and the book is that both include scenes of Hmong non-communist interactions, and also of Hmong communist interactions, thus giving voices to both sides of the conflict.

Pongkaset Suwannakoon was born in 1943 to a Christian family in Sarapee, just a little outside of Chiang Mai. After studying in Chiang Mai and later the Bangkok Christian College, he went to study university in the USA, starting out in Missouri and eventually finishing his Bachelors of Arts in music in Washington DC. Upon completing his degree, he returned to Thailand and started working as a translator for Air America, based in Udorn Thani, in northeastern Thailand. However, that job lasted less than a month, before he decided to take a position with the CIA in support of the Secret War in Laos. At that time he flew from Udorn to Long Tieng each morning before returning in the evening. He also took on other positions, including Order of Battle analyst in Udorn. For reasons unknown to him, it was then that he really started to get to know the Hmong. In particular, the CIA arranged for him to study Hmong language one hour per day for a year. According to Pongkaset, "They [the CIA] wanted me to know how Hmong thought, so they wanted me to study Hmong language."<sup>20</sup> He certainly learned more than Hmong language from his teacher, a young Hmong from Laos who was studying interrogation techniques at Udorn. Pongkaset and his teacher struck up a close friendship. "We would talk and drink beer and whiskey together when I met him at Long Tieng later," explained Pongkaset. After learning some Hmong, Pongkaset became a member of the mobile interrogation team in 1971, which resulted in him flying all over the country, including Luang Phrabang, Savannakhet, Pakse and Pha Khao, the Hmong interrogation camp in Military Region 2. He continued in that role until America's war effort declined after the 1973 Peace Agreement.

In 1974 Pongkaset transferred to working for the USA Consulate in Udorn. When refugees from Laos started pouring across the border to Thailand in 1975, he became responsible for gathering information about these refugees for the Consulate. He frequently went to interview Hmong refugees at various camps, in order to prepare reports that would help them gain permission to emigrate to the USA. As he put it, "I learned a lot about the refugees from Laos during this time. I heard their stories." It was at this time that Pongkaset started writing *Chao Fa*, his first of many books. It took him three years to finish writing it. He finally quit the Consulate and moved to Bangkok in 1981. From my meeting with Pongkaset at his home in Sarapee, where he returned to live in 1998, it is clear to me

---

<sup>20</sup> Pongkaset Suwannakoon, *pers. comm.*, June 1, 2014.

that he was deeply touched by his experiences with the Hmong. However, his sympathetic portrayal of the Hmong was, he told me, less appealing to some Lao Americans, who were unhappy that he had made the Lao look bad. This is probably an important reason why Jimmy Vang was influenced by the book, as it sympathetically told of the many hardships that so many Hmong faced in Laos before fleeing the country. It built on Hmong memories.

## Reactions to the Chao Fa Movies

The reactions of the intended audience of the Chao Fa movies, Hmong Americans, have been, not surprisingly, varied. On the one hand, Chao Fa 1 sold particularly well, as the first of the Chao Fa movies to hit the market. Chao Fa 2 was somewhat less successful, as the novelty of the first movie was hard to equal, it still sold relatively well, since it was a direct sequel to the first film.<sup>21</sup> Three thousand copies of Vaj Tuam Thawj were produced, and basically sold out.

Some Hmong felt nostalgic when they saw the films, especially the older generation, while other younger Hmong who were either born in America or were too young when they left Laos to remember what happened in the forests of Laos after 1975 were curious to learn from the films. Indicative of the emotions that younger Hmong felt, Houa Lor (2010) writes, in his review of Vaj Tuam Thawj:

“When you sit down and watch Vaj Tuam Thawj: Legend of Chao Fa, remember that each time you make a dream of yours come true, it brings to life the reason why your parents brought you here. Each time you do something with your life, do it with pride, do it with honor, and do it with passion. Don’t forget where you come from, the roots of your heritage, and the reason why you were brought here. Don’t live your life with a day to day basis of doing nothing extraordinary. Follow your dreams and remember that each time you make something happen, a little bit of that power and passion will bring us closer to giving those still fighting for freedom a chance to be with us.”

This passage, I think, indicates the importance of the Chao Fa movies in producing and reproducing Hmong American history and memory, even though the movies are admittedly fictional. This media is influencing the ways that Hmong Americans understand themselves, personal histories and memories, and shared Hmong American consciousness.

The former Chao Fa themselves had mixed reactions. On the one hand, at least some were happy that the Chao Fa were portrayed positively in all three films. Indeed, the Chao Fa were presented as basically the Hmong equivalents to Eric Hobsbawm’s (2000) ‘social bandits’, as essentially messianic saviors for the downtrodden Hmong. Although the Hmong Chao Fa did not so much take from the rich and give to the poor, they did sometimes help the poor escape from the persecution that they faced from their communist Lao and Vietnamese enemies.

---

<sup>21</sup> Kou Thao, *pers. comm.*, February 2014.

At least a few former Chao Fa were, however, quite upset by aspects of the movies. For example, Chao Fa 1 and Vaj Tuam Thawj both portray the Chao Fa flag as an important, even sacred, object for the Chao Fa in battles. However, during battles in both films, the flag holder does not simply hold the flag up in one place, which is what generally happened in reality (the Hmong believed that if the flag fell they would be defeated in battle). Instead, in both films the flag bearers wave the flag back and forth in battle, something that the real Chao Fa never actually did. In the case of Chao Fa 1, Pao Pawrabat told me that it was his idea to wave the flag, in order to add more action to the film.<sup>22</sup> But the older Chao Fa were somewhat irked by the artistic liberties taken with their sacred flag. They were also unhappy with the use of the Hmong Pahawh written script in Vaj Tuam Thawj, as the script is supposed to be secret. I heard this from a few former Chao Fa who I interviewed in the USA. Jimmy Vang also received at least two angry anonymous telephone calls from a former Chao Fa who was quite upset with the content. He told the caller that he was just a businessman, and that he was not trying to record history exactly as it occurred, and that he was instead just creating entertainment.<sup>23</sup> The seriousness of this reaction provides some evidence that these films are viewed as important sites for cultural reproduction by the Hmong themselves.

The Lao PDR government, however, was undoubtedly much more disturbed with the movies than others. Although none of the films were directly marketed in Laos, they arrived there nevertheless, via the Hmong American relatives of Hmong in Laos. In fact, some Thai Hmong told me that sometimes films made at Khek Noi get to Hmong communities in Laos before they arrive in Khek Noi because their relatives in America send copies directly to Laos. But the Lao PDR government was certainly unhappy with the content. At least the Chao Fa 1 and 2 films were banned from Laos. It is unclear whether Vaj Tuam Thawj was also banned, although it seems likely that it was, since all three films all portray the communist Lao in a bad light.

### **Interpreting the Chao Fa Movies**

The Chao Fa movies do not simply tell a story about Hmong resistance to Lao communism. They provide a lot of revealing commentary on ethnic relations, including Hmong self-understanding, and gender issues.

In relation to ethnic relations, at the beginning of Chao Fa 2, the hero, Kongpheng, rescues some Hmong being preyed upon by ethnic Lao thugs staying at the same refugee camp as the Hmong. Apart from depicting the Lao as bullies, the film includes commentary by Hmong actors that the ethnic Lao who fled Laos did not really have to leave, as was the case for the Hmong, but instead fled mainly for economic reasons, thus making them illegitimate refugees when compared to the Hmong. Both Chao Fa 1 and 2, and Vaj Tuam Thawj also depict the ethnic Lao communist soldiers as particularly evil. Certainly many ethnic Lao refugees would be upset to see the way they are portrayed in the films, but they do convey an impression, right or wrong, that at least some Hmong have about the Lao.

---

<sup>22</sup> Pao Pawrabat, Bangkok, *pers. comm.*, June 14, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Jimmy Vang, St. Paul, MN, *pers. comm.*, November 11, 2012.



Similarly, Chao Fa 1 and 2 portray the Thais as being predatory against the Hmong, an impression that many Hmong Lao refugees had during the time they were in refugee camps in Thailand. I heard of cases when ethnic Thai people took advantage of Hmong at the Tham Krabok Buddhist temple in Saraburi Province by getting outside sellers to overprice products sold to the Hmong, and then splitting the profit with the sellers (see Baird 2013). Indeed this negative impression of Thais from their time in refugee camps has resulted in some Hmong Americans, especially women, becoming scared of Thailand and Thais when they visit. Even today some dare not go anywhere without being guided by a Hmong person from Thailand who is able provide them with good advice and generally protect them from bad elements. This impression is clearly based on the bad experiences that many Hmong had when they were refugees in Thailand. However, in *Vaj Tuam Thawj*, a Thai named Yongyud tries to help the Hmong Chao Fa, but he ends being killed after he steps on a mine.

The Chao Fa 2 movie presents American government officials in a negative light. Kongpheng is in a refugee camp and does not want to be involved in any more fighting in Laos. He hopes to emigrate to a third country. However, officials from the American Embassy in Thailand learn that Kongpheng was once a skillful Chao Fa combatant, and recruit him to help rescue an American CIA soldier who is imprisoned in Laos. Initially, Kongpheng refuses to go on a mission to bring the American prisoner out alive, but then the Embassy staff put the pressure on, telling him that he will only be admitted to the USA after he completes the mission for them. So he has no choice but to accept the assignment, which he is eventually successful in doing. It is noteworthy, however, that in Chao Fa 1, Kongpheng befriends an "American" journalist named Tommy (the part is actually played by a German) who has snuck into Laos to try to take photographs of the atrocities being committed there. Tommy, unlike the American Embassy worker he meets in Chao Fa 2, is depicted in quite a positive light. So not all Americans are demonized in the films.

Chao Fa 1 and 2 and *Vaj Tuam Thawj* also present the Hmong who collaborated with the communists as bad people who betrayed their own people and deserve whatever their bad karma might bring them. These sorts of people are often referred to by Hmong Americans as "Vue Kheu" (Vwj Khwb), the name of the Hmong man who allegedly convinced Vue Mai (Vwj Mais), the Hmong leader of the Ban Vinai refugee camp, to voluntarily return to Laos in the early 1990s. Later Vue Mai disappeared in Laos and is assumed by many to have been killed. Many think the communists killed him, and that Vue Khue betrayed him because he convinced Vue Mai to return. Chao Fa 1 depicts an elderly Hmong leader who is intimately helping the Lao communists, despite being frequently insulted and disrespected by his Lao superiors. Finally, at the end of Chao Fa 1, the Hmong collaborator is himself betrayed by his Lao communist allies, who kill him. In *Vaj Tuam Thawj*, an equivalent Hmong assistant to the communist Lao, Lee Teng, is eventually killed by a rocket fired by his own boss, who has no regard for the life of his Hmong assistant. In the end, the moral lesson of both films is obvious: do not betray your own Hmong people for evil communist Lao. Reinforcing this idea that Hmong should not betray other Hmong, in Chao Fa 2 the Hmong leader of the Chao Fa, Pa Cai (who looks very similar to the real Pa

Kao Her<sup>24</sup>) says, as he is dying, that all the Hmong should come together, because if they do not they will be destroyed. The main hero of *Vaj Tuam Thawj* also states, " It is already bad enough that Hmong don't love one another, yet is made worse due to them being tricked by the Red Lao to fight like this." Moreover, in *Vaj Tuam Thawj*, Zong Zoua, the leader of the Chao Fa forgives a Hmong female communist spy who admits to having caused the deaths of many Hmong Chao Fa "heroes", and realizes the errors of her ways. Another Chao Fa similarly forgives a male Hmong soldier who also recognizes his grave mistake in following the communists. However, a starving Vang Toua Ter asks for help from a Hmong woman who is scared of him because her family was killed by Chao Fa. Nevertheless, the Chao Fa are ultimately presented as being compassionate to all Hmong, even if they have no choice but to kill some who side with the communists. In short, Hmong should love Hmong, a strong narrative about Hmong in Asia and in America today, an idea sometimes linked to ethno-nationalism.

In *Vaj Tuam Thawj*, it is also explained that the Hmong were persecuted by the Chinese a couple of hundred years ago, another important element in the construction of Hmong identity in Laos and Thailand, and also America.

Crucially, through negatively portraying the Lao, the Thai, the Americans, other Hmong who sided with the communists, and the Chinese; and encouraging Hmong to love other Hmong, one can see how the film depicts the exact sort of narrative the Gary Yia Lee (2006) discusses in his article about Hmong transnational media, one in which the Hmong see those around them as predators not to be trusted. Only true non-communist Hmong are believable. This obviously contributes to a particular type of Hmong ethno-nationalism as well.

In relation to gender issues, the Chao Fa movies all deal with relationships between the male and female key actors. In the case of Chao Fa 1 and 2, Kongpheng initially falls in love with a woman named Pa Ying. Later, they are forced to separate, but Pa Ying promises to only love Kongpheng, and to wait for him forever. Later, however, another Hmong woman named Mai Lee (Maiv Lis) starts to fall in love with him, but he is mindful of Pa Ying. Finally, Mai Lee steps on a land mine and is killed. In Chao Fa 2, Kongpheng learns that Pa Ying has gone to America. He hopes to follow her, but first must help the Americans rescue an imprisoned American CIA agent. During his mission, he meets another Hmong woman, Gao Shoua (Nkauj Sua). They eventually fall in love and escape across the Mekong River to Thailand as the film ends. But there is no mention of his commitment to Pa Ying, or his previous desire to follow her. Why not? There appears to be a contradiction, but it seems to be accepted that even though Pa Ying promised to only love him, it is acceptable for Kongpheng to end up with someone else. It is hard to know if this just represents a gap in the story, or if it is a more conscious acknowledgement that it is acceptable for Hmong men, even good men like Kongpheng, to love more than one woman. This may reflect the tradition of polygamy of the Hmong, or maybe this issue was expected to be resolved in the

---

<sup>24</sup> There is also a character in the Chao Fa 2 who resembles Zong Zoua Her, and is referred to as "Leader Zong", clearly referring to Zong Zoua Her. *Vaj Tuam Thawj* also includes Zong Zoua as the Hmong leader of the Chao Fa, who dies at the end of the film.

third movie but could not because Chart did not agree to act in it? Or maybe it relates to the fact that she was inaccessible because she was so far away?

Vaj Tuam Thawj depicts Hmong male and female relations somewhat differently, making it clear that for the Chao Fa, the nation is more important than loving a woman. As long as the land is in turmoil, there is no time for love and marriage, states Vang Toua Ter at one point in the film, although he hopes that the land will one day be peaceful enough to allow them to marry. Self-sacrifice is presented as being of the utmost importance. A complex situation is also revealed in which Pa Nhia must choose between her love, Vang Toua Ter, and her father, Chong Vue (Ntxoov Vwj), an evil communist Hmong, a dilemma that Hmong women frequently have to face in different contexts, since even though they maintain their original clan last name, they become members of their husbands' clans after they marry, rather than their fathers' clans. Fortunately, in the end, however, Chong Vue realizes his years of mistakes and sides with the Chao Fa.

## Conclusions

In this article I have tried to demonstrate that the Chao Fa films, Chao Fa 1 and 2, and Vaj Tuam Thawj: The Legend of the Chao Fa, are far more than exciting action films, although for some that aspect was indeed their main appeal. But for those who follow the story line, the films clearly present a strong dialogue of Hmong ethno-nationalism. The films portray the Chao Fa as Hmong heroes, as people willing to fight for their people, the Hmong, despite being at a great disadvantage, and having to endure various sacrifices. While the films may not have independently constructed any particular Hmong ideas, they have served as important mediums for reproducing, reinforcing and dispersing certain ideas and even memories often evident within Hmong American communities. Indeed, they are especially important for reinforcing and strengthening particular Hmong ethno-nationalist identities and the memories that they are founded on.

The Chao Fa films tell us a lot about an important period of Hmong recent history, but they should also be seen as crucial for constructing Hmong identities, and thus Hmong cultural norms, including in America. Indeed, cultural norms are never apolitical, and neither are the Chao Fa films, despite claims by their Hmong creators that they are simply "businessman" trying to make some money. But the ability to make this claim appears to be important for depoliticizing the production of these films, productions that engage in a continuing debate within Hmong American communities regarding what position to take in relation to the Lao PDR government, which remains in firm control of the country. The filmmakers are conducting an evasive maneuver that allows them to use the political appeal of the films to make money. Some would argue that the time for fighting has ended, and that in any case it would be pointless to continue to fight anyway, but these films present the Chao Fa not as perpetrators of violence, but rather as a necessary response to severe oppression and other injustices in the hands of communists in Laos. Examining films as cultural productions has long been an important tool for understanding diverse peoples. Louisa Schein (2004) achieved this in her assessment of the "Dr. Tom" Hmong movies within the context of Hmong America, and hopefully this paper can help readers better

understand how the Chao Fa films have played a role in the production and reproduction of Hmong America.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to David Chambers and Pao Vue (Pov Vwj) for translating Hmong language parts of the three videos into English, and for providing useful comments regarding earlier versions of this paper. Thanks, also, for the assistance of Nor Lue Herr (Nom Lwm Hawj), Tou Her (Tub Hawj), Pao Pawrabat, Ajan Prachin, Suriya Smutkupt, Pongkaset Suwannakoon, Reinhard, Meng (Meej), Kou (Kevin) Thao, Wee Thao (Vis Thoj), Rebecca Weldon, Jimmy Vang, Chue Yang (Tswb Yaj), and Lt. Col. Vang Neng for their assistance. I also want to convey my appreciation of others who I cannot name here.

## References Cited

- Baird, Ian G. 2013. The monks and the Hmong: The special relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province, Thailand. Pages 120-151 In Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke (eds.), *Violent Buddhism – Buddhism and Militarism in Asia in the Twentieth Century*. Routledge, London.
- Baird, Ian G. 2012. Lao Buddhist monks' involvement in political and military resistance to the Lao People's Democratic Republic government since 1975. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71(3): 655-677.
- Baird, Ian G. 2010a. The US Central Intelligence Agency and the Brao: The story of Kong My, a non-Communist space in Attapeu Province, southern Laos. *Aséanie* 25: 23-51.
- Baird, Ian G. 2010b. The Hmong come to southern Laos: Local responses and the creation of racialized boundaries. *Hmong Studies Journal* 11: 1-38.
- Bouphanouvong, Nakhonkham 2003. *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death. Revolution and Reeducation in Laos*. White Lotus Press, Bangkok.
- Brown, MacAlister and Joseph J. Zasloff 1986. *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930-1985*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Chambers, David 2013. *From a Petrified Log to the Mists from a Bleeding Mountain: A Hmong Story of Hope, Loss, and Betrayal in Hmong Space at Wat Tham Krabok Temple*. Master's Paper, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison.
- Chanda, Nayan 1986. *Brother Enemy. The War after the War*. Harcourt Brace Jovannovich, San Diego, New York and London.
- Conboy, Kenneth (with James Morrison) 1995. *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. Paladin Press, Boulder, Co.
- Dommen, Arthur J. 2001. *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis.
- Evans, Grant 2002. *A Short History of Laos. The Land in Between*. Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, Australia.
- Hamilton-Merritt, Jane 1993. *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars in Laos, 1942-1992*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Hillmer, Paul 2009. *A Peoples History of the Hmong*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, MN.

Hobsbawm, Eric 2001. *Bandit*. New Press, New York.

Jonsson, Hjorleifur 2009. Wars ontogeny: Militias and ethnic boundaries in Laos and exile. *Southeast Asian Studies* 47(2): 125-149.

Kerr, Euan 2010. Film fest brings a flood of Asian cinema to Mpls. *Minnesota Public Radio*, November 5, 2010.

Lee, Gary Yia 2006. Dreaming across the oceans: Globalization and cultural reinvention in the Hmong diaspora. *Hmong Studies Journal* 7: 1-33.

Lee, Gary Yia and Nicholas Tapp 2010. *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*. Greenwood, Santa Barbara.

Lee, Mai Na 2005. *The Dream of the Hmong Kingdom: Resistance, Collaboration, and Legitimacy Under French Colonialism (1892-1955)*. PhD. Dissertation, Department of History, The University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

Lor, Houa 2010. Review: Vaj Tuam Thawj - Legend of Chao Fa. *Hmong Empire*.

Morrison, Gayle L. 1999. *Sky Is Falling: An Oral History of the CIA's Evacuation of the Hmong from Laos*. McFarland and Company, Inc., Jefferson, North Carolina and London.

Panasuwan, Piriya 2000. *Chao Fa: A History that Could be* [in English], Benya, Chiang Mai.

Peterson, Tom 1990. Lords of the sky: H'mong resistance fights Communist LPA from mountain Lair. *Soldier of Fortune*, August 1990: 44-51, 84.

Pfeifer, Mark E., John Sullivan, Kou Yang, and Wayne Yang 2012. Hmong population and demographic trends in the 2010 census and 2010 American community survey. *Hmong Studies Journal* 13(2): 1-31.

Smalley, William, Chia Koua Yang and Gnia Yee Yang 1990. *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Thao, Tong 2010. *Chao Fah: Hmong Resistance Struggle in Laos, 1975-1978*. Master's Paper, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, 125 pp.

Schein, Louisa 2004. Homeland beauty: Transnational longing and Hmong American video. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63(2): 433-463.

Schein, Louisa 2002. Mapping Hmong media in diasporic space. Pages 229-244 In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (eds.), University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Thammakhanty, Khamphanh 2004. *Get to the Trunk, Destroy the Roots. The Fall from Monarchy to Socialism*. Portland, Oregon: Self-Published.

Tsing, Anna 2013. Subcontracting sovereignty: The afterlife of proxy war. Page 58-78 In *Varieties of Sovereignty and Citizenship*, Ben-Porath, Sigal R. and Roger M. Smith (eds.), University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Vang, Nengher 2011. Political transmigrants: Rethinking Hmong political activism in America. *Hmong Studies Journal* 12: 1-46.

Vang, Chia Youyee 2010. *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield.

Yang, Kao Kalia 2008. *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*. Coffee House Press, Minneapolis.

**Author Contact Info:**

Ian G. Baird  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Geography  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
550 North Park St.  
Madison, Wisconsin,  
53706 USA  
[ibaird@wisc.edu](mailto:ibaird@wisc.edu)  
Tel: 1-608-265-0012  
Fax: 1-608-265-3991

**Author's Bio:**



Ian G. Baird is an Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and is affiliated with the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, the Asian American Studies Program, and the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at UW-Madison. He is also a member of the executive committee of the Hmong Studies Consortium.