

Hmong American Leadership and Unity in the Post-Vang Pao Era

by

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Abstract

The passing of General Vang Pao (GVP) in a hospital in Clovis, California, in 2011 ended an historical era for Hmong Americans and the larger Hmong diaspora. This historical essay explores the changing meanings of leadership and unity for Hmong Americans in the post-GVP era. It first uses sociologist Max Weber's leadership criteria (rational, charismatic, and traditional authority) to explain Vang Pao's enormous influence on the Hmong in Laos and as refugees in the Hmong diaspora. The essay then reviews current sources of rational, charismatic, and traditional leadership in Hmong American communities: electoral politics, non-profit organizations, religion, and clans. The essay concludes that it is unlikely that a large segment of Hmong Americans will ever again coalesce around one leader. Instead, two new political orientations may become more prevalent as the Hmong reconsider their place in the world: one that favors the local over the national, and another which favors transnationalism rather than the quest for their own nation-state.

Keywords: Hmong, Leadership, Politics, General Vang Pao

Introduction

The passing of General Vang Pao (hereafter GVP) on January 6, 2011, at the age of 81, ended an historical era for Hmong Americans and the larger Hmong diaspora. He was an iconic figure in the historical development of modern, non-clan leaders that started with Kaitong Tong Ger Moua following the 1896 Hmong revolt against French colonialism in French Indochina in the late nineteenth century. Other non-clan leaders before GVP included Kaitong Lo Bli Yao in the 1910s-1920s and Touby Lyfoung in the 1930s-1940s (Lee 2015). In contrast to previous Hmong leaders, however, GVP's transnational politics influenced the Hmong worldwide, especially those in the Southeast Asian countries of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and those in the United States, France, and Australia (Vang 2011). A good illustration of the enormous influence that GVP had on the Hmong worldwide was the glorification of GVP as the king of the Hmong people at his funeral. Tens of thousands of Hmong and non-Hmong from around the world either

attended GVP's funeral service or watched it broadcast live via the internet. A Hmong funeral for an elderly person is typically a three-day event, but GVP's funeral lasted six days and six nights (Arax 2011).

This essay on Hmong leadership history explores the changing meanings of leadership and unity for Hmong Americans in the post-GVP era. It suggests preliminary answers to four questions posed but not answered by Lor and Yang (2012). 1) Why did GVP become such an influential leader? 2) What new sources of leadership could emerge in the absence of GVP? 3) Will they have the capacity to unite the Hmong as GVP did? 4) Will Hmong politics continue to emphasize resistance to the communist regime in Laos or will it focus more on civic engagement and winning local, state, and national political offices?

Many years will have to pass before there can be definitive answers to these questions. However, based on historical trends, this essay suggests the following preliminary answers. 1) GVP was an extremely influential and certainly the most talked about Hmong leader in history because he combined the three leadership qualities that sociologist Max Weber identified in his classic study of forms of authority: rational (professional), charismatic, and traditional. 2) Even before GVP's passing, other sources of leadership were emerging among elected officials, directors of nonprofit organizations, religious leaders, and clan leaders. 3) It is unlikely, however, that these new sources of leadership will unite Hmong Americans, not to mention the larger Hmong diaspora, as GVP did. 4) With GVP's passing, two different political orientations may become more prevalent in Hmong American communities: one that favors the local over the national, and another which favors transnationalism rather than the quest for their own nation-state as the Hmong reconsider their place in the world.

Why Was Vang Pao A Famous Hmong Leader?

GVP became a famous Hmong leader partly through his own personal ambitions. He chose to play a key role in the Secret War in Laos in the 1960s, the formation of Hmong American communities in the diaspora, particularly those in the US, and the interest of the Hmong diaspora in the resistance against the communist regime in Laos after 1975. But he could not have become a dominant leader without the Hmong's need for leadership. As a people, the Hmong place a very high value on leaders who will promote group unity and national sovereignty. They see leadership as essential for cultural preservation, ethnic solidarity, and autonomy from outside domination (Lor and Yang 2012; Lee 2015).

The sociologist Max Weber ([1922] 1978) explains why people want leaders. He drew a distinction between *power* (which uses threats and coercion to make others obey) and *legitimate authority*, which is based on followers' belief that a leader has the right to tell them what to do. Weber identified three types authority: rational, charismatic, and traditional (Coser 1971). Leadership based on rational criteria emphasizes law, rules, professionalism, credentials, and objectively measurable skills. Leadership based on charismatic criteria is the opposite of the rational criteria. Charismatic leaders derive

authority from a super-human quality to inspire people through public speaking that creates a vision of a better future. Leadership based on tradition is founded on custom, age seniority, or an inherited status from a parent or more distant ancestor.

While a definitive biography of GVP remains to be written, his leadership history is well documented in a number of sources (Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Hillmer 2010; Quincy 2000; Vang 2011; Warner 1996). This literature reveals instances in which GVP did use coercion and violence to maintain his leadership. But this literature also provides much evidence that GVP attained his preeminent status for the Hmong by combining rational, charismatic, and traditional authority.

Rational Authority

GVP began his professional career as a soldier in the French army and rose through the ranks to eventually become the first Hmong person in Laos to attain the rank of General in the Royal Lao Army (RLA). The subsequent leadership role that he played in the CIA's Secret Guerrilla Units (SGU), the paramilitary unit authorized by the Royal Lao Government but commanded by GVP and funded by the CIA, allowed him to fully exercise his vast military skills. GVP certainly had more knowledge of asymmetric military tactics and strategy than many US generals of his time. According to one US General who worked with him:

Vang Pao is one of the best field generals I've ever observed, and I've seen a hell of a lot of field generals. He had a fell for the fight that was eerier. He didn't have modern intelligence, overhead cameras, and all this kind of stuff, but he sure knew the enemy, and he knew what they were likely to do in certain circumstances (quoted in Hillmer 2010: 77).

Not only was GVP was a skillful military leader, he was also a very adept administrator. In addition to commanding soldiers and leading them in battles against communist forces in Laos, he coordinated relief efforts to drop food supplies for Hmong internally displaced persons and developed the infrastructure to recruit and pay Hmong soldiers for their service. He also developed plans and established schools for the Hmong, most notably Sam Thong College (actually grades six through ten) which opened in 1968 and from which "several hundred Hmong students would graduate...and many would go on to earn degrees from colleges and universities in France and the U.S." (Hamilton-Merritt 1993:199). GVP's educational policies were also quite innovative in that he "broke with tradition by allowing Hmong girls to train as nurses, as he had earlier trampled tradition by opening all schools to girls" (Quincy 2000:297).

Charismatic Authority

Some Hmong in Laos opposed GVP's leadership, but to his many supporters, GVP "was not just a mortal like themselves but almost semidivine--a sort of super-shaman able to reach the spirits and manipulate them" (Warner 1996:366). A more historically informed analysis also indicates that GVP fits the charismatic criterion for leadership since he hoped that an alliance with the US would gain the Hmong greater autonomy in

Laos, an autonomy that included a greater control of Hmong tribal land as well as better preservation of Hmong culture and integrity. According to some researchers, Vang Pao even tapped into the Hmong's historic desire for a Hmong state to inspire the Hmong people in Laos to join the Americans. Anthropologist George Scott, for example, documented that even though "Vang Pao never claimed to be the Hmong messiah, the returned king, he was not averse to having his followers think of him as such...[and] he definitely aspired to the leadership of the new Hmong state, which was promised him by his CIA allies, when their victory was complete. He even went as far as naming his 'cabinet' and designing a flag for this new nation" (Scott 1990: 118). Gary D. Wikkin similarly noted that the Americans were able to recruit large number of Hmong to "strike aggressively against the Vietminh and Pathet Lao around the Plain of Jars and Ho Chi Minh trail" by displaying strong support for "Hmong aspirations for autonomy" (Wikkin 1982: 188).

GVP also inspired other Hmong as a warrior whose military career began at the age of thirteen in the French army in Laos. GVP won so many battles against the odds and had so many near-death experiences, including a number of assassination attempts and a few plane crashes, that he developed an aura of invincibility. According to a high ranking CIA officer who worked closely with GVP: "His best capability was being the commander on the spot, meeting with individuals, 'cause he could inspire them all. He could almost lift them off the ground with the power of his speech" (quoted in Hillmer 2010:77).

Traditional Authority

GVP was not initially a traditional authority in that he did not derive influence from the clan system. His leadership was instead legitimized through his military service and by outside patrons, including the French, the Royal Lao Government, and the Americans. Overtime, however, he became a traditional leader as his generation became the last one to have been born and become adults in Laos before migrating to the US. According to (Vang 2008:3): "While there are many new and emerging leaders in the Hmong American community, General Vang Pao continues to symbolize a historical, transformative period in Hmong history." Until his arrest by the US government in the summer of 2007 for allegedly conspiring with eleven others to purchase weapons to send to resistance groups in Thailand and Laos to overthrow the Lao PDR government, GVP attracted mainly followers of his generation.

After 1975, GVP also embodied life as it was in Laos since he was already fifty-five years old upon arrival in the US. He was an outspoken advocate for Hmong unity and the preservation of Hmong traditions, culture, and identity. Most of all, GVP was the best representation of Hmong homeland politics even though he also simultaneously promoted civic engagement through the formation of Mutual Assistance Associations like Lao Family and the Hmong 18-Council and participation in local, state, and national electoral politics in the US.

Given that GVP's influence was based on rational (that is, professional), charismatic, and traditional authority, it is reasonable to investigate institutions in the Hmong American community that also provide these forms of authority. The next section evaluates the degree to which solidarity and unity for Hmong Americans might emerge from four different sources in the post-GVP era: 1) elected officials; 2) leaders of nonprofit organizations; 3) religious leaders; 4) and clan leaders.

Elected Officials

Hmong Americans have a very impressive record of successful political campaigns in all of the US regions in which they live (Yang 2013). Victories in school board elections include Ya Yang in Wausau (1992), Thai Vue in La Crosse (1993), Anthony Vang in Fresno (2002), and Charles Vue in Eau Claire (2012). Victories in city council elections include Lormong Lor in Omaha (1996), Bon Xiong in Appleton (1997), Ya Yang in Wausau (2000), Blong Xiong in Fresno (2006), and Noah Lor in Merced (2007). Eau Claire has had a Hmong American on its city council since Joe Bee Xiong was elected in 1996, followed by Neng Lee in 2000, Saidang Xiong in 2002, and Thomas Vue in 2004 (and still serving).

Hmong Americans in St. Paul have a particularly strong record of political participation (Vang 2010). Choua Lee was the first Southeast Asian refugee to be elected when she won a seat on the St. Paul Public School Board in 1991. When she declined to run again, Neal Thao won election to the school board in 1995, receiving more votes than any of the other seven candidates. He was re-elected in 2000, followed by Kazoua Kong-Thao (2004-2011) and Chue Vue (2013-present).

Hmong Americans in St. Paul achieved a new level of political participation when Mee Moua won a special election in January 2002 to replace state Senator Randy Kelly who had resigned after being elected mayor of Saint Paul in November 2001 (Yoshikawa, 2006). Moua had campaigned for only one month, but she managed to beat her opponents, including Representative Tim Mahoney, a white male endorsed by Mayor Kelly, by 167 votes in a district that was 16 percent Asian and 64 percent white. Moua was re-elected in November 2002 when she beat her Republican opponent, Dave Racer, with 60 percent of the vote in the general election.

Moua's election victory made her the first Southeast Asian refugee to win a state level office since the migration of Hmong refugees to the US began in 1975. It also inspired Cy Thao to run as a democrat for a seat in the state house of representatives. Thao had tried and failed previously as an independent despite being endorsed by former Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura. He announced his campaign in February 2002 and led an intense mobilization of Hmong Americans for the caucusing process, which resulted in a record turnout in May. Thao won the primary in September. Two months later, both Moua and Thao were elected (Lor 2009).

Thao and Moua did not seek re-election in November 2010. Four Hmong candidates, including Fong Hawj, Chai Lee, Vang Lor, and Cha Yang, sought to hold

onto Moua's seat while Robin Vue-Benson attempted to replace Thao. All, however, lost. There would not be another Hmong American elected official at the state level in Minnesota or the United States, for that matter, until 2012 when Fong Hawj took the seat from John Harrington, the retired St. Paul chief of police who beat Hawj and the other Hmong candidates two years earlier. That election also saw the first Hmong American electoral wins for city council in Minnesota (Blong Yang in Minneapolis and Dai Thao in St. Paul). Dai Thao won re-election in November 2015. In 2015, twenty-four-year-old Tou Xiong was also elected to the Maplewood City Council.

At some point, Hmong Americans will contest and may win elections to the US Congress. But elected officials are unlikely to provide a single, unifying leader for Hmong Americans even though they are highly regarded by the Hmong community. Hmong American elected officials face many constraints on their support for the concerns of the Hmong American community, including a finite amount of power and influence, re-election, and the political boundaries of their election district or state. An analysis of Senator Moua's and Representative Thao's time in office (2003–2010), for instance, reveals that they were highly selective in endorsing issues of concern to the Hmong American community (Hein and Vang 2015). They were most active on human rights issues affecting the Hmong in Laos and Thailand. During the grave desecration crisis in 2005-2007, Moua and Thao gave supportive media interviews, spoke at rallies, organized rallies, and introduced legislation. But they provided much fewer forms of assistance to several national issues, such as Normalized Trade Relations for Laos, and local issues, such as the police killing of unarmed teenager Fong Lee. They provided no substantial public support to the protests to have the US Department of Justice drop the terrorism charges against General Vang Pao, Lt. Col. Harrison Ulrich Jack, and eleven other Hmong Americans in California for allegedly purchasing weapons and explosives for Hmong insurgents in Laos.

Nonprofit Organizations

Since the arrival of the first refugees in 1975, Hmong Americans have shown a remarkably strong interest in operating nonprofit organizations (NPOs), such as mutual assistance associations (MAAs). By 1985, there were 120 Hmong MAAs in operation. During the mid-1980s, there was one Hmong MAA for every 478 Hmong Americans, compared with a ratio of 1:832 for Lao Americans, 1:1,024 for Cambodian Americans, and 1:1,082 for Vietnamese Americans (Hein 1995). The majority (57 percent) of Hmong MAAs at this time had social service and economic goals while the majority of the MAAs started by the other Southeast Asian refugee groups had cultural goals. The greater mobilization of the Hmong reflects their very high level of communal solidarity based on prior ethnic minority status in Laos, the value placed on group advancement, and other factors that promote collective identity (Hein 2006).

More recent data suggest that Hmong Americans continue to use NPOs for collective advancement. One database of US NPOs that have (or had) IRS 501(3)(c) status as charitable organizations lists 249 NPOs with the term "Hmong" in their name and another five with the name Lao Family (www.guidestar.org/SearchResults). It lists

734 NPOs with the term "Vietnamese" in their name. The official IRS website of current tax-exempt organizations that are eligible to receive tax-deductible donations lists 102 organizations with the term "Hmong" and four with the name Lao Family (www.irs.gov/charities-&-non-profits/exempt-organizations-select-check). It lists 395 with the term Vietnamese in their name. Using the IRS numbers and population size from the 2010 US Census produces a ratio of 1 Hmong NPO for every 2,454 Hmong Americans compared with a ratio of 1:5,036 for Vietnamese Americans. These ratios suggest that, just as in the mid-1980s, Hmong Americans create NPOs at about twice the rate of Vietnamese Americans.

Given the extraordinary organizing abilities of Hmong Americans, it is possible that a new leader might emerge from one of its NPOs. Lao Family Community Inc., the first Hmong social service organization in the U.S., was started by General Vang Pao in 1977 (Yang 2013). With 2012 revenue of \$2,430,073, the Minnesota branch of Lao Family is one of the largest Hmong NPOs in the US. Aimee Xiong, a prominent community activist who previously worked for TakeAction Minnesota, became the first female (interim) director in the organization's history when she was appointed to the Minnesota office in 2012.

Lao Family, however, is unlikely to produce a new unifying leader for Hmong Americans. A legal battle over a disputed 2011 election for the President of the Board of Directors of the Minnesota office, followed by protests since 2012 over allegations of corruption and mismanagement of organizational funds collected from the annual Hmong New Year celebration and the Hmong Freedom Celebration (more widely known as the July 4th Soccer Tournament), badly damaged the organization's credibility (Melo 2014). Lao Family survived a near foreclosure in early 2015 only to be plagued by more protests, a lawsuit, and a leadership dispute over who and which organization should run the Hmong New Year and the Hmong Freedom Celebration, the two largest and most well-attended events in the state (Mohr 2015). In addition, Lao Family, like many other nonprofit organizations that assist Hmong Americans, still operates within a refugee adaptation framework. It is primarily a provider of social services with a focus on English education, employment, youth and family, and intake/referral social work for immediate problems.

Hmong National Development (HND) has a much broader base of support than Lao Family and thus would be more likely to be a unifying force for Hmong Americans (Yang 2013). Formative discussions about HND began in 1987 at the Hmong New Year celebration in Fresno and, in 1991, more than 100 national delegates elected by Hmong communities throughout the US held a conference to adopt bylaws and elect a board of directors. HND was incorporated in 1992 with Dr. Yang Dao, Thao Phia Xaykao, and Tony Vang as its directors. HND's many accomplishments include having offices in key geographic locations (Washington, DC, Fresno, and St. Paul) and organizing the most important national conference on Hmong Americans for seventeen consecutive years.

HND, however, is also unlikely to become a unifying organization for Hmong Americans. It cannot engage in political activities related to Laos due to funding from

federal agencies, foundations, and corporations. Although they have advocated for Hmong American poultry farmers in Arkansas, many civil and human rights issues—such as LGBT recognition and police excessive use of force—are outside the purview of HND, as are many forms of civic engagement—such as the arts. Finally, HND is a small organization with a 2012 revenue of only \$277,938 according to GuideStar's NPO database. Primarily for financial reasons, HND was forced to merge with Hmong American Partnership (HAP) in 2010. HAP is a very large NPO (revenues of \$6.2 million in 2012) but also very localized. Established in St. Paul in 1990 by Christopher Thao and currently led by Bao Vang, HAP provides conventional social services that still follow the refugee-adaptation model.

In 2011, Dr. Xoua Thao, a medical doctor in St. Paul, Dr. Shoua Yang, a political science professor at St. Cloud State University, and a few others formed the Committee on Hmong Relations (CHR) with an intent to use the CHR to unite all Hmong Americans and develop a constitution and a legal procedure for Hmong Americans to elect future Hmong leaders in the post-GVP era. The CHR was later renamed Hmong Nationalities Organization (HNO) and formally organized as a non-profit organization with 501(3)(c) status. Despite its grand vision and noble intent, however, the HNO was only able to register a little more than 200 active members and representatives in multiple regions and states across the US (Suab Hmong News 2015; <http://www.hmongnationalities.org/>).

Part of the lack of total support by Hmong Americans for the HNO has to do with what Hmong historian Mai Na M. Lee has uncovered about Hmong supreme leaders or paramount chiefs in the political landscape of twentieth century mainland Southeast Asia. In traditional Hmong societies in Laos, Hmong elected their leaders at the village, district, and provincial levels. But, as Lee has illustrated, Hmong supreme leaders or “paramount chiefs” were rarely chosen by the Hmong. They gained their authority through their service for an outside patron, such as the French, the Royal Lao Government, and the Americans, and it was these outside patrons that provided the legitimacy necessary for their paramouncy (Lee 2015). Thus, while Hmong Americans have come together to elect Board of Director Presidents for Lao Family Community and the Hmong 18-Council or Hmong candidates like Mee Moua, Cy Thao, and Fong Hawj for local and state offices, the lack of a Hmong consensus is likely to prevent them from coming together to elect a supreme leader through a non-profit organization or a procedure such as that envisioned by the HNO.

Religion

It is possible that a charismatic religious leader could emerge for Hmong Americans. Hmong history reveals a number of messianic movements that have sought to unify the Hmong and conquer enemies. There has been, on average, one such movement "every twenty-five to thirty years over [the past] 150 years" (Culas 2004:119). The roots of messianism are revealed in Hmong legends about a character named Tswb Tshoj, "the culture hero who periodically arises to unify the clans and establish hegemony over the land" (Tapp 1986: 91). Dunnigan (1986:42) goes so far as to call such efforts "revitalization movements led by Hmong prophets."

During the French colonial era, several messianic leaders emerged in Vietnam and Laos calling on the Hmong to unite to end French colonial oppression in Indochina. The most prominent was Vue Pa Chai who fought the French in the so-called Crazy War from 1918 to his death in 1921 (Lee 2015). After Vue Pa Chai was Yang Shong Lue who more popularly known as the Mother of Writing (Niam Ntawv) for his invention of the Pahawh writing system, gained a huge following during the Secret War in Laos but was later assassinated by “soldiers in General Vang Pao’s army” (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990: 37-38).

After the war, students of Yang Shong Lue, including Pa Kao Her and Zong Zoua Her, led the Chao Fa guerillas in Laos and Thailand in the fight against the post-1975 communist government in Laos and its Vietnamese allies. In the Ban Vinai refugee camp, Lee Chai, a student of Chia Koua Vang, another pupil of Yang Shong Lue, formed a vibrant messianic movement calling for unity and peace among the Hmong (Lee 2004; Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990). In America, Shong Lue’s Pahawh writing script continues to be taught by various individuals and organizations in California, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Minnesota. One of the most active organizations to disseminate the Pahawh writing has been the St. Paul-based Hmong Language Institute of Minnesota.

In the US, several messianic leaders arose in the Hmong communities immediately before and after GVP’s death. They all claimed to have experienced some form of divine encounter and received a message of unity for the Hmong people. Vue Pao Xiong of Minnesota, the founder of the “A Message of God” movement, for example, contended that he had received a message of peace and unity from God for the Hmong and the world. As the appointed messenger of God, Xiong was to contact and bring world leaders to congregate in 2010 at Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple located in the Phra Phutthabat district of Saraburi Province, Thailand. Wat Tham Krabok was the site where Hmong refugees called home following the closure of Ban Vinai and Chiang Kham refugee camps in the early 1990s. In 2003, the State Department resettled 15,000 Hmong from the monastery in the US. Once gathered at the monastery, world leaders would receive the message of world peace from Xiong as given to him by God, a message that included giving the stateless Hmong people a land of their own.

Like previous Hmong messianic leaders, such as Xiong Mi Chang, Vue Pa Chai, and Yang Shong Lue, who had failed to unite the Hmong in their fight against foreign oppression, Vue Pao Xiong attracted only a small segment of the Hmong population despite broadcasting his message in several languages (Hmong, English, and Thai) on Youtube for several years. Most Hmong people remain deeply skeptical of messianic religious leaders. Many continue to see messianic leaders, who derive their legitimacy by proclaiming the Mandate of Heaven, as “crazy” in ways akin to how the French and their Hmong collaborators construed Vue Pa Chai and his followers during the “Crazy War” in the early twentieth century (Lee 2015).

Furthermore, in spite of the unprecedented rise of Hmong shamans in Hmong American communities in recent years, animism is likely to gradually lose its appeal for

Hmong Americans since it is not actively practiced by many younger Hmong Americans. Most Hmong American youth lack the knowledge and interest in animism even if they still have or live with parents who still practice animism. Some Hmong Americans, both young and old, also have grown increasingly skeptical of the proliferation of new shamans in the communities since the start of the new millennium. They see these new shamans as individuals possessed by malignant spirits more than benevolent shaman spirits and as individuals more interested in making money than healing the sick.

Hmong animism is also deeply parochial. It is practiced largely within the confines of the individual household and clan. It is not based on formal organizations as places of worship. In the early 2000s, two religious groups arose to address this lack of formal places of worship for the Hmong. The first was a group called Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv. According to its founder and prophet, Vaj Lis Thum (whose legal name is Bee Lee) of Appleton, Wisconsin, he had a semi-divine encounter with two spiritual messengers in the form of the late Pa Kao Her and former US President William Jefferson Clinton in 2006. During that encounter, the two messengers told him that he would soon receive knowledge of the true Hmong religion, and that he was to teach and unite the Hmong people through it. Vaj Lis Thum eventually attracted some followers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California after he founded Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv and began his teaching of the religion to the Hmong in 2008.

The second group was the Temple of Hmongism. Like Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv, the Temple of Hmongism was also deeply concerned about the rising cost of traditional rituals in the Hmong communities. Indeed, the Temple of Hmongism was established in St. Paul in 2012 in response to the growing concern in Hmong American communities for the rising cost of shaman ceremonies and funeral services. Unlike Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv, however, the Temple of Hmongism did not claim to have created a new religion. As Yuepheng Xiong, one of its founders, explained, “Hmongism is not a new religion. It is only a simplified version of our traditional religion which we call it ‘Dab Qhuas Hmoob.’ Dab Qhuas Hmoob in English is Hmong religion. And a better term for ‘Hmong religion’ is Hmongism” (Xiong 2014).

Several considerations suggest a charismatic messianic leader is unlikely to emerge from these groups as a source of unity for Hmong Americans. To start, only within a few years of its founding, Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv was already plagued with allegations of sexual scandal involving its prophet, Vaj Lis Thum, and some of his female followers. The internal power struggle and subsequent defection of some of its religious leaders and followers following the alleged sexual scandal further damaged Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv’s credibility in spite of an initial rapid growth of the organization with multiple branches in California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Furthermore, the primary mission of the Temple of Hmongism was to “simplify [Hmong] traditional practices in order to dramatically reduce time and money and to inspire future generations to proudly remain with Hmongism as their faith” (www.hmongism.org). It was not to inspire the rise of a unifying Hmong leader. Nor was it meant to be a unifying religion for all Hmong Americans.

Since they first arrived in the US as refugees in 1975, Hmong Americans have also had a very rapid conversion to Christianity. Estimates suggest that between 28 percent (Lo 2001) and 70 percent of the Hmong in Milwaukee (Lucke 1995) identify as Christian. The truth is probably somewhere in between since 40 percent of the Hmong in St. Paul may be Christians (Tai 1993). Protestants substantially outnumber Catholics in the Hmong American community by about ten to one (Lo 2001), reversing the pattern in Southeast Asia, where Hmong converts to Catholicism were more numerous (Tapp 1989).

The Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) is the oldest and most prevalent form of Christianity for the Hmong. The CMA began missionary work with the Hmong in Laos in 1950. Its website claims to have 116 sites of worship in 30 states. A database of past and present nonprofit organizations registered with the IRS (www.guidestart.org/SearchResults) lists 51 NPOs with the name Hmong Alliance, of which fourteen are in California, seven in Wisconsin, five in Michigan, and three in Minnesota.

Some Hmong American communities appear to have a greater adherence to Christianity than others. Milwaukee has three Hmong Alliance Churches suggesting that the Hmong Americans there (with a population of almost 12,000, the fourth largest in the US) may be a center of Hmong Christianity. The Hmong in Colorado only number 3,900 but support three Hmong Alliance Churches in the Denver metropolitan area. Similarly, the 2,900 Hmong in Oregon support four Hmong Alliance Churches, two of which are located in Portland. While there are only three Hmong Alliance Churches in Minnesota, where the Hmong population numbers 66,000, two of those churches are the largest Hmong Alliance churches in the US not only in terms of the size of their membership but also in terms of the size of their physical buildings.

Yet, in spite of the emergence of a great number of charismatic Christian leaders in Hmong American communities, it is also unlikely that a Christian charismatic leader will emerge as a source of unity for Hmong Americans. Christian versus traditional religious practices remain one of the strongest divisions within the Hmong American community (Lee and Tapp 2010).

Clans

One of the most innovative leadership initiatives by Hmong Americans was cooperation among the 18 clans through the formation of the Hmong Council by GVP in Fresno in 1982 (Yang 2013). For the next ten years, the organization primarily worked to organize the Hmong New Year.

In 1999, the Hmong 18 Council (H18C) was formally established in St. Paul and has become one of the most influential NPOs for the Hmong American community. In cooperation with the Minnesota criminal justice system, H18C developed a Certified Mediator Program. It now has 30 trained and state certified Hmong Americans mediators who assist with familial and communal conflicts that would otherwise end up in court.

One of the main purposes of this mediation is to prevent domestic violence. In 2005, with the support of the St. Paul Police Chief, H18C established a telephone hotline to enable community members to confidentially report gang violence and other crimes. Some Hmong Americans have worried that H18C has now become an arbiter of the law (since it might not report some crimes to the police) rather than an NPO that educates the community about laws, such as underage marriage and polygamy.

The H18C demonstrated its important leadership role in 2011 following a racist media incident (Hein 2014). In late March, a radio host with a state-wide audience sang a song entitled "30 Hmongs in a House." On April 2, the Hmong American community met and issued a list of demands: a public apology by the station; firing the radio host; asking advertisers to boycott the station; diversity training for other DJs; public air time to discuss racism; and a station policy banning ethnic jokes. Similar incidents had happened in 1998 and 2007, and the organization which developed in response to them--Community Action Against Racism--remerged to confront the current problem. It was assisted by the H18C and Hmong American youth led by Aimee Xiong of TakeAction MN.

Although the radio station quickly issued an apology, the three organizations demanded that its program director hold a face-to-face meeting with community leaders. On April 15, Hmong Americans organized an early morning picket in front of the radio station's office. More than 200 people attended. When a seven person delegation went into the office and asked to meet with the station manager, he called private security guards and the police to have them removed. At a meeting on April 30, protest leaders announced that three large corporations had pulled their advertising from the station and that seven members of the St. Paul City Council had signed a letter supporting the protest and sent it to the radio station. On May 12, protest leaders announced that the radio station had agreed to hold a private meeting at the office of the H18C. The meeting produced almost all of the demands originally made, except for the firing of the radio hosts.

In 2013, H18C held its first national conference and one outcome was to officially endorse a bride price (*nqi tshoob*) of \$5,000 to reaffirm the value of this traditional practice and to reduce inter-family conflicts over it since some *nqi tshoob* had reportedly risen to \$30,000. Some Hmong American women, however, were disappointed that the H18C did not abolish the practice altogether but may have instead helped to legitimize it. In other respects, however, H18C has supported greater gender equality, such as taking a position against international marriages in which Hmong American men often marry much younger women from overseas.

In 2014, the Hmong 18 Council of Wisconsin was formally organized as an NPO in Milwaukee. It had been operating informally for many years, and in 2010, it held its first election for the office of president of the organization rather than having its leader appointed by GVP. In 2014, Mao Kang was elected as one of two vice presidents for the H18C of Wisconsin, the first time in Hmong history that a woman has had a clan leadership position.

The innovative activities of the H18C suggest that its form of adaptive traditional leadership could become even more important for Hmong Americans in the future. Yet, there are eighteen Hmong clans and the H18C leadership model is not meant to unify all Hmong Americans but to only resolve local communal conflicts. Some clans have very active organizations of their own, such as the Hmong Lee USA (formally organized as an NPO in 2005), the Vue Family of Minnesota (which does not have 501(3)(c) status but is highly organized), the Vang Council of Minnesota, the Yang Wameng Association, and the Lo-Pha Society.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper applied Weber's classic distinction among rational, charismatic, and traditional forms of authority to explain why GVP was such an influential leader for the Hmong. It then evaluated four forms of leadership within the Hmong American community: elected officials and nonprofit organizations (rational or professional authority); Christian and traditional religion (charismatic authority); and the Hmong 18 Council (traditional authority). It illustrated that Vang Pao was able to combine rational (professional), charismatic, and traditional authority in a unique way to produce enormous influence on the Hmong in Laos during the Secret War and as refugees in the US after the war, and that it is unlikely that a large segment of Hmong Americans will ever again coalesce around one leader.

A more historically informed analysis indicates that it was during moments of crises that the Hmong paramount chiefs who represented a source of unity for the Hmong in the twentieth century rose to leadership positions. For example, both Kaitong Lo Blia Yao and Touby Lyfoung rose to leadership positions during the French era when the Hmong were under French colonial control and needed a leader to mediate between the French and the Hmong. Likewise, GVP rose to power during the Vietnam War when the Hmong needed a leader to provide leadership in the fight against their enemies—the Pathet Lao communists and their Vietnamese allies—and a vision of hope for liberation from foreign domination. Hence, it may take another crisis as gigantic as French colonialism or the Vietnam War—one that directly affects all Hmong Americans and not just some families, clans, or a segment of the population—for the rise of another unifying Hmong leader since Hmong paramount chiefs have historically ascended to power by providing leadership in confronting the national crisis that the Hmong confronted during their time. The arrest of GVP and his alleged co-conspirators in 2007 came close to creating such a crisis for the Hmong and an opportunity for the rise of a unifying Hmong leader. Out of the GVP crisis emerged a few potential leaders, such as Vaming Xiong of Sacramento, California, Chairperson of the Hmong American Ad Hoc Committee who organized and eventually became the leading spokesperson for the “Free Vang Pao” movement across America. But no one, not even GVP’s own sons and closest associates, has emerged as the new and undisputed Hmong leader who could unite the Hmong as GVP did.

Without a crisis that affects all Hmong Americans, the post-Vang Pao era is likely to be characterized by a greater diversity of leadership for Hmong Americans. Hmong

Americans will continue to win more and more state and local elections. Eventually a few may even be elected to the US Congress and/or be appointed to a high level position in a federal agency. It would also not be surprising to see more charismatic leaders emerging from among Christians and traditional religious practitioners, given the phenomenal growth of shamans and religious movements in Hmong American communities in recent years. Clan leadership structures, too, will become increasingly important because they innovatively combine traditional authority and self-help with the recreational and social service outreach of western formal organizations. None of these emerging leadership forms, however, will become as powerful as GVP.

The post-GVP era will also be characterized by two trends: more localization and more transnationalism. On the one hand, the passing of GVP will allow many Hmong Americans to shift away from an identity based on the "secret war" and "refugee" experience and to develop instead a broader and more complex set of identities. There will be less emphasis on a single, national framework for Hmong Americans. What it means to be Hmong will be defined more locally as growing distinctions along linguistic, religious, political, class, and regional lines emerge among the Hmong in large communities such as those in the Twin Cities, Fresno, Sacramento, and Milwaukee. New communities are already emerging in North Carolina, Arkansas, and Alaska as Hmong Americans take advantage of changing economic opportunities outside of traditional areas of settlement in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (Vang 2010).

On the other hand, GVP was the strongest link Hmong Americans had to Laos. His principal support came from the refugee generation born there, but only 42 percent of Hmong Americans are foreign born. The passing of GVP probably means that the older generation of Hmong Americans will lessen their support for the anticommunist resistance and give up on their dream of ever retaking Laos and returning "home" to live under a new and democratic government in their home country. At an event organized by the United Lao Council for Peace, Freedom and Reconstruction (ULCPFR) in November 2015, Chong Vang, President of the ULCPFR chapter and son of the late GVP, for example, sadly announced that it only had a few hundred active members compared to 12,000 to 13,000 active members under GVP's leadership in the 1980s.

There is also likely to be a decline in support for Hmong autonomy and separatism in Laos in the post-Vang Pao era. A segment of the Hmong American population, particularly those of the refugee generation, such as those in the Congress of World Hmong People, still dream of having a separate Hmong nation-state in Laos, but that dream will likely dissipate. The number of Hmong resistance forces in Laos has dwindled significantly in the past few years. Many of them have either surrendered or fled across the border to Thailand. Scams to collect tens of thousands of dollars in the past few years by some Hmong individuals, such as Steve Moua and Seng Xiong of Hmoob Tebchaws (Hmong Country) who are currently under FBI investigation, will further damage the faith and support of the Hmong for any group or individual working for Hmong sovereignty in Laos (Melo 2015). Contrary to the claims made by these certain Hmong scammers, the United Nations has never supported the separatist claim of

the Hmong, and it is unlikely that the United Nations will support the partition of Laos into two separate states—one Lao and one Hmong—in the foreseeable future.

Finally, there are those who aspire for a peaceful co-existence with the Lao state and increased trade between Laos and the US as well as the large segment of Hmong American youth who are interested in connecting with other Hmong around the world. While still emphasizing their US nationality, Hmong American youth use the internet to develop global relationships with other Hmong. Thus, it is foreseeable that the older generation's concern for land will not be continued by the younger generation of Hmong Americans. Instead, they will increasingly identify with a virtual global Hmong diaspora and support peaceful co-existence with the Lao state or a gradual democratic transformation of the Lao state over an abrupt military takeover of Laos or the establishment of a separate Hmong nation-state in Laos.

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