

Gathering Vines Around a Trellis Pole:
Power Geographies in Bangkok's Hmong Refugee Communities

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is a deep look at political spatialities of Hmong immigrants living in Bangkok, Thailand's urban setting. It asks whether Hmong immigrants have developed a distinct sense of territoriality and territories. The dissertation maps how Hmong groups of differing national origin—Hmong Thai, Hmong Lao, and Hmong Viet—find differing positions of precarity or stability in Thailand. Most Thai Hmong have citizenship, while Lao Hmong more rarely have become Thai citizens. A group of recent immigrants from both Laos and Vietnam have no citizenship. Although many Vietnamese Hmong have UNHCR protection status, some have been denied protection. The dissertation focuses on one group of Hmong immigrants living in Bangkok. Despite their precarious immigrant status, this group of mostly Christian Hmong Vietnamese immigrants have found a way to fit into the Thai territory and create a territorialization which allows them a degree of stability despite countervailing pressures. To Liisa Malkki's botanical metaphors, I add a third metaphor of refugee territoriality. This third metaphor is analogous to a beanpole. It represents a type of territoriality which neither seeks to reestablish a separatist ethnostate (following Malkki's arborescent metaphor) or hybridize into the spaces of their host country (following her rhizomatic metaphor). Instead, the territoriality of this community recognizes the temporal ephemerality of the territorialization like a beanpole that is staked into the ground by a gardener and can be removed later. This community tends to seek out, attract, and stabilize social relations in an analogous way that the bean pole attracts bean vines. Thus this community of Hmong refugees is able to establish a firmly planted set of social relations which allow this group to strive for goals of social justice for the time being. This process involves careful negotiation of relations with people inside and outside their ethnic and geographic community. Unlike many other Hmong immigrants who scatter and distrust one another, this group has gathered themselves through establishing affects of conviviality and trust. This affect mobilizes tactics to control community legibility to the government and ultimately establish an ongoing territorialization.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAT - Asylum Access Thailand	HWST - Hmong Women's Society of Thailand
ACD - Asia Cooperative Dialogue	IDC - International detention Center
ACMECS - Ayeyawady Chaophraya Mekong Cooperation Strategy	IEM - Interevangelistic Movement
AEC - Asian Economic Community	IGO - intergovernmental organization
APEC - Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation	JRS - Jesuit Refugee Services
BHNK - Ban Huai Nam Khao	Lao PDR - Lao People's Democratic Republic
BPP – Border Patrol Police	NAFTA - North America Free Trade Agreement
BPSOS – Boat People SOS	NGO - nongovernmental organization
BRC – Bangkok Refugee Center	NCPO - National Council for Peace and Order
BTA - bilateral trade agreement	OMF - Overseas Missionary Fellowship
CIA - Central Intelligence Agency	OMI - Oblates of the order of Mary Immaculate
CIM - China Inland Mission	PARU - Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit
CPB – Communist Party of Burma	PL - Pathet Lao
CPC – countries of particular interest	PRC - People's Republic of China
CPT - Communist Party of Thailand	RLA - Royal Lao Army
COMECON or CMEA Council for Mutual Economic Assistance	RPA - Romanized Popular Alphabet
DACA - Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals	SKT - Sib Koom Tes (Joining hands)
ECVN (N) - Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)	THB - Thai Baht
ECVN (S) - Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)	UN - United Nations
FBI - Federal Bureau of Investigation	USA - United States of America
FEBC - Far East Broadcasting Corporation	USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
FULRO - Front for Liberation of Oppressed Peoples	UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
HAT - Hmong Association of Thailand	UW CSEAS - University of Wisconsin's Center for Southeast Asian Studies
HECCT - Hmong Eighteen Clan Council of Thailand	VND - Viet Nam Dong
HMAT - Hmong Merchants Association of Thailand	WTK - Wat Tham Krabok Temple

Part I

Introduction

Introduction

In Bangkok, Thailand, there are hundreds of Hmong immigrants from Vietnam living in the swirl of urbanity. They are considered illegal immigrants by the Thai government but are allowed to stay based on the Thai government's shaky relationship with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Most of these groups seem to live in the shadows, seeking to remain unseen and free from state interdiction. However, one group among them, which I will call *Pa Kluai* here, seems to be thriving in a certain way. In contrast to another group in a place I call Thung Raab,¹ the people at Pa Kluai live more out in the open, even the entirely undocumented people among them look at ease. Their leader, Kong Meng Thao, once recounted to me a dream he had, which explains his understanding of this success and security. The vision is framed in a message he received from the most famous modern-day Hmong leader, General Vang Pao. Kong Meng shared that:

Uncle Vang Pao came to me in a dream. Uncle Vang Pao said to me that I had come to Pa Kluai, which is very good. Uncle Vang Pao also noted that this area's *mem toj* (geomantic flows) are healthy and are very good. If I come here, then Uncle Vang Pao said it would cause the sky to rain for the people, which I lead and me, so we can eat. Uncle said that I should be cautious because there were people who would sabotage my life. The person who can help me will be my true father by birth. If it is possible, he wanted me to go and see my father's grave, so that no one can sabotage me. When he had finished telling me this, uncle Vang Pao then allowed me to see all the mountains which are high and beautiful. When I finished seeing these things, I suddenly woke up.

Kong Meng's mention of the Hmong geomantic term *mem toj* hints at how Hmong people often imagine maps power relations in space. Since this dissertation is an ethnographic political geography of Hmong immigrants living in Thailand, the idea of *mem toj* (otherwise known as *looj mem*) works as a metonym for Hmong experiences and concepts related to the confluence of

¹ Thung Raab is a community of mostly Lao Hmong migrants who have come to Thailand fairly recently. Although this group of Hmong people live in small groups, they do not exert a presence which openly shows their Hmong identity. Rather they often scatter to go unnoticed by Thai authorities.

power and space. Looj mem belief is an analog to Chinese *Feng Shui* but is nonetheless distinctly Hmong and reflects Hmong immigrants shared historical experience. This experience is especially the case in the collective recitation by Southeast Asian Hmong of Chinese digging up the graves of Hmong progenitors as the ancestors of Southeast Asian Hmong fled from the Chinese into the mountains of Vietnam. Such desecration was not limited to simple insult by the Chinese. Rather, exhuming a Hmong ancestral grave damaged the political and economic fortune of the Hmong, thereby ensuring Chinese eminence and sealing their control of that territory. Reading Looj mem is related to Hmong understandings of territorial control as well.

The reasoning of this recitation of history is based on Hmong people's various understandings of *looj mem* as the flow energies or material substances which course through the landscape of mountains, ridges, and valleys and intersect with the buried bodies of ancestors.² When the ancestor is buried in a place that receives beneficial flows through mountain formations, the descendant's fortunes are directly affected. Depending on the type of flow, the buried ancestor may even become preserved as stone or copper, and their descendants become rich, healthy, or politically powerful, depending on the shape of the mountain formation. Contrarily, the inauspicious burial of ones' progenitors can result in personal poverty, illness, and lack of power for the generations following. The importance assigned to place in this schema is not limited to where progenitors are buried but drives the living to find auspicious places to live. Places are assigned auspiciousness based on a system of "looking at places" (*saib*

2. "The essential principle of the system is that *it is upon the welfare of ancestors that the fortunes of their descendants depend*, [emphasis in original] and that this is importantly affected by the location of their burial sites according to the 'veins of the dragon', or currents of natural energy which run through the elevations and depressions of the landscape, particularly mountains and watercourses (Feuchtwang 1974; Freedman 1966, 1968; Durkheim and Mauss 1963). The system is known to the Chinese as fengshui (winds and waters) and to the Hmong as *looj mem* (dragon veins). If good fortune is to be assured, the graves which are the dwelling places of the dead must be correctly aligned, as also must be the houses or villages which are the dwelling places of the living (Feuchtwang 1974, p. 17). Here, however, it is the dwelling places of the dead which particularly concern us." (Tapp 1989:137)

qhov chaws). Hmong people value certain aspects of the causative linkage between spatial emplacement and positive life outcomes. My master's research was focused on understanding the looj mem system for its own sake as Hmong people's understandings of looj mem were found in Wat Tham Krabok Temple in Saraburi Thailand. In truth, I hoped to do some of the same things in this dissertation, but my subject community is made up of younger people, who did not focus on Looj Mem in their explanations of politics. This community is young. Their focus is on Christian worship and practice. So even though many of them continue to hold a worldview that does not preclude Hmong geomancy, they are less skilled in those practices. Furthermore, since their new home is Bangkok Thailand, they seem unsure how to explain good fortunes based on landscape. The community leader Kong Meng even told me once that their neighborhood, Pa Kluai, must have good looj mem relations, but he didn't know exactly where this flow was coming from since the area is flat. Having mountain topography is usually key to uncovering the underground geography of the flows of looj mem. So this dissertation attempts something else. Here I hope to explore the social relations commonly experienced by Hmong refugee migrants, which may have encouraged Hmong migrants throughout history to value the looj mem in their resettlement process.

Certainly, there is something about spatial arrangements that actually does help Hmong people succeed or fail. Why have Hmong people often paid attention to emplacement's power to build political and other forms of success? Though only a partial answer, a few reasons for this sensitivity to the relationship between territorial emplacement and fortune can be noted. Chief among them is Hmong people's historic mobility. The majority of the previous two centuries have seen Hmong people moving out of China and across Southeast Asia and the western world. They have stopped in a number of places on this journey. As such, at each step of the way, they

have needed to evaluate and negotiate the material, political, and social realities of each new place to determine new settlements. Considering the reality of their non-static lifestyle, it seems logical that Hmong people would establish a cultural institution like looj mem, which pays close attention to physical emplacement for determining political success. Looj mem then has become a form of territorial evaluation embedded into Hmong cultural practices. But there is more to Hmong refugee territoriality than looj mem.

Following this vein, this dissertation explores two primary ideas: (1) Hmong ideas of territoriality and (2) Hmong instantiations of territorialization. On the later point, I questioned whether these instantiations were actually territories, due to their shaky claims to sovereignty over those spaces. Instead I opt for the materializing term ‘territorialization’ to describe the spaces that my subject communities create because territorialization indicates an ongoing, incomplete formation. whereas territory denotes the completeness of territorial formation complete with sovereignty which is recognized by a set of peers. In exploring the two ideas of territoriality and territorialization, the dissertation argues that the Hmong people’s refugee identity has influenced them to have a topological understanding of territoriality and construct topological territorializations. These territorialities and territorializations take a few different forms. This is based on their subjugated position and tendency toward endosociality and subliminality, which forces them to make topological political connections rather than trying to function in spaces that might be imagined to be scale-sized, smooth national-territories. I argue furthermore that topological territorialities formed on the basis of endosociality³ are troubling to the project of statization⁴ and are often suspect by the forces of statization, including state and

³ Endosociality refers to the tendency in a social group to confine interactions to those within that social group. The Hmong have been characterized as an endosocial ethnicity (Tomforde 2008).

⁴ Statization is a term I explain in more detail later.

non-state actors. The Hmong themselves are often associated with ethnonationalist movements. Though this assumption is not made wholly without reason, I believe it plays an oversized role in dealings with Hmong immigrants. In reality, the goals of ethnonationalism and social justice have often been tied together and are difficult to separate. So it is easy to conflate social justice concerns and ethnonationalism, but there are times when Hmong people are driven by concerns for social justice but are mistaken for ethnonationalists.

The dissertation's argument proceeds with an initial chapter that discusses the Thai State's construction of geopolitical context for several waves of Hmong immigrants in Thailand, which helps show the differences between Hmong-Thai citizens of Thailand and Hmong immigrants from Laos and Vietnam. I then build on Liisa Malkki's botanical metaphors to present a new metaphor that I will argue shows the bean-pole of territoriality characterized by my Hmong subject community at Pa Kluai. Although this territorialization holds control of a place and exhibits some aspects of sovereignty, it is temporary and artificial. The balance of the dissertation is an explanation of how the Hmong at Pa Kluai have been able to create and hold that territorialization. However I continue to compare Pa Kluai to another community outside of Bangkok called Thung Raab throughout the dissertation. This has been partly due to Pa Kluai's ability to manage affective relationships to create an affect of trust within their community versus what I have perceived as Thung Raab's inability to do so. Pa Kluai's trustful affect was facilitated by a topologic network of relations between the members of Pa Kluai and important people and things that surround them. In the end, Pa Kluai is able not only to establish this territorialization because they can see the hidden flows of power in this topology, but they are able to use these relations to benefit members of their community and some outside. On the other hand, Thung Raab is unable organize themselves to benefit group members in the same way

because they fail to control social relations as a group. In this way Pa Kluai becomes a staging ground for a nascent activist network that hopes to help persecuted Hmong people in Vietnam.

In 2012, I realized in real-time how important geographic emplacement and territoriality was to political salvation when I met several recently immigrated Hmong Lao families who were teetering on the edge of incarceration if they ventured across nearby provincial boundaries. In this dissertation, I show that the movement of Hmong refugee bodies through the gauntlet of power relations. Their journeys through these landscapes of power have created subjectivities that are consistently sensitive to some particular aspects of political life. Hmong people from refugee backgrounds are keenly sensitive to mapping power in space. However, rather than falling in the territorial trap familiar to the European nation-state tradition (Agnew 1994) with its bounded homogenous areas, Hmong people view territorialities in ways that are useful to them. Rather than seeing a vast, inhospitable territorial surface, they see hidden topologies, much like the hidden flows of energy that went through mountain landscapes in the looj mem conception. The networks of power they see are embedded in the landscape of various social actors. Viewing things in this way is certainly related to these immigrant's marginality in society. They are precluded from participating in state-sanctioned mechanisms. So rather than viewing the state's sovereign territory as a legitimately contiguous surface, Hmong people examine the flows of power which course through the cracks and interstices of sovereignty, allowing them to occupy inhospitable countries.

Since this dissertation is a political geography and an ethnography, I use the example of Vietnamese Hmong immigrants living at the Hmong Viet community of Pa Kluai in Bangkok. This is a present-day example of a Hmong community that actively examines the flows of power between people and spaces. This attention to emplacement and power is ingrained in Hmong

culture, likely through a collective historical experience of conflict and retreat as a marked ethnic minority, possibly which is more likely to inhabit the cracks in sovereign spaces rather than their smooth surfaces. As such, they are interested in the nodal connections of those cracks through which positive energy flows.

In this chapter, beyond simply introducing the overall dissertation thesis, I undertake redefining an understanding of territoriality and territory, arguing for a more networked understanding of territory. This is a more focused project which contributes to the overall dissertation. First, in this introduction, I define some key terms through a discussion of some theoretical treatment of those terms including place, space, territoriality and territory. The words, space and place, as well as territory and territoriality, can be loosely used. I try to use them in this dissertation in a very specific way, which helps to explain my view of state territoriality, especially in the case of Thailand. The illustration which springs from these definitions sets the stage for understanding how Hmong people have helped to define the Thai state territory through their movement and mobility across its borders and spaces. It also depicts Thai state territory outside of the confines of the territorial trap. Finally, I foreshadow that based on my topologically adjusted definition of ‘territory,’ the Hmong of my primary research group in Pa Kluai, create for themselves a topological territory. This territory allowed for their social development and attainment of their political goals.

To be clear, I am not arguing that Hmong people universally view power topologically. To be sure, Hmong people often view territories as bounded spatial surfaces. In everyday instances of territorial control, Hmong people historically used a marker at the four sides to mark off an agricultural field. This practice, known as *ntaus phuas* in Hmong, involves the partial splitting of the head of an embedded wooden post and the cross wedging of another piece of

wood in the split crevice. Furthermore, houses are bounded with four walls, and in Thailand, cattle are now commonly grazed in bamboo fenced pastures. So some senses of Hmong territoriality follow the Eurocentric view.

That being said, understandings of political effectiveness are not always seen in such bounded terms. The power of clan networks is an obvious topological power arrangement. The traditional Hmong settlement patterns of parts of southwest China and Southeast Asia spread Hmong clan networks across mountainous areas. Anyone who has traveled away from home in a Hmong area knows that utilizing kin networks for mobilizing economic and political organization is often expedient (Leepreecha 2001:65), although not equally between different Hmong people (Baird and Vue 2017). Barring other restrictions, Hmong people have an essential territorial claim to occupy the households of their clan members in places as far-reaching as the clan network topology extends. A similar topology of places is evoked when a Hmong person is laid to rest. The singing of the *Qhuab Ke* funeral chant leads the deceased's soul to visit each one of their former habitations (Her 2005). Tracing the steps, for example, from Laos to Thailand, and then to the United States. These cultural institutions evidence both Hmong understandings of topological connections between places of power and the mobility of Hmong bodies to travel among those places.

The literature on Hmong Spatiality and Politics

Scholars in Hmong studies have treated Hmong spatiality to some degree. Maren Tomforde's (2008) *The Hmong Mountains: Cultural Spatiality of the Hmong in Northern Thailand*, takes a decidedly socio-cultural view of Hmong space. Though an anthropologist, Tomforde's nuancing of space as more than a physical container for social interactions draws on the theorist of space Henri Lefebvre's (1991) parsing of the socio-spatial dialectic ensuring that

space and society are coextensive. Approaching the topic of Hmong spatiality she follows the spatial tradition of anthropology of George Condominas (1991), she goes far to explain how this dialectic relationship works in the culturing of the Hmong and influences the space of Hmong social and cultural realities. Noting Hmong migratory history⁵, cosmological underpinnings, propinquity, economy, and life events, she goes far to explain many of the spatial and cultural linkages in Hmong life. However, one thing she fails to map in any detailed form is the political geography of the Hmong in Thailand. She neglects especially the intra-ethnic political cleavages among the Hmong across Thailand's space. Noting this paucity early in the development of my dissertation fieldwork, I sought to address it in my discussion of the Hmong Viet in Bangkok as I developed my dissertation. My primary goal in this dissertation is to consider the political geography—especially the territoriality and territory—of the Hmong people in my subject communities.

Also, Tomforde notes that Hmong migratory social memories include memories of fleeing China because of persecution. True stories of being chased from ancestral lands by the Chinese have been important contributions to developing Hmong spatial tropes that shape current narratives of Hmong political and social subordination (Tomforde 2008:134). However, I would portray this Hmong migration process as ongoing. It has proceeded in fits and starts throughout the ages. The deterritorialization and alienation associated with migration are ongoing rather than a finished past. Furthermore, it shapes narratives in the present rather than

⁵ Although neglect of the political in favor of cultural in research of spatialities seems to follow a tradition in anthropology, the apolitical nature of George Condominas and Jacqueline Matras research among the Brao in Cambodia may have been influenced by the exigencies of these researchers own political positionalities. Condominas and Matras own personal relationships with people in the community might have prevented them from gaining access to conversations about the political realities of their communities. It is possible that Tomforde had a similar situation, possibly the reliance on a translator might have prevented her from getting access to the intragroup politics of her village setting.

only appearing in relics of social memory. Hmong people are still coming to Thailand from Laos and Vietnam, and they are coming through a number of routes. When they arrive, they not only find themselves positioned in relation to the majority Thai population, but also in relation to other members of their own ethnic group. Tomforde's research subjects came from an established village of Hmong Thai people in Chiang Mai. Their integration to Thai sovereign space compared to that of recent immigrants has developed and solidified more than that of the groups of recent Hmong immigrants in Thailand. So I seek to present this more variegated picture of Hmong political positionalities. This picture shows both the material and discursive wrangling exist in any complex social grouping. Hmong people have intraethnic stratification of societal segments. These segments are often tied to an individual's national origin and the point in history during which that immigrant came to Thailand. For example, a Lao Hmong who came to Thailand after the closing of Thailand's refugee camps on the Laos border is afforded fewer privileges in Thai society than a Hmong person whose parents came to Thailand before his/her birth, and that immigrant's overall political positionality vis-a-vis the Thai state. From this view, I hope to see more dimensions than the somewhat flat view of Hmong political interaction between what some have portrayed as a monolithic category of Hmong people vis-à-vis the Thai state. The project I attempt in this dissertation of uncovering the various spatialities of these several Hmong groups is a project which has not been explicitly undertaken before.

Past literature has done some of this work for me. In his (1989) seminal work *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand*, Nicholas Tapp charts a tentative Hmong political geography that is more nuanced than Tomforde's in terms of the relations between Hmong and the state. Within the context of "Increased contacts between the structures of the lowland Thai's state bureaucracy and the Hmong population of the hills, a series

of violent clashes and sporadic resistance began in the 1960s. Furthermore, “[a] Widespread ethnic Hmong rebellion broke out in four provinces in 1967-8, affecting large areas of Chiang Mai and Nan provinces” (Tapp 1986: 36). Tapp’s geography left out Chiang Rai, Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, and Tak Provinces as major sites of the rebellion.⁶ Despite this deficiency, Tapp realized that underlying this map was the reality that,

“Most Hmong were fundamentally neutral with regard to the affairs of the Thai state since they were, to a large extent, able to continue their traditional modes of subsistence. In extreme cases of conflict or trouble with the government, however, CPT⁷-controlled areas provided an alternative sanctuary.” (Tapp 1989:77)

Tapp attributes this drifting of Hmong toward areas held by the Communist Party of Thailand’s insurgents to a long-held set of cultural predispositions conditioned by historical processes toward sovereignty. Tapp attributes the rebellion against Thai authority to an analogous tendency built up by “long-term *internalization* of opposition to control from external ‘formulations.’” He sees this as related to a long history of subordination to the Chinese, the Lao, and finally the Thai. He further asserts that this history of the subordination of the Hmong to an external sovereign power has conditioned a latent set of values in Hmong people, which can be activated in momentary acts of rebellion (Tapp 1989: 177).⁸ Despite the compelling nature of this construction, Tapp focuses on Hmong territorial deprivation at the hands of ethnic outsiders rather than delineating the picture of the Hmong territoriality forms of sovereignty would seek to protect. *Territoriality* in this story is thus neglected. He makes an assumptive connection between livelihood and land-based territorialities understandably. Tapp recounts an instance in

⁶ Tapp’s research was not done in Chiang Mai. In this province the CPT was not strong.

⁷ CPT stands for Communist Party of Thailand.

⁸ “Paj Cai inspired a full-scale rebellion, claiming to be guided by the spirit of Tswb Tchoj, and when Yaj Soob Lwj announced the imminent birth of Tswb Tchoj, which is followed by the erecting a large statue of the black boar said to have been Tswb Tchoj’s father, then I would argue, the leading has taken on an active, manifest form.” (Tapp 1989: 136)

which a Hmong village in Chiang Mai faced flooding because they were forced to cultivate land directly connected to their village. Tapp also explains that land in the area around his research site was not scarce, but the Thai government's restriction of shifting cultivation in areas further afield forced them to clear land on the village edge. This inequitable use of land directly affected the Hmong, likely making them concerned with sovereignty over land and access to it. He states:

“Thus, it becomes still more clear that the shortage of land in the uplands is by no means the sort of inevitable natural process, resulting from overpopulation, it is all too often depicted as. Shortage of land is the direct result of social divisions and ethnic inequities that favor certain types of occupancy at the expense of others. When we come to consider some of the myths and legends collected in the village, we shall see how the entire history of the Hmong is phrased in terms of similar mechanisms of territorial control, and inter-ethnic rivalry for sovereignty over the land.” (Tapp 1989: 65)

The sovereign response to this type of deprivation is often uprisings that seek to overthrow the existing political order of state territory, whether this comes in the form of a secular Communist insurgency or a millenarian holy war.⁹ It should be noted, though, that the single goal of either of these methods is gaining sovereignty over a bounded surface of land space: in other words, the *territory* is their goal. However, territoriality and territory can take different forms from the Westphalian construction associated with European nation-states—which usually have a sovereign power that exerts control over a bounded space. In this dissertation, I hope to show some new varieties of territoriality and unpack the specificities of one newly described territoriality and its resulting territory. That is the territorialization, albeit

⁹ On this point, I should mention that the theories of Edmund Leach (1965) might also explain some of the tendency toward millenarianism. His understanding of egalitarian thinking highlanders like the Kachin might hold true with Hmong people's tendency toward insurgency.

impermanent, of my Vietnamese Hmong subject community in Bangkok's Pa Klui neighborhood.

There are certainly rich pictures of Hmong attempts to establish territory. Mai Na Lee's recent, important work *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960*, does much to establish a Hmong political history, charting the developing bifurcation of Hmong intra-ethnic politics in the Hmong Lao diaspora community. This important work traces political developments over Hmong history ending in the more recent Hmong Lao diaspora politics. Furthermore, she considers important Hmong political archetypes and the relationship between Hmong leadership and imperial overlords in the spatial assemblages of colonial states. In the form of two archetypal leaders, Hmong people have sought to inject their own sovereignty into the management and establishment of territory. Noting these archetypes, Lee explicates a theory of central figures of Hmong political life, she writes

“The longing for autonomy was hindered by the lack of broad political consciousness across time and space, however. As back in China, clan division, cultural group disparities, and regional rifts in Southeast Asia have prevented Hmong unity under a central figure. The quest for legitimation since the mid-nineteenth century has forced Hmong leaders to interact with the state, resulting in the emergence of two types of leaders: the prophet who rejects the state as a legitimating force and proclaims the Mandate of Heaven; and the secular political broker who, with state backing, succeeds in becoming a supreme chief or ethnic representative.” (Lee 2015:304)

Intimations of these two figures—state broker and sovereign prophet—appear over time in Hmong leaders across history. Figures like Touby Lyfoung, Vang Pao, Yang Dao, Xiong Mi Chang, Vue Pa Chay, Shong Lue Yang all show aspects of either one of these two archetypes. I reflect on the significance of this archetypal bifurcation throughout my dissertation, placing this lens on the view of a few figures—especially the Vietnamese Hmong leader of my research community and Kong Meng—to assess whether they are messianic prophets set to restore

Hmong sovereign space or secular negotiators with a state overseer role. Either way, the question of morals figures prominently. Like the prophets, Lee mentions, for some Hmong, access to sovereign territory precedes the development of morals while others flip this causation to assume moral uprightness ensures access to a sovereign territorial space. Admittedly this is something of a chicken or egg question, but it matters when moral improvement is made in a messianic language is assumed by state authorities and others to be a prefiguration of a separate ethnostate that would presumably be won through violent armed conflict.

According to Lee's compelling narrative, the messianic prophet's underlying animus is a desire for sovereign space. A Hmong prophet seeking to unite his people to gain sovereign space does so through a moral quest. Furthermore, speaking of two prophets seeking a sovereign Hmong kingdom, Xiong Mi Chang and Pa Chay Vue, both lost the mandate of heaven due to the moral depravity of their military forces¹⁰, Lee highlights their attention to moral uprightness in the pursuit of that kingdom.

“Since Pa Chay had aimed to establish a just kingdom—the antithesis of the oppressive colonial state—once his men proved to be no better than the system they had fought against, surrender and subjection to the state became the logical path. ‘Cruel beings who do not follow the ways of Heaven and Earth cannot wear Heaven’s crown,’ said Pa Chay. “Go surrender your weapons immediately before the French.” (Lee 2015:305)

This is not only the belief of the Hmong. Other ethnic minority groups have been known to have similar beliefs regarding the loss of mandate through acting cruelly and losing purity (Baird 2008). This belief is convenient to explain the failure of a particular millenarian movement without questioning and leaving the millenarian worldview intact.

Though traced through the line of Hmong Lao history, this model of state broker versus messianic prophet is relevant to Hmong communities in Thailand, including Hmong Thai, as

¹⁰ Other upland ethnic minorities have been known to believe the same thing. Ian Baird documents this in his dissertation discussion of the Brao.

well as Hmong Lao and Hmong Viet immigrants. However detailed and foundational, Lee's narrative does focus on the Hmong Lao diaspora history and therefore holds off on a close examination of political relations between Hmong Lao (outside of the diasporic history), Hmong Thai, and Hmong Viet now living in Thailand. Through my dissertation, I hope to build on understandings of Hmong politics from the point of view of Vietnamese Hmong, who have traditionally been somewhat left out of the conversation of Hmong politics. However, in most cases the mention I make of Vietnamese Hmong is in comparison to other groups of Hmong in Thailand, especially the group of mostly Lao Hmong at Thung Raab. They are an absent presence in most of my explications of the Hmong at Pa Kluai. For example, it was the relative weakness of territorialization in Thung Raab and other Bangkok Hmong communities that taught me so much about Pa Kluai's territorialization. Furthermore, Thai Hmong experiences, especially their lack of connections to the New Hmong immigrant communities illuminated a hidden political cleavage between Hmong peoples.

Sociospatial Metaphor

In order to map the Hmong immigrant space, I need to discuss my use of sociospatial metaphors. Geographic literature has much to say about versions of socio-spatial understanding. In search of a useful set of sociospatial metaphors, Jessop et al. (2008) note that following an "unreflective 'churning' of spatial turns" there has been a "short intellectual product life cycle for key sociospatial concepts." As such, the aforementioned scholars of space seek to bring the ideas of territory, place, network, and scale into conversation with one another. In their opinion, using only one of the aforementioned lenses risks falling into a limited and one-dimensional view of sociospatial relations. Their historiography proceeds first with attention in the 1980s to the idea

of territory as the bounded political power spaces of nation-states. This was followed in the 1990s by geographers turning to scale to understand capitalist restructuring between the “global, national, regional, and local relations” in the face of state retrenchment. In the 2000s, it was the turn toward networks. These ‘rhizomatic’ forms were applied to studies of ‘interspatial interconnectivity’ found in “commodity chains, inter-firm interdependencies, governance systems, interurban relations and social movements” (Jessop et al. 2008: 390). In their appraisal:

“The succession of relatively distinct debates on territory, place, scale, and networks reflects differences in research object, shifts in their relative importance in different research fields and historical context, and, to some extent, intellectual fashion cycles. (Jessop et al. 2008: 391)

This observation that the shift in distinct debates reflects a difference in research objects is a very good point. I began my dissertation with the broad goal of mapping Hmong spatiality in Thailand then found myself grappling with conflicting questions of placemaking, network, and territoriality between my Hmong immigrant subject communities and various state and non-state actors. In the end, I found myself drawing on various literatures and spatial metaphors in order to understand the peculiarities, particularities, and idioms of my subject community. Jessop et al.’s (2008: 391) solution to a similar problem is to use each of these metaphors in concert.

“[I]t is surprising, from our present perspective, how far work in sociospatial theory is concerned with fine-tuning and applying conceptual tools associated with one or another ‘turn’ rather than with exploring the mutually constitutive relations among those categories and their respective empirical objects.”

I take a similar approach in defining the particular form of socio-spatial arrangement my subject community creates as they come together in a place in Thai space.

However, using a broad approach that can draw on the theoretical uses of each of these spatial metaphors—territory, place, scale, and network—does not mean they are all equally

useful for my project at all times. The idea of territoriality presented itself early as one of the key ideas in my dissertation, as I noticed a form of political spatiality in the Hmong communities where I worked. However, I vacillated between terms when speaking about this political spatiality. I have understood territoriality as defined by Robert Sack (1986), as a socially constructed, bounded space within which rule is enforced by some governmental control. In Sack's own words, "territoriality [is] defined as the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area" (Sack 1986:19). Distancing this idea from the previously popular ethological understandings of territory, which understood territoriality as a tendency or instinctual, animalistic drive, Sack characterizes territoriality as a geopolitical strategy and a social need. This understanding is often associated with a state's delimiting and assertion of sovereign control over its lands—Elden cites Giddens, who described state territoriality as "border power-container" (Elden 2013: 3).

John Agnew warns in his (1994) seminal paper *The Territorial Trap* that state territory is not a homogenous container of sovereign space. Rather state territory is laced with contested spaces. This understanding not only cracks the door to the possibility of non-state territorialities but morphs the image of territory from a smooth homogenous surface to a possible tangle of contesting and contingent power relations. Agnew is moving from an examination of the state's imagined territoriality to the actualized historical instantiations of territory. In other words, he is speaking of territory rather than territoriality. This helps me see the metaphor of The Thai State's control over space as incomplete territory. However, my primary subject community is a

group of Hmong Viet immigrants¹¹, and their political space looks nothing like a power container. And they do not seem to imagine a territoriality that looks that way.

Stuart Elden's (2013) is concerned that writers like Sack are more likely to examine the ideas surrounding "territoriality" rather than to study specific instantiations of "territory."

Speaking of this difference, he wrote:

"Recognizing both, and seeing the development made possible by emergent techniques, allows us to understand "territory" as a distinctive mode of social/spatial organization, one that is historically and geographically limited and dependent, rather than a biological drive or social need. "Territory" needs to be thought of in its specificity. (Elden 2013:10)

Furthermore, he asserts that carrying this distinction and writing a history of 'territory' allows us:

"to try to grasp how political-geographical relations were understood in different times and places rather than to assume that the categories with which people in other times and places thought were the same as our own. The idea of a territory as a bounded space under the control of a group of people, with fixed boundaries, exclusive internal sovereignty, and equal external status is historically produced." (Elden 2013:18)

For me, this distinction, which Elden makes between territoriality (framed as a social need always already present) and territory as a historically contingent manifestation, opens the possibility for us to tend to instances of political space that do not resemble bounded surfaces of Westphalian state territory. Elden understands constructions of the concept of territory to be historically contingent. He says: "[t]he history of the concept provides the basis for the more radical claim that the term *territory* became the way used to describe a particular and historically limited set of practices and ideas about the relation between place and power." (Elden 2013: 6-

¹¹ Though I spend significant amounts of time in a few other communities, including Hmong Thai, and Hmong Lao in places in Thailand's north and central plain.

7). The relation between place and power exhibited by my subject community may not resemble Sack's bounded *territoriality*, but it resembles one version of Elden's *territory*.

Having noted that my Hmong subject communities had not established a territoriality or territory in the mode of Agnew's bounded territorial trap, I now begin to describe the theoretical picture of what this 'territory' resembles. Cristina Del Biaggio's discussion of differences between Anglophone and Francophone's understandings of territoriality is helpful in the description. As mentioned earlier, Anglophone writers on territoriality have often stressed the link between state-centric understandings, which pin territoriality with the sovereign state. From the 1970s onwards, Francophone geographers, on the other hand, have seen territoriality as something not necessarily attached to the state (Del Biaggio 2015: 36; Painter 2010:1099). According to Del Biaggio, the French understandings of *territoire* or *terroir* (Basset et al 2007) are not exact matches to the English territory that is a bounded space. *Territoire* is more closely related to the English *place*. Interestingly, like *place*, the French understanding can be a container of any social activity. Furthermore, unlike Anglophone territory, it is unbounded. Like the French *territoire*, the spatialities of my Hmong subject community do not have any formal boundaries. They occupy a topology of spaces mixed in with many other people outside of their group. Unlike the sometimes apolitical *territoire*, there is an overall political tinge to the places my Hmong subject community occupies. As immigrants whose claim receives limited recognition from the Thai government, their occupation of the place is a partial challenge to the Thai state's sovereign territoriality. This possibly inherently agonistic positionality is political. Especially since the individuals in my primary subject community¹² who have UN protection

¹² Though I worked in several communities for this dissertation, I had one primary research community in the Pa Kluai neighborhood of Bangkok. Aside from this I spent time in Thung Raab in central Thailand and several communities in northern Thailand which included villages in Chiang Rai, Chiang Kham, Phetchabun, Nan, and Chiang Mai.

papers help to legitimate the spaces they occupy enough for undocumented individuals to find clandestine refuge there¹³. In review, the territory my Hmong subject community occupies in the Pa Kluai neighborhood of Bangkok Thailand is unlike the state-centric sovereign bounded space. Rather, it is a topology of power relations existing in the interstices of Thai state space. So, although it doesn't resemble Westphalian territory in its unboundedness, this territory does not totally unbundle sovereign power from spatial circumscription.

The image of an unbounded power-laden network resonates with John Allen's understanding of power. Though not speaking specifically of territory, John Allen said,

“The spaces of politics that I have in mind, however, are not bounded cells hollowed out within the structures of an over-regulated system, but the more porous, global spaces that Doreen Massey (1999) has spoken about in the context of relational challenges and that Ash Amin (2002, and in this issue) has subsumed under a politics of connection.” (Allen 2004: 29)

Furthermore, Allen suggests “thinking about power as a topological arrangement—as a *relational effect* of social interaction [...]” (Allen 2004: 19) By this he means that looking at political practices as a topology suggests that political mobilization happens through networks of interaction from points which are distanced from one another spatially and temporally (2004:29). Later on, Allen suggests that flows of resources and materials act to establish this power. This description fits very well with the Hmong territory I did my fieldwork in. Allen came to this understanding of power by negotiating the juxtaposition of two concepts of power, which he calls a binary. Those are—the Weberian centered view of power which sees power as stored in institutions—versus—the Foucauldian decentered understanding which sees power throughout all societal relations. Noting the shortcomings of both, Allen sets these two theoretical views on

¹³ This is a concept which I call *refugized place* in chapter six. The idea shares some similarities with *spaces of sanctuary*.

a continuum rather than a binary and seeks to synthesize these two approaches by finding the midpoint between these theoretical approaches. This, he believes, is a political as well as theoretical imperative¹⁴ to escape the enfeeblement which comes with either of these perspectives.

Firstly, Allen shows how the resources of an institution create power rather than the institution itself that is thought to hold power, thus calling into question the centered ‘centers of power’ side of the binary. He then goes on to discuss how the Foucauldian perspective seems to negate any material coercive influence of power in favor of relational self-regulation.

“This understanding of power is undoubtedly associated with the writings of Michel Foucault where the techniques of power concerned —organizational, classificatory, spatial, representational, ethnical—show up as an effect on the actions of others. There are no direct constraints on behavior, no overt sanctions, only indirect techniques of regulation through which people freely fashion their own sense of self.” (Allen 2004:23)

Though I think this understanding neglects Foucauldian understandings of the relationship between discursive and material effects as well as Foucauldian disciplinary power versus pastoral power, in highlighting this, Allen calls attention to whether power is material or ideational. Obviously, it is both. In some ways, this argument between the Foucauldian creation of power through ideational relations versus the accessing of material force was presaged by the Hegel/Marx question about the basic argument between historical materialism and Hegel’s idealism. The question regarded, which is the preceding element: idea or material. It seems to me that there is a chicken or egg conundrum which could be answered with a dialectic. Possibly in the historical progression of political power, some state authority has mobilized their material goods, but they also used non-coercive intimidation, manipulation, and seduction in order to

14. “In the first part of the paper I explore the shifting binary of power through its different centered and decentered realignments. This is done in part through a consideration of rather stilted views of space and spatiality entailed in both views of power in spelling this out, I try to show why, if we have to make a choice between a rather over-determined, centralized view of power or its counterpart a decentered, pervasive view of power, we effectively enfeeble ourselves politically by leaving little room for intervention and manoeuvre.” (Allen 2004: 20)

encourage other parties with whom they dealt to self-regulate based on an ideational effect of power. Recognizing this difference, Allen seems to attempt to walk that line or strike a balance between the two extremes because there are problems to either approach. On the one hand, dispersed views of power, possibly enfeeble reactions to power. The reductionism, which comes from paying too close attention to empirical observations of material aspects of power can produce a stale analysis of power that does not recognize underpinning infrastructures to that power. Furthermore, Allen is suspicious of the idea that “power is coextensive with its field of inquiry” (2004:23). Viewing it as such leaves one without any focused view of its workings or target of an attack, as such “For those who do believe that power has no obvious whereabouts to speak of, no identifiable landmarks to target, political engagement of any form is rendered problematic” (Allen 2004:24).

So, Allen decides that his topological approach allows him to escape centering power too much to see where it is actually flowing and not viewing it as already everywhere. In some ways, this balance can, at times, give way to a more centered or decentered approach upon a more detailed investigation. For example, I find that after studying my subject first in a topological way allowed me also to survey the landscape to find myriad other power relations that are peripheral to the primary linkages in my initial view. I might have neglected these important linkages had I taken a centered view of power. Furthermore, in asserting a topology in which the power of distance is made less operative, he focuses on the quality of relations rather than quantitative distances to influence power relations. Accordingly, Allen focuses on the modalities of power. “Reach proximity and presence are not straightforward givens,” he says, “they make a difference to the exercise of power, [...], precisely because the many and varied modalities of power are themselves constituted differently in space and time” (Allen 2004:19).

Whether coercion, seduction, domination, inducement, manipulation, or others, these modalities are contextually defined and variously manifested in topologies of power. This model sets up a very helpful representation for understanding the Hmong people in my subject communities who are respectively negotiating several points in a networked topology of power through various modalities.

Focusing in this way on the primary relations in a topology rather than a fabric-like weaving of relations is helpful to zeroing in on causative factors. However, at times, zooming in to microscale relations—the very weavings of the social fabric—between my subject community of Hmong immigrants and officers of the Thai State, I am able to see how somewhat Foucauldian understandings of ‘state effect’ really have some value. Again, this counters a Weberian state theory which views: “the state either as an organizational actor in its own right or a set of organizational resources through which other agents (such as classes or elites) act. In both cases, the state is seen as consisting of a more or less coherent matrix of institutions (Painter 2006:756). Citing Timothy Mitchell’s (1994:94) formation of the idea of State effect, Joe Painter explains that:

“Timothy Mitchell argues that the state is not an organization or structure separate from the rest of society, but must be understood as a structural effect, that is “it should be examined not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist.” (Painter 2010: 1095)

This effect is created by the social body, and effectively constitutes the process of statization—which I will explain as a discursive practice different from the idea of state formation—through prosaic interactions and practices. Interpellation of individuals to the state’s effects happen through prosaic activities in which one interacts with ‘state’ institutions and other institutions which reinforce the ideological construct of the state. (Painter 2006) Painter develops a theory of this “prosaic of statization” by taking up the work of Soviet literary theorist

Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of *prosaics*. Prosaic activities can be the obvious state sector every-day activities such as police functions, department of motor Vehicles, border guarding, and others. "the idea of *prosaics* is intrinsically open to the importance of the affective, the non-rational, the non-cognitive and the practical in ways that distinguish it sharply from critical realist and structurationist accounts." (Painter 2006: 763) Affects of stateness come in varieties. Imagine how the dominating stance of a police officer toward an undocumented immigrant shapes the immigrant and police officer's view of state existence; or how the touch of a police officer at a political protest teaches about the state's qualitative response to protest—as Woodward and Bruzzone have shown (Woodward and Bruzzone 2015); or consider the process of applying for a passport. Painter explains this specific example:

When I apply for a passport identifying me as a citizen of a state, the passport, the office and the officials that issue it, and the border post through which it allows me to pass all exist. However, the state in whose name they function is neither an aggregation of these elements, nor a separate reality behind them, but a symbolic resource on which they draw to produce their effects. (Painter 2006: 758)

However, less obviously, private sector activities can also reinforce the state effect through channeling prosaic acts of stateness. For example, law firms are privately owned businesses that spend all their time reinforcing the state logic. Whether public or private sector, prosaic activities which build up stateness contribute to the *statization* of the state effect. On the subject, Painter wrote:

Thus *statization* can be defined not as the growing control of society by a separate sphere called the state, but as *the intensification of the symbolic presence of the state across all kinds of social practices and relations*. [Emphasis in original] Again this does not mean that real institutions are not involved: courts, police, schools, councils and so on all exist but whether their activities constitute *statization* depends on the nature of the practices in which they are engaged not on the categorization of any particular institution as a part of the state or not. Thus, *statization* can occur through practices undertaken by nominally

non-state organizations, such as private businesses and in principle, organizations that are nominally part of the state could be mechanisms for de-statization.” (2006: 758)

In essence, non-‘state’ individuals can do the work of *statization* or *de-statization*. As such, I have found that the interactions between my Hmong subject community with people in the communities surrounding them as well as the state agencies and international organizations both challenge and affirm the effect of the Thai state. In chapter four, entitled *Feeling Pheej Hmoo*, I show how undocumented Hmong immigrants negotiate the surrounding milieu of actors in ways that challenge Thailand’s state effect. This is itself an affective project in which the Hmong produces affects which help to challenge the state effect. Furthermore, these affective intersubjectivities help the Hmong to create networks of social capital.

However, the story does not end there. Just as Mitchell and others theorize the state to be an effect, Joe Painter theorizes in his (2010) paper “Rethinking Territory” that territory (not to be confused with ‘territoriality’) is also an effect and is produced by networked socio-technical processes. Furthermore, he argues that this theorization of territory reconciles the seeming incongruence of territorial versus spatial network metaphors. He shows that these socio-technical practices which make up the boundedness of territory more closely resemble a weaving of territorial cloth made of a multiplicity of interlinking strands. In this example, Painter explains that the calculation of a regional indicator of Gross Value Added in Britain’s neoliberal reforms has created a regional territorial effect. He says:

“This perspective suggests that the territory-effect is the product of networked socio-technical processes in two senses. First, the governmental technologies that produce the effect of territory are the product of spatially extensive networks of human and non-human actors. [...] Second, the matter, energy, information and money that technologies such as regional GVA code to one regional territory or another are themselves both the products of and mobilized by socio-technical networks (Painter 2010: 1114).

Obviously, the prosaics of Thailand's stateness do similar work in creating territories. However, what is possibly more surprising is that my Subject community does similar work. Socio-technical practices established in the Pa Kluai Hmong immigrant community in Bangkok involve the arranging and monitoring of food distribution across that community. These activities are managed and surveilled by leaders in the community themselves, and reports and records (including photographs) are kept, which are coded to specific families in the community. This coding will influence the calculation of future food distributions. In this way, the technical logistics enforce the territorial effect strikingly similar to the state effect by constituting the Hmong as a different societal grouping from the general population with a governing logic, which is also different from the general population of Thai citizens. So, in this case, the Hmong have established a territory of sorts. The question remains whether that territory has any sort of sovereignty.

One Side of the Coin: Hmong Immigrant's Effect on Thai Territory

Having established now that Thai state territory is the product of networks of socio-technical practices rather than a smooth territorial surface, I must admit that this understanding is nothing new to Thai history. Thongchai Winichakul (1994), has long pointed out that Thailand's (more accurately Siam's) political spatiality has only recently fallen into the territorial trap. The understanding that bounded territorial space was introduced to the Siamese by European invaders of Siam's newly created neighbors—Burma (a state of British India), British Malaya, and French Indochina. The borders they drew were forcibly thrust on Siam, and later Thailand, to maintain. Much as the colonial invaders began inculcating state effects in their populations, Siamese then Thai rulers worked to build state effects and national identity. This

began the era of imagining Thai sovereignty to be coextensive with its delimited borders. This now indigenized project has continued with ferocity in the recent past—if the conflict by some Thai nationalists with Cambodia over Preah Vihear is any indicator.¹⁵ However, this cuts against a long tradition of peoples recognizing multiple sovereigns through the mandala system. This understanding developed in Thai society that it developed its own vocabulary in the ethnoregion. As individual Thai cities (called *muang* in Tai languages) negotiated multiple sovereigns, they were given distinctions according to the number of sovereigns they were subject to. Thongchai explains:

Remarkably, a *muang* in this situation was called in Thai and Lao by the adjective *songfai* or *samfai*, literally “under two overlords” or “under three overlords” respectively, with the first word *song* (two) and *sam* (three) indicating the number of overlords to which such a *muang* submitted. Sometimes it was called *suaisongfai(fa)* or *suaisamfai(fa)*. The word *suai* means tribute and the final word was sometimes omitted, hence meaning tribute to two and three overlords respectively (Thongchai 1994: 96).

Sovereignty was split in these cities among several parties. Furthermore, it seems to have a scalar quality to it. Different levels of authority managed various types of relations. Though the model implicit to this language seems now unacknowledged in the way it once was, Thailand continues like many other countries (Sicakkan 2008) to share some sovereignty with non-state parties, especially in regard to the processing of refugees, as I will discuss in later chapters. Asylum seekers and refugees are not processed by Thai state apparatuses. Rather, the UNHCR wielding the capacity for such work takes over the lion’s share of decision-making on who will be given asylum and refugee status in Thailand, even though the Thai government does not officially recognize the UN category of “refugee” and is not a signatory of the UN’s relevant

15. Preah Vihear (or Khao Phrawihan as it is known in Thai) is an ancient Khmer ruin near the border between Thailand and Cambodia. Contrary to the voracious claims of Thai ultra-nationalists, this monument and surrounding land has been claimed by Cambodia. After some conflict the Hague designated that Preah Vihear is in Cambodia recognized as a UNESCO world site.

1951 Convention on Refugees. Indeed, the UNHCR's claims to this duty are shaky, Thailand has at times forced them out, and at others dishonored the decision of the UNHCR—as has notably been the case with the shocking deportation of Chinese Uyghurs who were technically under UNHCR protection.

Despite the reality of some degree of fragmented sovereignty, consolidation and integration of political space have been ongoing processes in Southeast Asia since the 800s (Lieberman 2003). This likely accelerated in the 1800s when borders were drawn up on the mainland (Thongchai 1994). Like many other places characterized by loose immigrant regimes in the early modern period, more recent policies from the Cold War, but especially after the Cold War, have become increasingly exclusionary. As I will discuss Hmong immigrant populations have increasingly been seen as illegal since the immigration laws of the 1970s and 1980s (Thonglek 2011: 124), and are sometimes seen as needing to be cleared from Thai state territory. If Henri Lefebvre's evaluation of abstracted space as the dominant spatial condition of modernity (Gentler 2000: 647) is any guide, it is not surprising that Thailand's state supports policies that view their territory as abstracted space which can be cleared of undesirable elements in the population. As such, modern states have been portrayed as power containers of abstract space that can be emptied and filled at will. Steinberg (2009: 471) noted this view among theorists as well.

As Sack (1986) notes, at an advanced stage of territoriality, space is viewed so abstractly that it becomes “conceptually emptiable.” Combining Sack's image with Giddens's (1985) depiction of the state as a power container, the territorial state can be conceived of as a container that can be emptied and filled, and the contents of which can be rearranged across its points in space.

This quest to empty, fill, arrange, and rearrange space by state sovereignty reflects de Certeau's basic definition of *space* and *place*. As a French speaker, de Certeau's definition of

space and place both involved an assignation of social value. This is unlike Anglophonic understandings of *space*—which has until Lefebvre’s oeuvre was translated into English—were thought to be abstract and shorn of social processes. Anglophone place, on the other hand, was where social processes took place. De Certeau distinguished between space and place based on the movement of those social processes. For him

At the outset, I shall make a distinction between space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*) that delimits a field. A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of existence. [...] A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. (de Certeau 1984: 117)

Emphasizing the last sentence of this quote is key to understanding de Certeau’s definition of place. “It implies an indication of stability.” The stable relationships of existence, as it were, make up the various social *places*.

De Certeau viewed *space*, on the other hand, as characterized by mobility, movement, and instability of social relations. He said:

“A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus, space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts. In the contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a “proper.” (De Certeau 1984: 117)

He summed up this idea with the single line that “In short, *space is a practiced place.*” (de Certeau 1984:117) It is the mobile, moving, changing randomness that often constitutes practice. Governmental logics would dictate that state interests would often collectively hope

that their territory is a place. The stability of a place is easier to govern than the shifting instability of a space. On this spectrum between stable place and unstable space, it is obvious why immigrants present a challenge to state sovereignty. The Thai state, for example, has spent more than four decades of enacting programs to sedentarize upland ethnic minorities.

Critical geographer Philip Steinberg said of de Certeau's understanding of space "Space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is, in a sense, actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (de Certeau 1991, 117). Hence, movement produces politics (and states) as well as challenging them." Steinberg (2009) notes that not only do elements from outside the state, like immigrants, challenge the state's stability, but they define the state system by their very exteriority to it. Further, in calling critical border studies to examine how state exteriority is constitutive of the state's interior, he says:

These studies go a long way toward explaining how an individual state's ideology is produced, but they fail to interrogate how the normative discourse of the generic, idealized state as an internal space with governance, unity, stasis, fixity, and society—the state idea (Abrams 1988; T. Mitchell 1999; Painter 2006)—is buttressed by its juxtaposition against an even more fundamental outside: an asocial world of disorder beyond the state system. (Steinberg 2009: 469)

In other words, the Thai state needs migrants, like My Vietnamese Hmong immigrant subject community, to act as part of just such a "fundamental outside" whose discursive coding as disorderly or unpredictable qualifies them as the needed constitutive exteriority to buttress the state effect and territorial effect.

For Thailand and many other countries, the clamping down on migrants coincided with an ostensible qualitative shift in the types of migrants which would be given legitimate passing into their borders. The political refugees of the Cold War-era coming from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar gave way to more economic migrants seeking employment from many of

the same countries. According to geographer of migration Jennifer Hyndman, from World War II until the late 1980s, Cold War geopolitics helped to define international relations and migration regimes. During this time, she notes that asylum seekers were given relative hospitality in legal terms¹⁶, and this did not change until the ending of the Cold War and the onset of neoliberal reform in most parts of the world. This change was driven and guided by the world's remaining superpower, the United States (2012: 244). Hyndman notes that this new geopolitics of the 1990s “was accompanied by a more finely tuned ‘geo-economics’ that coincided with the rise of neoliberalism as dominant political discourse (Roberts, Secor, and Sparke, 2003). She further notes that geoeconomic relations are supplanting geopolitical ones” (Hyndman 2012: 245). During the Cold War, political alliances between Thai military leaders and groups like Hmong Lao insurgents were stronger and more effectual for Hmong purposes. But these links were set by the wayside as Thai leaders began brokering with Lao or Burmese government gatekeepers to gain access to the forests and mineral resources locked in Laos and Myanmar (Glassman 2010). This development presented more tempting avenues than a political alliance with Hmong insurgent fighters. I discuss this topic at length in chapter one of this dissertation.

Geographer Matthew Sparke has noted that the 1990s neoliberal reforms, which were “contingent articulation[s] of free market governmental practices [had] varied and often quite illiberal forms of social and political rule”(2006:153). With these reforms and the subsequent migration caused by changes to global and domestic economies, countries have sought new methods of securitizing border spaces. At the same time, they attempt to accelerate migration frequency and convenience for commercial elites. For example, Sparke discusses the ramping

¹⁶ When I say ‘relative hospitality’ I’m comparing to more recent legal developments which have begun to shut immigrants out of the possibility of making successful asylum claims. However, this ‘relative hospitality’ certainly did not mean that refugees were treated kindly. Abuse, rape and other forms of mistreatment were common for refugees during this period. The treatment of Hmong people in Thailand was no exception.

up of US border securitization after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as being one side of the two-sided coin of neoliberal reform.

“On the one side, are the economic forces that continue to generate pressures for liberalized cross-border business movement in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). On the other side, are the political and cultural forces that are leading to heightened border surveillance and more militarized border enforcement in the context of the US ‘war on terror’, cultural and political forces that are also based on more long-standing racialized and class preoccupations with restricting access for non-white non-professionals.” (Sparke 2006: 152)

This double moment has not only been the case in the US. Thailand deals with a similar issue. While they take in a steady number of migrant laborers and still reluctantly receive asylum seekers, Thailand (during my fieldwork) also appeared to be ramping up securitization measures. This included deterrent practices, more frequent police raids on known places of employment for migrants, and prominent deportations of migrants who had already been granted UN refugee status. There is a rationale for this increased securitization. Notably, since 2004 an armed insurgency by Muslim Malay separatists has destabilized Thailand’s southernmost provinces. Hitting much closer to home was the 2015 bombing of the Erawan shrine, which I passed while on my fieldwork only a few days before the bombing. Furthermore, the security risk presented by human traffickers became very apparent after a mass grave of Rohingya Muslims was discovered in Southern Thailand. All of these news stories fit into the zeitgeist of globalized fear linked to terrorism (Pain 2009: Sparke 2007) since September 11, 2001.

What this has meant for the Hmong immigrants I have worked with is that they find themselves within a geopolitics constructed by neoliberal reform and globalized fear. Government calculation and management of their bodies correspond to a metric of risk. Their

identity is newly called into question, associating them with terrorists¹⁷. Whereas in the past, a Hmong political refugee would be granted passage to a third country by virtue of their status as a former Hmong Lao insurgent, participating in some insurgencies now becomes a black mark, they believe, on an asylum seekers' record, preventing their passage. Furthermore, Viet and Hmong Lao, with possible connections to millenarian ethnonationalist movements, are doubly scrutinized to ensure that economic and political relations between Thailand and Laos or Vietnam are not imperiled. As in other countries, Thailand has externalized some of its asylum seekers (Dikec 2009). However, in Thailand, this has not been done through neo-refoulement in which migrants are received in some extraterritorial holding location, as is the case with Australia bound migrants detainment in Nauru (Hyndman and Mountz 2008). For those Hmong Lao migrants whom the Thai government especially hopes to discourage from migrating to Thailand, Thailand itself is their carcerality. Instead of hoping to stop them from coming to Thailand, they hope to stop them from leaving for another country. As such, the movement to a third country is closed off as a viable option for these immigrants. Those with possibly legitimate claims to political refugeehood are disqualified from formal refugee candidacy. In this state, if they fear to return to Laos, their only option is to remain in Thailand as a non-person—illegal and illegitimate. One of them told me with bitterness sitting on a low stool on his rural porch “I think Thailand does this on purpose, they want to keep us here in this prison and torture us.”

The Other Side of the Coin: Thai Territory's Effect on Hmong Immigrants' Territoriality and Territory

17. A prominent photojournalist who works in Laos and Thailand reported to me that an important Lao media liaison had equated the Hmong with the Taliban when discussing a group of Hmong insurgents in Northern Laos.

Having said a little about what Hmong migration means to the Thai state's territoriality, I should return to discussing what Hmong migration means for Hmong concepts of territoriality and their establishment of territory. The territorialities imagined, or the territorializations enacted by my Hmong subject communities, resemble a few of the botanical metaphors used by Lisa Malkki in her (1992) essay "National Geographic." The tree and rhizome are helpful metaphors that reflect some of the aforementioned themes. Some Hmong refugees attach their identities to space in an arboreal (tree-like) territoriality, which is rooted in one state-like territory. Assumedly, this primordialist, rooted construction leaves few options for banished refugees other than to advocate for armed reclamation of their homeland. As such, ostensibly peaceful refugee life in a country neighboring the homeland is assumed to be simply a staging ground for plotting a violent reprise to former conflict—even though this is not always the case. On the other hand, some refugees see their political relationship to political space in a rhizomatic way, which is able to find meaningful connections to new, ever-expanding horizons of space. These refugees may make themselves comfortable in a new country, adjusting to the option of staying there and rooting themselves in a new space. Lastly, I should note the political implications of these two refugee territorialities, the restorationist tendencies of arbor implies a challenging of the current political order, whereas the rhizome seems to imply acquiescence to it.

However, as I have found, Hmong refugees have imagined a third territorial metaphor that Malkki does not speak of. Like Maliki's aforementioned constructions, this territoriality is somewhat botanical. It is the metaphor of the bean pole or trellis. In some ways, this is a middle ground between the arbor and the rhizome in that it adopts the stasis of the arboreal and the multirootedness of the rhizome. However, adding one more element is the temporary and non-botanical planting (not rooting) of the pole in places. A single-pole is planted in the garden near

the bean plants beckoning them to gather around and climb the pole; this was a social decision, not a natural law. The propinquity of social ties is important to the trellis understanding. The trellis understanding of territoriality seeks to stabilize space by gathering social relations closer together and creating place, but it does so with the multiplicity of roots. Furthermore, the beans may have started their roots somewhere else, but the new space they occupy and gather around helps them to produce fruit. The political ramifications for this metaphor are neither wholly acquiescent nor challenging to the current political order, rather somewhere in-between. As I will show in chapters six through eight, my primary subject community uses counter-legibility to neither directly challenge the Thai state or UN, nor do they completely acquiesce in their establishment of a territorialization. This ambivalence can sometimes lead outside parties to misapprehend the motivations of Hmong activists who use this type of territoriality as a base of action. The gathering of Hmong people in space can be seen as the seed of an ethnostate, whereas the Hmong people in the action may simply view this territorialization as a staging ground for moral development and upliftment of subordinated ethnic minority.

If these constructions of Hmong migrant territoriality are at all accurate, it seems safe to say that Hmong immigrants value *place* (using the term as de Certeau would signify a place of stability), and they are not always mobile through their own choosing. Steinberg, quoting Timothy Cresswell (2006), dispels a common romanticization of people on the move.

“Whereas some early works in this genre [critical border and migration studies] tended toward what Cresswell (2006) critiques as a celebratory “nomadic metaphysics,” more sophisticated, empirically based studies generally have emphasized that individuals’ practices of mobility vary and are not necessarily liberatory; the experience of the jetsetter is very different from that of the refugee (Steinberg 2009: 469)

This acknowledgment is reflected in the lives of my subject communities. I spent time in a few different Hmong migrant communities. Some of them were characterized by swirling

disorder and others by static sedentarity. Two example communities are an urban Hmong migrant community in Pa Kluai neighborhood in Bangkok, and a rural community outside of Bangkok called Thung Raab. In de Certeau's usage, Thung Raab would be called more of a *space*, and Pa Kluai more of a *place*. Of my Hmong immigrant subject groupings, Pa Kluai¹⁸ is the most liberated (depending on your definition of 'liberated'). Their liberation is partly because they have established territorial orderings facilitated by stable social embeddedness. In other words, the most liberated of the groupings were those who established themselves as stable *places* and enjoyed the relative benefit of their social connections within and without the community, rather than falling victim to the random mercies. In chapters six, seven, and eight, I discuss how Pa Kluai is able to establish a stable network of people, things, and locations that have helped them to gather temporarily together, like the bean vines around the trellis to make-do in an otherwise hostile social field. Furthermore, not only is Pa Kluai a place, but it is a territorialization which the people there exert control over.

Like Hmong people's apparently age-old practice of traveling the hills and seeking to understand the hidden underground flows of *looj mem* to ensure political and economic fortune, the present Hmong immigrants in Thailand's mountainless urban spaces or relatively flat lowland rural areas are approaching a landscape rife with hidden topologies of power even though there are no mountains to channel the flows. The Hmong in these spaces seek to uncover these analogous hidden flows of what I call *new spaces of power*. Obviously, this system of power is not always divined by the traditional methods of *looj mem* geomancy or *saib qhov chaws* (or

18. Noting the obvious relationship stasis shares to carcerality, I am not arguing that stasis is necessarily liberatory, or that Pa Kluai's people were even relatively liberated compared to most people (especially compared to Thai citizens)—it is far from that case. The imposition of stasis from external powers is certainly a factor affecting each one of my communities. Pa Kluai's residents would certainly like to be somewhere else but are restricted by the State's interdiction, or need to access UN protection and NGO resources, or other circumstances. And though they enjoy a somewhat stable territorial arrangement in one place, that does not mean my Hmong subject community would not rather occupy a different place or space. They are simply restricted from doing so.

“reading the landscape”), I show in chapter five how *new spaces of power* are gradually revealed to newly-arrived Hmong immigrants in Thailand as they interact with and negotiate the new-found socialities and materialities in these new spaces and places. Their task is to find a salutary position within those topologies and stabilize those relations enough to establish some sort of territorialization. Some are successful, but most of the communities are relatively unsuccessful. Either way, their positioning as a node within a network of power relations influences the formation of subjectivities particular to that positionality. Subjectivities take various forms since the positionality, body, and past experiences of each person differ. But it stands to reason that similar positionalities of societal segments produce similar subjectivities. Thus, similarity and stability of connections in urban Pa Kluai might cause subjectivities in Pa Kluai to converge. So, when I say that the less liberated communities are more adrift in unstable *space* rather than embedded in *place*, I mean both that communities like rural Thung Raab lack linkages with community outsiders—such as Thai people and westerners—in quantitative terms. Also, qualitatively, those links are often weak. Furthermore, rural Thung Raab’s internal community cohesion suffers from social interactions, which are often characterized by distrust and a lack of meaningful connection between members.

An important part of this negotiation of social relations is the controlling of these Hmong people’s visibility. Their gathering as a group is beneficial to them in some ways, but it expedites the state’s surveillance capacity to make the bodies of Hmong immigrants more legible. Just as states and colonial powers have sought to gather previously mobile or dispersed people in so many instances (Scott 1998), this is part of the reason for the UN’s encouraging the Pa Kluai community to gather together. The surveillance acts as one component in a system of

control intended to discipline Hmong migrants into normalized Hmong refugee subjects (Hannah 2000).

However, Hmong in urban Pa Kluai use their propinquity to control the flow of information to the UN, thus countering some of that legibility. The leadership of Pa Kluai produces technologies and rules which help manage that intersubjective exchange, produce counter legibilities, and create a territorial effect. In a way, these rules help to control the amount of information that the community passes to their UNHCR overseers. This counter-legibility is mobilized for the goal of individual and group salvation seen in terms of ones granting by the UN of refugee status. In a sense, they manage the affective encounters of Pa Kluai's residents. Broadly, the affective encounters of people in Pa Kluai are far warmer and convivial than the encounters of people in other Hmong immigrant settlements. And their meetings of people are larger. This has led the people in Pa Kluai to have a generally expected *affect of place*, which leans toward positivity and trust for one another. In the spaces of other communities, individuals and groups do not come together as often. The limited intersubjective meetings I've experienced do not seem as characterized by trust and cooperation like Pa Kluai. Positive affects bring people in Pa Kluai together.

They gather around the bean pole, and this proverbial foliage grows to shade its surroundings and produce fruits. The Hmong immigrants in Pa Kluai who have recognized refugee status gather together there help to mark Pa Kluai as a legitimate refugee space in the eyes of Thai authorities. This shades more vulnerable immigrants, which includes many Hmong Viet and some Hmong Lao. Those who do not have such documentation, but who also live in Pa Kluai, are mistaken for legitimate refugees simply because they live near these other immigrants. And furthermore, this planting of the bean pole in Pa Kluai helps the Hmong there to bear fruits

as they improve their own lives and those outside their immediate community, even in other countries. In essence, the limited control they exert over their place—their stabilized topography of power relations—allows them to organize themselves for political purposes beyond their individual needs. They have been involved in activism, which seeks to help persecuted Hmong still living in Vietnam. Pa Kluai members use Pa Kluai's territorialization to protect one another and extend their influence even outside of their community. So although the Hmong people in Pa Kluai are holding a territorialization of sorts, the territoriality which it is based on is not one based on a primordial rootedness which might be mistaken for ethnonationalism, nor even simply a rhizomatic acquiescence to existing territorial arrangements. Rather, the Hmong people at Pa Kluai are making a territory that they can control. And although they may not intend for it to be permanent, its usefulness might need to stand in perpetuity.

Outline of the Chapters

Having discussed the primary theoretical thrust of my dissertation, the following is a brief outline of the dissertation's organization. I begin with a brief theory and methodology section before I begin the body of the dissertation. This is followed by Chapter one entitled *Network Versus Category: Changing Thai Politics and Hmong Precarity in post-Cold War Thailand*, in which I contextualize the several waves of Hmong immigrant communities within Thailand's history and geography. Chapter two entitled *Tree or Trellis: Understanding Hmong Territoriality Alternatively* develops the reader's understanding of possible Hmong territorialities by building on Malkki's botanical metaphor of the Arbor or Rhizome in refugee territoriality into a third 'beanpole' metaphor. The territorial metaphor of the beanpole grasps the temporality and artificiality of some Hmong migrant's territoriality, which is often mistaken for an arboreal ethnonationalism. Chapter

three, entitled *Vietnamese Hmong Migrants: The Long Journey to Thailand*, shifts the dissertation to discussing the background of my specific research community in Vietnam. It charts many of the reasons for their ultimate departure from Vietnam for Thailand. Chapter four entitled *Feeling Pheej Hmoo: Hmong Migrant Subliminal Performance in New Geographies of Power* is a discussion of the negotiation of new spaces of power which Hmong immigrants like the recently arrived Vietnamese Hmong immigrants had to negotiate when arriving in Thailand. This helps to develop the importance of performance and affect in establishing a territorialization. Although the remaining chapters are structured in a topology that discusses different points in the topology, this chapter focuses more on the qualitative aspects of intersubjectivities between Hmong migrants and those outside the Hmong migrant community. Chapter five, entitled *Gathering: Pa Kluai's Network of Material Propinquity*, is an overview of how the Hmong people in Pa Kluai have been enabled by the material networks of places and things to establish a gathering of people. Chapter six, entitled, *Through the Lens of Power: Hmong Legibility and Counter-Legibility*, is a brief introduction to the two chapters which follow. It describes how the powerful agencies of the Thai government and UNHCR have placed the Hmong under forms of legibility and surveillance. Furthermore, it describes how the Hmong at Pa Kluai have taken on a subjectivity that prepared them to counter this surveillance and legibility through establishing a counter-legibility. Chapter seven, *Twelve Oxen: Pa Kluai's Internal Organizing for Counter-legibility*, discusses how people in Pa Kluai organized themselves in order to establish an affect of trust, which allowed them to control the flow of information about their community to the UN and Thai government. Lastly, Chapter eight, *The Mirror and the camera: Pa Kluai Connecting to External Networks*, discusses how efforts to manage exterior connections with outsiders in order to improve chances of gaining material support have influenced Hmong at Pa Kluai's identity.

Fieldwork and Methodology

Fieldwork Sites

This dissertation is the result of thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork completed in Thailand in 2015 funded by a Fulbright-Hayes doctoral dissertation research assistance grant (DDRA). This research included a follow-up trip to my primary research site in 2017 funded by the University of Wisconsin's Center for Southeast Asian Studies (UW-CSEAS) and the Hmong Studies Consortium (HSC). The dissertation is, in many ways, an extension of my master's research on Hmong experiences at Wat Tham Krabok (WTK) for which I completed two months ethnographic of fieldwork in 2012. The fieldwork for this research was done in several Hmong communities in something of an itinerant ethnographic style. Though my wife and children stayed in Chiang Mai, I traveled to between a few of Thailand's northern provinces—Chiang Rai (in the Phu Chi Fa area), Phayao (Chiang Kham), Nan, Phitsanulok—and central provinces—Phetchabun, Lopburi, Saraburi, Singburi, and Bangkok.

In the first half of the year, I spread my fieldwork between subject communities in Northern and Central Thailand before transferring my efforts to central Thailand, especially Bangkok. I concentrated the last half of the year on a single location in Bangkok. I lived in a Vietnamese Hmong immigrant community in a Bangkok neighborhood called Pa Kluai. From that base, I visited other Hmong immigrant groups in Bangkok. Because I was particularly interested in the political spatiality of the Hmong of Thailand, this multi-sited ethnography helped me understand aspects of Hmong political geography in Thailand in a way that a

stationary ethnography in a single village would not. This is especially so because, Hmong people are a highly networked ethnicity, their intra-ethnic politics are complex and varied across their ethno-community. Their actions and opinions seem often influenced by actors unseen in immediately proximate spaces, but across borders, and even oceans, often friends and kin.

Let me note briefly that Pa Kluai is a pseudonym. Similarly, all the Hmong immigrants discussed in the dissertation are given pseudonyms as well. Only Lee Zai and a few other well-known figures whom I indicate are called by their actual names.

Prior to my fieldwork, I was well aware of a community of Hmong Lao and a few Hmong Viet living in central Thailand. Outside of Wat Tham Krabok Temple (WTK), there were a few other communities of Hmong that were in central Thailand's Saraburi and Lopburi provinces aside from the Hmong Lao who are veterans of the secret war and their families living at WTK. This group outside of WTK was in dire circumstances, precariously making do, but seemingly unable to appeal to commonly used networks of kin-groups based on clan identity. The question of why this Lopburi/Saraburi community did not depend on people in those networks for help was precisely the initial question that motivated me to seek an understanding of the micro geopolitics affecting similar communities in Thailand.

However, because of my concern regarding the Lopburi and Saraburi communities' exposure and safety, I questioned whether I should conduct a significant amount of research in the Saraburi/Lopburi community. The last thing Hmong people in Lopburi and Saraburi seemed to need was a white guy hanging around constantly drawing the attention of Thais in the surrounding area. It would have been especially suspicious in a semi-rural area where few foreigners often spend their time. Since they live in several communities spread across the countryside, I would have needed to ride a bicycle between them, constantly raising the question

of what I was doing. So, I had decided that I would find a different community in Tak Province where the Hmong immigrants might be more concentrated. In the end, my contacts in Tak seemed not to want me around.

For the first six months, I divided my time between a few locations. The sites for this multi-sited ethnography were chosen to help get an understanding of a few particular themes, including, relative economic development, migrant identities, political cleavages, millenarianism, and ethnonationalism each of the major research areas taught me something different about my primary research topics.

Subject Communities

The first of these areas was Chiang Mai. The city of Chiang Mai is a major metropolitan area, and although it is not Thailand's second most populous city, it is often considered the country's second city for its cultural value and international tourism fame. Though Chiang Mai lies in the lowlands of the Ping river valley, the rather famous Hmong communities in the mountains surrounding Chiang Mai (especially at Doi Inthanon and Doi Suthep/Doi Pui) are located near tourist destinations that also supply the city with a large cohort of Hmong temporary and permanent residents. Commercial relations between the upland and lowland are strong on the whole despite some ethnic strife (Forsythe and Walker 2008:138).¹⁹ Hmong and other upland farmers largely bring cold weather crops (including vegetables and fresh-cut flowers) from the mountains to market in lowland Chiang Mai City (especially *Talaad Mueang Mai market*). This being the case, my subject communities and interviewees in Chiang Mai represent Hmong people who are not only Thai citizens but individuals who are becoming increasingly identified

¹⁹ Northern Thai lowlanders blocked the road to upland areas because they blamed upland minorities for environmental damage they believed were caused by ecologically unsound upland minority farming practices.

through their Thai nationality and often their commercial success (Yangcheepsutjarit 2020). Chiang Mai is also a center of Hmong Christianity²⁰. I was able to conduct interviews with Thai Christian Hmong, who have connections to the Hmong Christians in Vietnam. Except for a small community of Hmong Lao made of residual members of WTK that moved to Chiang Mai, there are very few Hmong Lao people in the areas surrounding Chiang Mai city. I did not meet or hear of any Vietnamese Hmong immigrants or visitors living in Chiang Mai.

The communities I conducted interviews within Phetchabun, Chiang Rai, and Chiang Kham are a mixture of a broader sampling of Hmong Thai, Hmong Lao, and a small number of Hmong Viet. Kheknoi Subdistrict of Phetchabun Province is often billed as the largest Hmong populated subdistrict in Thailand (Baird 2019) and was originally built through government efforts to gather the Hmong population of the area to a manageable center during a period of Hmong communist insurgency in Thailand. In essence, it is a remnant carceral space. What began mostly as Hmong Thai who long resided in the surrounding mountains and did not join the communist insurgency (commonly known as *Hmoob Qub Zog* or old village Hmong) later came to include Hmong CPT (former communist insurgents) and their families. Hmong Lao, who left WTK after 2004, the Hmong CPT in these areas all have citizenship while some Hmong Lao still have not gained citizenship (though this seems to be a dwindling number). Similar to Phetchabun, the areas near Chiang Rai, Chiang Kham, (Phayao)

This study was prompted largely by a question about the Hmong people living in central Thailand. I wanted to understand why the Vietnamese Hmong in Bangkok and Hmong Lao at

²⁰ Of the upland minority groups Hmong people have not always been susceptible to Christian conversion as others like the Karieng or Akha. However, as noted by scholars such as Tapp and Prasit Leepreecha conversion to Christianity among the Hmong in Thailand has been a long ongoing process (Tapp 1989b, Prasit 2016). Tapp notes how conversion to Christianity offers subordinated ethnic groups a chance to join with Christian groups associated with ascendant global powers. Prasit notes more recently the emergence of Christian conversion among divorced Hmong women. In a situation of social disconnection from their clans, Hmong women have sought out a new community in Christian organizations.

Saraburi and Lopburi seemed to be isolated from other groups of Hmong people. Certainly, a commonly noted tendency of Hmong people is their ability to take mutual aid from clan networks, but it seemed that these groups were not receiving any such aid from other Hmong people in Thailand. A multisite ethnography allowed me to both compare/contrast and connected the experiences of the Hmong in Central Thailand to other Hmong in Thailand (especially in the North). This approach allowed me to triangulate the position of the Hmong immigrants of Central Thailand in the wider community of Hmong in Thailand. I wanted to understand some things about other communities of Hmong and their relation to my primary research community.

Firstly, I found that a few important narratives influence and, at times, guide actions of Hmong people of various nationalities and social groupings—in this dissertation, I use the shorthand word “political positionality” to denote the various positions that different Hmong groups occupy. Some important foils to differentiate these positionalities include citizenship and documentation status, and national affiliation (Hmong Thai, Hmong Lao, and Hmong Viet). Often these narratives are animations of discursive categories created both in realms of political power—like “citizen” or “undocumented”—or lower down in the grassroots of Thailand’s Hmong speaking population. However, they become inscribed on Hmong bodies in various ways. These narratives weave the legitimacy of Thai citizenship and loyalty to the state and political order, which creates a discursive categorization of Hmong people recognized in the broader Thai community. For example, Chiang Mai Hmong, who have often been given full sanction by the royal establishment to live in and conduct agriculture (royal projects) in usually restricted mountain areas. But their firm citizenship claims allow them to view other less nationally integrated Hmong groups with suspicion.

This is especially true for Hmong former Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgents. These former Hmong CPT are often referred to as the *Red Chinese Hmong* (Hmoob Suav Liab) by those outside their group (See, for example, Baird 2018). The Red Hmong are now trying to prove their loyalty to the Thai state and nation in turn bristle at the ostensible appearance of what they suspect are disloyal, fanatical, undocumented Hmong Lao ethnonationalists (Baird 2018). This next group (the Hmong Lao) threaten former Hmong CPT's newly gained public relations traction after the Red Hmong's own past communist insurgency. Both Hmong Thai groups are reluctant to have any contact with the Lao and Vietnamese Hmong, who have recently arrived in Thailand. Furthermore, Hmong Lao already living in Thailand are often unable to assist these new arrivals as they struggle to tend to their own needs. There are also political differences (Baird 2014) that prevent them from giving this assistance.

My trips to central Thailand's Saraburi/Lopburi area was where I met the majority of the Hmong Lao immigrants in my research. Though I had already made acquaintances and friends with members of this community during my master's research, I attempted to expand my research in this area. Initially, I met several new families and charted the scattering of Hmong immigrant groups across the countryside. Though the geographic questions regarding the Hmong people in Saraburi and Lopburi seemed the most interesting to me even during this short period of research (about a month-long), several problems arose for the possibility of continuing my research there. I began to see the importance of affective geography in the Lopburi/Saraburi area. It struck me that Hmong people here were often negative, distrustful with others in their area. Furthermore, they foregrounded affective interactions with outsiders. Despite this interesting observation, problems came to a head for my prospects of research in that community. One problem concerned my worry about exposing members of the community to

attention from outsiders in the area. I already knew that the police frequently harassed and took heavy fines, particularly in Saraburi. However, the second reason became the tipping point for me. One of the members of the community had begun spreading the rumor that I was a spy. This patriarch of one settlement openly acknowledged his dislike of Americans. Though he initially agreed to some interviews with me, he subsequently avoided answering any of my questions when we sat down. Because he would not tell me directly, I do not know exactly what he believed about me; he seemed to regard those associated with the Hmong Association of Thailand (many of whom I had mentioned as people possibly able to assist this group) in Northern Thailand as spies as well. Indeed, Ian Baird has learned that many former Red Hmong have been courted by the Lao government, and asked to provide information about possible Hmong insurgent groups opposed to the Lao government. Though I did not get this impression at the time, it could have been the membership of former Hmong communists in these organizations, that made them suspect to the Hmong Lao in Saraburi and Lopburi. Though I certainly had no official affiliation, my associations with them seemed to make me suspect to this individual. This is not to mention other more obvious reasons. Although some vouched for me and the groupings of families there are distanced by miles with little of a unified community connecting them, the rumor spread and even one woman I had met several times before as early as three years prior was suspicious of me by 2015. I understood the amount of stress members in that community were already under, and I did not want to add to it with the fear of a possible spy lurking among them. So I decided that at the end of that trip I would not be returning.

I already worried about the possible exposure of this community, and I was drained by their cold affective relations. I had hoped I would find an appropriate community of immigrants, which I viewed as more resilient to exposure or possibly more hidden. During the first six

months of my fieldwork, I made various plans to study such communities in Tak, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai, aside from those in Lopburi and Saraburi, I had not seriously considered making the Vietnamese Hmong communities in Bangkok my primary research subjects. However, it was just at the time I had decided not to stay in Saraburi that I was invited by a young Vietnamese Hmong man, currently doing labor in Saraburi, named Dao Hang to visit his community of Vietnamese Hmong migrants in Bangkok. He was one of a few Vietnamese Hmong who comes periodically to Saraburi and Lopburi temporarily to work. I had heard about his community in Bangkok and had even unsuccessfully tried to meet some of its members by going to an area I had heard they frequented. Upon arrival in this community of Pa Kluai, I was immediately struck by the difference between the Hmong in Saraburi and this community. Firstly, noting my interest in the affective geography, the members of this community seemed happy. Their common bodily affect was one of warmth and conviviality, which contributed to an overall scene of convivial interaction. Realizing this difference, I became interested in comparing the location in Thung Raab I had long been acquainted with and this new place in Pa Kluai.

And though I still worry about what effects my doing research there might have on the community, gatekeeping was well established from the beginning. When I arrived, Dao Hang brought me to meet with Kong Meng, his group's leader (leader is *thawj coj* in Hmong). I was to stay in the leader's home. After meeting with Kong Meng, I was taken to have a meal with the household heads (all men) of the community. Several jokes were made about whether I was a spy or not. I was also made to explain myself to the household heads, telling them about myself and my work. I was later informed that I had essentially been given the ok by Kong Meng to conduct research there even prior to my arrival. Later, after my research had progressed

significantly, I learned that much of this initial interviewing was perfunctory, and the decision had already been made. Word travels fast in Hmong networks, so the veracity of my identity was researched online after my arrival, and I was actually sought out by the community before they met me.

In this new community, I was able to address a few of the same questions that arose in Saraburi and Lopburi. These revolved around the issues of how a group of precariously situated Hmong was able to make do from day to day. Furthermore, how does their entanglement in their local and international power networks overdetermine complex subjectivities and exude affects into their localities?

Lastly, I should make a note of the languages I used during my fieldwork. Conducting fieldwork in Thailand among Hmong immigrant communities required me to speak three primary languages. I spoke White Hmong, Green Hmong, and Thai during my fieldwork. With the Thai people, I spoke Thai. When conversing with Hmong people from Vietnam, I would use a combination of White Hmong and Green Hmong. Although the majority of the population of Hmong Viet people I worked with speak Green Hmong as their first language, they are also easily conversant in White Hmong. White Hmong has become something of a Hmong lingua franca owing to the frequency of its usage in Hmong movies, music, internet forums, and Christian Hmong communities. As my fieldwork progressed, I became more comfortable speaking green Hmong but always tended to speak White Hmong. Furthermore, although the Hmong Viet communities I worked with did not tend to mix many Vietnamese words into their speech, I learned some of their more commonly used Vietnamese words. Similarly, although my primary subject community in Pa Klui was from Vietnam, most of them had learned to speak Thai—with varying degrees of proficiency. They mixed Thai words into their speech at will,

especially when speaking about technical issues involving the state or popular culture. On the other hand, I also worked with many Hmong Thai and Hmong Lao and a few Hmong Americans. I spoke mostly Hmong with them as well, but a few of them seemed more comfortable speaking Thai, Lao, or English.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Along with an expanding group of ethnographers, I am informed by some aspects of nonrepresentational theory. Notably, I do not claim to take a completely non-representational approach. I find the pesky condition of writing is fraught with representation after representation. However, noting the intentions of nonrepresentational theory as a non-foundational approach that helps steer clear from the all too frequent essentialization of Hmong identity and sociality found in Hmong studies, makes some version of this theory almost essential (irony intended). My research might fall more appropriately in the “more-than-representational category” (Lortimer 2008). If I have learned anything about social studies during my decade-long graduate program is that good social studies admit the shortcomings of representation. There is always something one cannot represent on paper. Furthermore, since the materialities and socialities of the world seem to be an ever-unfolding sequence of changes, a representation is inherently momentary and reductionist. Using a more-than-representational approach helps me be honest about my bafflement concerning the complexity of social relations while it simultaneously helps me make some sense of the world through “cultivate[ing] an affinity for the analysis of events, practices, assemblages, affective atmospheres, and the backgrounds of everyday life against which relations unfold in their myriad potentials” (Vannini 2015: 318). I used some of the

aforementioned guideposts to direct my attention throughout my research and writing experience.

In my ethnographic chapters, I try to tend to the affective nature of intersubjectivity to understand how Hmong immigrants fit themselves into the new spaces they occupy. These affective connections spread out in topological networks across the landscape to interact with the materialities and socialities which surround one's body. I explore this idea in chapter five's consideration of the network of material propinquity that the Hmong in Pa Kluai use to get by. However, the roots of these affects are not always limited to connections to the material milieu, which surrounds one's body at a particular time, understanding that absent presences and hauntings influence one's feelings and actions in later times. I discuss how the power relations in Vietnam and the overarching threat of Viet state interdiction continue to haunt the Hmong Viet in Thailand. Although I stress the significance of events (Woodward 2011), like momentary gatherings of individuals to places and spaces, I try to remember that these are simply one point in an ongoing sequence of events and movement of bodies. This idea was helpful throughout, and it particularly helped me maintain perspectives as I considered Hmong territory in chapter two's succession of territorial instantiations.

With this theoretical underpinning to my research methodology in mind, my primary research methods were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal focus groups (see Crang and Cook 2007). My participant observation work paid close attention to affective observances of different subjects from obviously different positionalities, such as Hmong Thai and Hmong Lao. I paid attention to group dynamics in various settings as well, including church, home, public, traveling in urban spaces or, getting stuck in a truck on a muddy unpaved mountain road.

My semistructured interviews were recorded, and notes were taken during many interviews simultaneously. Interviews were processed using Transana qualitative methods software. I translated, transliterated, and coded the interviews after returning to the United States. Recordings were especially helpful to my research for the understanding of affect and emotion since they captured the emotion and tones of voice used in speech. Although visual cues such as furrowed brows or smiles were not captured in photographic form, I took notes of these visual aspects while recording many of the interviews. I actually tried to take as few photographs of my subject community's faces as possible to maintain safety and anonymity.

On countless occasions, I engaged in walking, driving, or traveling interviews—interviews conducted on the move. These walking interviews took place during everyday activities and conducted in places—such as worksites, stores, markets. Walking interviews were also conducted as I traveled with interviewees to important places like the UNHCR office, the Bangkok Refugee Center, and the offices of various aid and legal advocacy organizations—Asylum Access Thailand, or Jesuit Refugee Services. These in situ interviews allowed me to get a glimpse of both of what life is like for the Hmong as they travel and also allowed me to ask questions about aspects of their travel experience.

I was also very often able to conduct informal focus groups. The Hmong at Pa Kluai often have get-togethers that make perfect opportunities for the group to bounce ideas off of one another and show me what their group dynamics are like. Unfortunately, these meetings are usually restricted to male participants, so I do not have a good idea about the group dynamics of Pa Kluai's women, my interactions with them were mostly restricted to meetings at dinner time. However, I was allowed a few times to translate for an NGO worker when he came to the

community to work on a fair-trade Hmong embroidery project which involved the women of the community.

Aside from interviews and participant observation, I conducted some archival research that blended with the interview and participant observation process. This archival research included the collection of UNHCR narrative histories and letters to various organizations. Usually, the informant would ask me to help translate the letter or history and then allow me to use the information in my research. Any direct quotes I've taken from these documents, I have asked the person for specific permission to use. Other documents include housing deeds and police summons. These were written in Vietnamese, which I cannot read. So, they were less helpful for later research. Furthermore, their subject matter had already been summarized to me in my interviews, so a detailed translation of them seemed to demand more effort than the returns would be. I also provided several interviewees with a pencil and sheet of notebook paper for them to doodle on during our interviews. This produced several interesting examples of topological understandings of space — especially one representation of Bangkok's Hmong food distribution system and some agonistic political relationships.

It is interesting to observe Hmong people keeping documents in Thailand. I have long noticed that Hmong people—and many Thais—are very careful in storing their documents from their home country, though the tendency to possess useful documents such as police summons seems less prevalent among Lao Hmong. On many occasions throughout my research and meetings with almost countless new acquaintances, my questioning would elicit thoughtful pauses, followed by requests to wait while my interviewee retrieves something. In so many cases, they come back with a variety of containers—a plastic bag, wallet, satchel, plastic folder, manila envelope, box, notebook, etc.—in which a precious, folded or bundled sheet of paper,

card, packet, photograph or other item was stored. These were official documents, often markers of formal recognition by governments, international bodies—such as the UN. In many cases, these documents had been saved for years, and though they were not generally tattered or dog-eared, they were usually affected by humidity and heat through storage in an area without climate control. The tendency to save these documents was found among those who had been outside of the political order, illegitimate, without citizenship, or planning to pass to a third country through normal channels to a third country.

A similar experience has stuck in my memory more easily. During my 2012 period of master's research at WTK, one very enterprising Hmong elder living at WTK told the immigrant Hmong of the area that I was a UN worker who had come to help the Hmong immigrants. I am not sure whether this was an effort to win friends and influence people or was simply misplaced hope, I tend to view it as the former. Either way, it set things up for me to often be called to early morning meetings with members of the community (and some who had come from far away) who had come to his house looking for me. Out of courtesy, I would meet these individuals, and they would ask for help, there was very little I could do to help them, and I did not want to—and was advised by my advisor not to—give them any more false hope. However, some had expressed the need to get documents translated (from Hmong to English or from English to Hmong). Honoring these requests was a way to provide help. In this way, I could both render real service and make it clear that my abilities were only in this realm. I would not be seen as a UN worker or some white savior but as someone with few connections to the power brokers they sought to connect with. Realistically, they would know that there was nothing more I could do to help them.

Some of the documents I translated were letters from the UNHCR written in English. In most cases, they were letters giving official UNHCR decisions regarding the processing of protected status application. I found it tragically ironic that the letters to these Hmong people which informed the individual that their application for protected status was rejected or as the Hmong would put it, their “papers were cut” (*ntawv UN muab txiav poob*) were written in a language they did not speak—English. In a few cases (though certainly the exception), the recipient seemed to be learning they had been rejected for the first time when I translated it for them, although the letter might be months old. Not only was such an event tragic, but it also felt offensive that the UN would not dignify these people with writing such an important document in a language that its recipient could understand. Although I was told that the substance of the letter was presented verbally through a translator when it was received, the details and reasoning for rejection of the application by the UNHCR could easily be misunderstood—especially when the listener only had one chance to hear the details. Pardon the dramatic picture, but one can easily imagine that after hearing an initial “no” answer in such an important matter, an understanding of explanatory details that follow is blurred with tears. Furthermore, because many of the terms used in the letters were technical terms, I am quite confident that a spoken interview is far less useful to these Hmong recipients than a written correspondence in their own language would be.

It was only the Hmong Viet who would receive these letters of rejection. That is not because the Hmong Lao, on the other hand, would receive letters granting protected status, but because the Hmong Lao requesting assistance from UNHCR by 2012 were receiving no letters at all. The UN was not accepting their applications nor giving them NI processing numbers. Most, if not all, the Hmong Lao I met were never even given a NI processing number by the UN. This

meant. This followed Thai Policy that only allowed refugees from countries bordering Thailand to be processed in authorized refugee camps. Since there are no refugee camps along the Lao border, Lao Hmong are not generally provided a pathway to asylum processing.

Caveats

Lastly, I should be reflexive in noting a few complications in my research. I am indebted to the burgeoning field of feminist political geography. Though I primarily interviewed men, I consider my research feminist political geography. I benefitted tremendously from weaving themes and methods of feminist political geography in my research. In the general cultural context of Pa Kluai, it would have been very inappropriate for me to spend time alone with women (but see more recent work by Ian Baird—Baird 2020, under review). But I am informed by methodologies of feminist political geography which stress viewing political geographies “from below” and paying attention to unevenness, inequality, relations, and the multivalent qualities of heterogenous spatialities connected to subject positionality (Massey 2005: 9; Sharp 2009). Similarly, since my research community was characterized by feelings of insecurity, I attempted to incorporate Sara Koopman’s idea of alter-geopolitics (Koopman 2011). I was asked to travel with some undocumented Hmong to various locations for their own protection.

Koopman explains alter-geopolitics thusly:

“Many grassroots groups are not only pushing back against hegemonic policies of (in)security (anti-geopolitics), but also nurturing other types of nonviolent security in connection that they do want— what I have been calling alter-geopolitics [...]. Grassroots groups are not waiting for (or trusting) the state, but coming together on their own, non-violently, for safety.” (Koopman 2011:277)

Although political geography often stresses the security of the nation-state, the alter-geopolitics perspective offered by Koopman helped me to recognize the nascent securitization, which was occurring in Pa Kluai. As they increased their capacity to organize their control over territory

and security, seem to increase as well. I assisted members of the Pa Kluai community ongoing projects through translating documents, communicating with foreign contacts, and traveling to help ensure their security and deflect attention from them while they traveled to more distant locations in the city—such as the UN building.

Secondly, I should acknowledge one possible elephant in the room. It may seem that I am romanticizing or going easy on my Hmong Christian community at Pa Kluai, as they struggle for asylum. Or possibly I might be seen as villainizing the Viet, Lao, or Thai governments. Each of these critiques could be true to some degree. Admittedly, I like the people I met in Pa Kluai, and I am fearful of bureaucratic structures and exclusionary nationalism. Furthermore, I consider some of the people I met during my research to be among the most admirable people I have ever met. The people in Pa Kluai were a breath of fresh air to me. Readers aware that I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day-Saints (commonly known as Mormons) will hopefully realize the nuance of that positionality and not equate my glowing portrayal of ingenuity and affective happiness of members of the Pa Kluai community with some sort of Christian chauvinism. Admittedly, like other Mormons, I consider myself a Christian. However, not everyone in the broader Christian faith community shares my opinion. I have often found myself an outsider in Christian communities in the United States. In truth, a few years ago, the thought of living with a group of Charismatic Evangelical Christians would present me with my own personal hell. Aside from being raised on a heavy diet of recounting of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith (Mormonism's founder) by an angry mob of midwestern 'Christians' who drove my ancestors to Utah in the mid-1800s, I was also told by evangelical childhood friends while playing in dusty cul-de-sacs of central California that I was going to hell because I did not know 'the right' Jesus, or that I worshipped the devil. I can recall waiting in family rooms being

quizzed about flaws of Mormon eschatology by the fathers of my high school crushes. Continuing to take offense at these jabs to my nascent adolescent identity seems somewhat silly to me now in hindsight. After all, I sit in a position of relative maturity, but I should admit they left some indelible marks. Admittedly, these interactions helped build within me a tendency to sharpen my argumentative knives as a twenty-year-old Mormon missionary in Thailand whenever I met with an evangelical Christian missionary or pastor. As such, I submit now, that my interactions with this group of wonderful Hmong evangelicals have ostensibly healed many of my childhood wounds of suspicion. In some instances, I may give them the benefit of the doubt, but I think I am overall as honest as I can be in my discussion of them. But as a trained qualitative human geographer, I recognize that there is no way to rid myself of so-called 'bias' totally.

Part II

Background & Contextualization

Chapter 1

Network Versus Category: Changing Thai Politics and Hmong Precarity in post-Cold war Thailand

I begin in this first chapter by showing that Hmong immigrants have become increasingly precarious in Thailand's state territory within the context of neoliberal regional economic reforms since 1988. This sets up much of the dissertation by showing the current state of affairs for my primary research community. Though my primary research community is made up of Viet Hmong, my description of decreasing security and increasing precarity follows the relationship of the Thai government's with Lao Hmong. Security (for Hmong Lao especially) has waned as various cold war connections have lost their effectiveness. This has set the stage for both Lao Hmong and Viet Hmong, who have newly immigrated to Thailand. In this chapter, I compare the mobilities of the respective political positionalities of Hmong immigrants living in Thailand. A Key ancillary argument I make is that the Thai government is motivated to clear its state space of any Hmong immigrants and not to recognize any which occupy Thailand. This chapter helps to set the stage for the dissertation as it shows the precarious situation that any new Hmong immigrants are stepping into.

Though this story is detailed, it can be seen to show a broad trend when viewed from the theoretical posture of my Introduction chapter. Reminding the reader of John Agnew's caveat against territorial trap helps them remember that Thailand's territory is not a container of sovereignty. Rather as Joe Painter points out, it is a web of sociotechnical practices and prosaic activities created by a territorial effect (Painter 2010, Painter 2012). The territorial effect, much like the state effect, is manifest in the materialities that those effects produce. In this chapter, the manifestation of Thailand's state effect is the precarity that Hmong immigrants experience as the

Thai state demands the enforcement of anti-immigrant measures. The changing materialities and social relations of these mobilities produce differing subjectivities in new Hmong immigrants.

I begin with an anecdote of a meeting I had with a young Hmong man in 2012. Using my Hmong name—Fong—the young man Lee Her pleaded with me, "Please help me, brother Fong." His words thudded on my chest but fell to the ground. There was little if anything I could do to help this desperate individual who claimed to have been running from Lao spies for a year. His fleeing took Lee in a crisscross of migrations over the border from Laos into Thailand, across northern Thailand—Chiang Rai, Phetchabun, Tak—and now to central Thailand only an hour outside of Bangkok. Lee now wanted to know where to go. I continue even now to receive phone calls from Hmong friends in similar situations in Thailand, asking where they should go in Thailand to be safer.

This experience exemplified the precarity that logically concluded as network connections between Hmong Lao and Thai military elites were overcome by the foregrounding of the formal government category of "illegal immigrant." I heard similar pleadings from several other Hmong people I met in 2012 near WTK Buddhist temple in central Thailand's Saraburi province who would have, had they come ten years earlier, likely found access to networks of political patronage in refugee spaces and would eventually have gone to a third country. Instead, they now face the threat of police harassment and fear of deportation to Laos, where they assume that unfair treatment, abuse, possibly torture or even murder may follow. Lee's story sounded similar to many other Hmong tangled up in post-Cold War insurgency politics whom I had met previously. To some degree, his story resembled others similarly persecuted for links to the Royal Lao Army (RLA) or post-war insurgency whom I knew had already gained passage to a third country or were even given citizenship in Thailand following the dissolving of the Hmong

gathering at WTK. However, at the time I met him, his claims to refugee status went unheard by formal institutions. Neither the Thai Government nor the UN would accept his application for asylum. The question emerges as to why Hmong people with such similar life stories can be given different outcomes when they seek asylum, some granted salvation, others left in a state of precarity denied asylum or citizenship. In short, the answer is that some came to Thailand too late and found a different set of political conditions from the set that allowed for their coethnics to go to a third country.

In this chapter, I attempt to show how some Hmong face precarity, and others find stability in Thailand. To answer this question, I view the tangled history of Hmong immigrants in Thailand with an eye toward understanding the tension between (1) Hmong immigrant group's respective levels of precarity (deep or shallow) in Thai space vis-a-vis their connection to state power networks, versus (2) their precarity (or lack thereof) in Thai space vis-a-vis their fulfillment of legitimate formal categories set by the state. I view precarity through the lens of mobility. As they find themselves in or outside of formal categories, Hmong mobility is restricted or extended.

Through this lens, the chapter illustrates what happens to an individual's mobility in the shift away from a situation in which Hmong immigrants were provided some stability through a legitimacy afforded by wartime connections with networks of military and political elites (allowing some mobility), toward a situation of precarity due to Hmong people's unfitness for newly emphasized formal categories marked with legitimacy and illegitimacy in Thai space—especially “refugee” or “illegal immigrant” (Supang and Tawin 2011:40). Though this distinction seems unsure at first, in that the government had not come down hard on whether

Hmong were refugees or illegal immigrants as the UN negotiated with them (Supang and Tawin 2011).

Similar to the loss of refugee hospitality (Hyndman 2012: 244) which came in the global shift toward neoliberalism I mentioned in the dissertation's introduction, these categories seemed to solidify partly to facilitate geopolitical negotiations of regional economic integration with Thailand's neighboring states, most notably the Lao PDR, whose favor was curried through Thailand's politics of cleansing Thai space of Hmong Lao insurgents. This more recent regime of cleansing state space of threats to economic regionalization is facilitated by the state's calculation and governing of Hmong bodies through categorization rather than considering the multitudinous network of Hmong connections to political elites (especially military) which were considered in the past. In the end, it appears that networks of connections have been essentially overcome by formal categorizations to create Hmong immigrant's precarity in Thai Space and discourage the movement of Hmong bodies into (and out of) Thai Space.

The chapter lists five Hmong political positionalities with attention to the precarity and subjectivities formed within the power relations of particular historical contextualization. This discussion emphasizes Hmong mobility in Thai space as a foil for understanding precarity. I begin the chapter by discussing two groups of Hmong people firmly identified as Hmong Thai—*Old Village Hmong* and *Red Hmong*—who are more securely mobile in Thai space. Second, I discuss two groups of Hmong immigrants from Laos—*Camp Hmong* and *Cave Hmong*—who have likely experienced more precarious mobility than the Hmong Thai groups, but less so now since most have gained Thai citizenship. At this point, I consider an important change in the efforts of the Thai government to cleanse the Thai territory of problematic immigrant elements. This happened sometime between when Wat Tham Krabok and Ban Huai Nam Khao were

closed for refugees, in 2005 and 2009 respectively, and was effectively the closing off of what I call *crypto-formal network's* ability to secure Hmong immigrants a place in what I call *refuge-ized spaces*. Lastly, the chapter describes the *New Hmong* from both Laos and Vietnam. This most recent group of Hmong immigrants consisting of both Hmong Lao and Hmong Viet is most precarious among these categories. The Lao Hmong seem more precarious than Viet Hmong, but both groups are precarious in comparison to groups of Hmong who came to Thailand earlier. The difference between new Hmong—both New Hmong Lao and New Hmong Viet—and earlier immigrants is not that the earlier group is made up of refugees with greater claims to protection than the New Hmong. The primary difference is that the New Hmong came to Thailand at a time when category is stressed over network connections in the management of refugee bodies. Also, as I show in chapter four, political context is also paired with new Hmong immigrants relative unfamiliarity with Thailand's culture, language, and laws, which make life difficult for them as well.

Notes on Theory and Methodology

Methodologically this chapter is based on both primary archival material and secondary sources, as well as ethnographic fieldwork. Admittedly, however, my historical research done mostly in 2016 was heavily informed by the earlier ethnographic fieldwork I did in 2012 and 2015, during which I found key cleavages in Hmong ethnic identities and political networks. This prompted an exploration of the histories that described the formation of these subjectivities. Thus, this chapter is meant to begin describing those subjectivities and contextualizing them, especially showing how the precarity of the undocumented Hmong experience in Thailand formed within a broader political-economic and geopolitical context.

My itinerant form of ethnography²¹ (Novoa 2015; Schein 2000) allowed me to understand some key differences between different Hmong communities in Thailand and get an idea of how similarities in subjectivities might have formed among segments of those communities. Three years prior, I had spent a month and a half living in WTK completing masters research and doing preliminary Ph.D. research, where I was able to get a grip on some aspects of political networks that allowed for the Hmong immigrants to function in Thai space with some degree of stability.

Attention to the mobility of my subject communities helped me understand their relative precarity in Thai space. Interviews were important in asking them about places that they could or could not go, how they moved, and how they felt in mobility. Similarly, I used participant observation to note their activities, tendencies (rationalized and not), and bodily affects as they moved in spaces. This attention gave me a window into their experience of precarity. Admittedly, I was most interested in the precarity of undocumented Hmong, but I was able to learn about this by comparing it to the relatively less precarious existence of other segments of the Hmong population in Thailand.

In terms of archival research, the recently leaked US state department cables helped me understand how the US, Lao, and Thai negotiations became real policy decisions regarding Hmong immigrants in Thailand, especially during the most recent Ban Huai Nam Khao period. The volume *Hmong Lao in Thailand* edited by Supang Chantavanich and Tawin Plaensri (2011) was very helpful for me in periodizing Thai government policy regarding Hmong immigrants.

²¹ As mentioned earlier, during a period of one year's fieldwork in Thailand in 2015 I spent six months traveling to several different Hmong communities—in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Phetchabun, Lopburi, Saraburi, Phayao and Nan—before finally focusing on one community for the final six months of my fieldwork.

In this chapter, *precarity* describes the relative instability of Hmong people's claim to the legitimate occupation of Thai sovereign space. Just as a precariously balanced stool limits one's ability to rest comfortably on it, precarity limits Hmong people's ability to dwell in Thai space and make a home. This chapter discusses the relationship between precarity and mobility of the Hmong people and their perceptions of precarity in space. Speaking of the Hmong in Thailand, one may generally presume that mobile Hmong are less precarious. However, following Cresswell's observation that not all forms of mobility are liberatory (Steinberg 2009:469, Cresswell 2006), precarity is related to mobility, but not necessarily in this simple way. For example, although Thai Hmong still experience discrimination, the relative lack of precarity experienced by a Hmong person possessing Thai citizenship and economic well-being might allow them to roam with relative ease across Thai territory. Albeit endangered, inconvenienced, and insulted by police drug check stations, which are often set up along roads in areas heavily populated by Hmong, Hmong with Thai citizenship can realistically make travel plans to most places in Thailand. In contrast, the precarity of someone with no citizenship and very little claim to future citizenship status might force that person to flee frantically from place to place for fear of interdiction by agents of the state. Both individuals were mobile, but one was experiencing more precarity than the other. Similarly, people living in spatial stasis shouldn't be seen as necessarily liberated or precarious. Cases exist in which a formally legitimate citizen is able to rest assured in one place, or conversely, a precarious individual may be in a stationary position because they are stifled from movement by fear of venturing into hostile space.

Furthermore, Hmong people's place in space embeds them in networks of power relations, which produce subjectivities like those highlighted by the categories described in this chapter (Foucault 2000). Though these subjectivities are numberless and complex, there seem to

be some similarities across the selected groups discussed here. These subjectivities hold a degree of endurance, so even after a Hmong subject's articulation with the power network changes, a relic of former power relations remain printed on the subject. For example, an undocumented Hmong person without a driver's license learns to fear being caught while driving a car or motorcycle in Thailand. Such fear has inhibited several of my Hmong Lao subject's desire to drive and the ability to drive, even after gaining citizenship and earning a valid driver's license.

Although formal categories placed on Hmong bodies by the Thai government are important, this chapter discusses the Hmong experience of precarity within a framework of changing relations of power directed at Hmong bodies and also notes informal categories which Hmong themselves recognize were inscribed on their bodies through power relations present at particular moments. Particularly interesting is that the Hmong in Thailand very often categorize themselves based on this history of governmental categorization and movement. A discussion of these endonymic categories is necessary to make sense of the rest of this chapter; however, it should be clear that although many Hmong in Thailand are familiar with these categories, they have not reached the status of a subethnic category in any formal sense. Furthermore, though they are broadly used in informed discussions, there are a number of variations on the themes of these categories, which are often improvised intuitively in discussions by Hmong people to describe categories similar to those listed. Furthermore, the lines between these categories can be blurred, with one person identifying with none or more than one of them. The primary categories are as follows: Old village Hmong (*Hmong Qub Zog*), Red Hmong (*Hmong Liab*), Camp Hmong (*Hmong Soun*), Cave Hmong (*Hmong Qhov Tsua*), and New Hmong (*Hmong Tshiab*).

Policy Shifts, Covert Geopolitics, and Hmong Precarity

Some level of precarity and restricted movement has been a reality for Hmong people in Thailand refugees over the past four decades (especially for Hmong Lao immigrants) as many of them have found themselves successively at military camps, refugee camps, repatriation camps, detention centers, and the like. However, the precarity of their position as non-citizens, even illegal immigrants, living in Thailand has been thrice ratcheted up in 1992, 2003, 2009 in inverse correlation with the cascade of refugee camp closures. This divergence lines up with the market forward economic and policy imperatives of Thailand's Prime Ministers Chatichai Choonhavan (1988-1991) and Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006) that "turned battlefields into market places." Although such immigrants had limited legal right to live in Thailand, from the late 1970s until 1988, Hmong insurgents were given Thai military support and allowed patronage through a variety of networks (Baird 2012; 2013; 2014). Basing themselves at refugee camps along the border with Laos, these insurgents continued the battle against the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and acted as a buffer against Lao encroachment. Or, from their view, Hmong were given refuge in Thailand while they continued insurgent activities in Laos. Thus, Hmong refugees were allowed to stay in Thailand with some guarantee of protection and legitimacy of residence from the Thai government through patronage at the local level afforded,, particularly by more broadly connected military strongmen and local political elites. These connections afforded the Hmong a secret, crypto-formality, as they lived at WTK for a while until they were cleansed from that refugee space.

The movement toward increasing precarity of undocumented Lao and Hmong Viet living in Thailand at present is embedded in the broader geopolitical framework of Thailand's shift in policy orientation—from bilateral US-Thai relations to a multilateral, regional approach. This shift of scales and increasing precarity should be embedded within the frame of geopolitics

surrounding U.S. Cold War policy in Southeast Asia. Despite Thailand's geographic positioning at the center of mainland Southeast Asia's five nation-states, it was not a crossroad for cooperation in the region. Beginning in 1953, the US, with intentions of making the kingdom into an anti-communist stronghold, sent aid and backing for Thailand's police and military that turned the country's authoritarian regime into a Cold War-era US "client-state" that shirked efforts at regional cooperation and stifled transparent national politics (Baker and Pasuk 2009: 146).²² Aside from a narrowing of Thailand's foreign policy, this Thai-US cooperation (possibly cooptation) led Thailand's military and police (notably paramilitary organizations such as Thailand's Border Patrol Police (BPP) and Police Aerial Reconnaissance Unit PARU) to assist the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1960s and 1970s.

Changing Political and Economic Contexts and Hmong in Thailand

I now contextualize the Hmong immigrant occupation of Thai space through a whirlwind tour of Southeast Asia's regional political and economic history over the past thirty years, which helps to explain why the Thai Government has tended toward the cleansing of Thai space of Hmong Lao insurgents under the category of political refugee. In doing so, I show that placing them in the requisite category then removing them from Thailand happened when Thaksin pushed to regionalize and became an international elite by extending his own networks of power across Thailand's borders. This extension was facilitated and, in some ways, driven by broader geopolitical and economic changes in Southeast Asia. These changes revolve around Cold War politics and development in the region. These changes reflect directly on the changing situation and categorization for Hmong refugees living in Thailand in the transition from temporarily

22. For Example, Thailand's Prime Minister from 1980 to 1988 Prem Tinsulanond did not make a single official visit to Myanmar in his eight years as Thailand's leader.

formal legitimacy in Thai space during the Camp years (1975-1992) to cryptoformally legitimate²³ (1992-2003), toward increasing illegitimacy.

As World War II ended and the Cold War began, the 'free world' with the United States at its head soon faced the looming threat of communist takeover in East and Southeast Asia.²⁴ On the Southeast Asian mainland, communists were victorious in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and communist insurgencies continued in Myanmar and Thailand. These new regimes and insurgencies were aligned respectively with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), who had been in conflict since the 1960s. China supported the efforts of Myanmar's Communist Party of Burma (CPB), Thailand's Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Laos' Pathet Lao (PL) insurgency, on the other hand, was supported directly by the Viet Minh in-turn backed by the (USSR). Thailand's Indochinese neighbors had all fallen to the communists leaving the kingdom a sole US ally in the region. Remnants of the conflict spilled over the borders of former Indochina into Thailand as successive waves of supporters of toppled royal and republican regimes took refuge in camps flanking Thailand's border with Cambodia and Laos. Lao refugees, including Hmong, never turned away from conflict in Laos and continued armed insurgency thereafter 1975. At the same time, the China-backed communist insurgencies in Thailand and Myanmar continued.

The significance of this political history for the Hmong at WTK is obvious in some ways. Cold war politics created the pretext for their involvement in the war, subsequent exile from Laos, and continuing insurgency. Pre-1975 connections between the Thai military and members

²³ Cryptoformality means that one is recognized through a formal channel which is not general knowledge, and some times depends on informal recognition by one portion of the state but not by other portions.

²⁴ By 1949 Mao's Army had taken China, pushing the KMT nationalists into border areas of Burma's Shan State. Furthermore, Viet Minh revolutionaries after taking power in Vietnam for a short period following Japanese defeat were driven back but not defeated, eventually reclaiming North Vietnam under the name the Democratic People's Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with 1954's Geneva Accords. Communist insurgencies also cropped up on the mainland in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand (which Hmong people joined in large numbers).

of the Royal Lao Army (RLA) continued to some degree as refugee insurgents were provided with a home base on Thai soil to continue their insurgency. This meant the Hmong among these former RLA now living along the borders with Laos still factored into Thai politics as an important buffer force against communist threats to Thailand in the heat of the Cold War until the late 1980s and early 1990s. Furthermore, Hmong insurgent connections to the military elites they had worked with during the war allowed them to maintain legitimacy as residents in Thailand. This position gave Hmong insurgents certain stability in Thai sovereign space (see, for example, Baird 2018).

A Shift to International Political Economic Networks

This position changed when Cold War-era economic divisions gave way to efforts to integrate mainland Southeast Asia's regional economy. The Southeast Asian mainland lacked economic integration, with confined blocks of various economic relations. Similarly, the region's communist and socialist countries lacked economic development in comparison with Thailand (Rigg 2003: 12). Largely unsuccessful efforts at rural collectivization in Vietnam, cooperatives in Laos, and Pol Pot's radical agrarian communism left the Indochinese countries lagging behind more market-oriented economies like Thailand and Malaysia (Rigg 2003: 19). By 1986, both Laos and Viet Nam had declared economic policy adjustments that equated to economic but not political liberalization. Furthermore, the break-up of the USSR and the ending of foreign aid from the Soviets to Vietnam and Laos contributed to the economic necessity of such reforms. Upon reform, these former command economies deemed it necessary to 'catch up' (Rigg 2003: 12) through liberalization policies such as *Doi Moi* in Viet Nam or *Chinthanakan Mai* in Laos.

Although Thailand experienced a brief period of civilian rule from 1973-1976, violent rightist paramilitary crackdowns on students suspected of leftist sympathies sparked a coup that brought the military back to power. Networks of traditional military elites were still central to Thailand's political and economic environment. However, a period of political stability, afforded by Prem Tinsulanond's premiership from 1980-1988, built investor confidence in Thailand's nascent economy, increasing domestic and foreign direct investment. A shift from import substitution toward export-driven growth allowed Thailand's economy to expand rapidly during the 1980s, going from the export of primary commodities and low value-added commodities such as textiles to higher-value products such as computer chips and automobile assembly. This growth continued until the 1997 Asian Crisis (Rigg 2005: 25-30), allowing for the expansion of the middle class and economic empowerment of provincial elites through business and other transactions. In other words, there was more money to be had by more people through more channels. It was in this environment that people like Chamroon Parnchand, Thaksin Shinawatra, and Banharn Silpa-Archa maneuvered their way to power as local and provincial ascendancy (McCargo and Ukrist 2005; Nishizaki 2008), taking the latter two both to parliament and premiership.

In comparing Thaksin's style of political connection with that of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond, Duncan McCargo notes a difference in the quality of their respective styles. Of Prem, he said:

Prem's ability to combine both military and political portfolios illustrated the extent to which he was the consummate hybrid figure. While Prem did have close ties with certain business groups—reflecting favors done in the past—they did not comprise a major network. Prem's connections with political parties were also more in the nature of personal ties than large-scale structural connections; [...] Prem's basic stance was highly conservative, reflecting his military background. It is striking, for example, that he never made an official visit to any of Thailand's socialist neighbors during his eight years as prime minister. During his

premiership, economic policy was driven largely by technocrats and civil servants, especially those associated with national economic and social development board [...] (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 214)

McCargo continues, speaking now of Thaksin that:

"Thaksin's power network is based upon a new kind of political economic structure, one based upon the growth of the new business conglomerates that began to assume increasingly open roles within Thailand's political order during the 1990s." (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 215)

In McCargo's view, although Prem's premiership assisted in creating conditions for civilian rule, his network followed traditional interests and was established by military strongmen and overseen by the monarchy (McCargo and Ukrist 2005). McCargo posits that Thaksin's assumption of premiership began a fundamental break in the way that high-level political business was now done in Thailand. Thaksin Shinawatra's entrepreneurial bent and tendency to look for business style negotiations allowed him to look at post-Cold War Southeast Asia in a way that considered more than military-style national security.

Though McCargo notes this change of network styles in terms of its quality, I would add that Thaksin—and his like-minded, though less successful, predecessors Chatichai Choonhavan and Banharn Silpa-Archa—were pushing for a scalar shift from national to international in the formation of new broader business networks and made resulting changes to domestic policy to fit within those networks. In a sense, Thaksin was trying to shake up what he likely saw as antiquated connections made up of military elites. Prem's network based on the 'traditional' connections that McCargo mentions seemed to have been caught in the 'territorial trap' of the nation until the 1990s. Prem did not pay enough attention to salutary possibilities of business with Thailand's close regional neighbors, holding them at arm's length as security concerns for his entire premiership and even in some cases engaging in military conflict with Laos in 1984 and 1987.

Jim Glassman, on the other hand, presents another facet to this change in international relations showing the central importance of Thai military elites with this burgeoning regionalization. Taking a Poulantzian perspective, he notes that:

“[m]uch of the capital that moved into neighboring countries was that of investors connected to the Thai military, itself a major “state capitalist” involved in various processes of “primitive accumulation” Chaovalit Youngchaiyudh was widely cited as having considerable interests in this logging expansion.” (2010: 69-70)

According to the aforementioned narrative, this opening of military elites to regionalization coincided with Chatchai’s “battlefields to market place” doctrine but was driven by Thailand’s 1988 logging ban. The ban had been long pushed by environmental groups but generally became popular after deadly mudslides brought on by illegal logging. Similarly, the Thai state’s desire to increase the urban industrial labor force tended in the 1980s toward forestry regulation that sent people to cities through limiting available agricultural land (Glassman 2010: 69).

With Indochinese liberalization in progress and the ending of the CPT insurgency in the early 1980s, Chatchai Choonhavan, Thaksin and his predecessors saw a range of new business opportunities in areas formerly more restricted. Furthermore, according to Jim Glassman, the logging ban in Thailand pushed a new wave of investment from Thai investors—especially those connected to the military.

“an immediate consequence of the logging ban was the burst of investment in Burma, Cambodia, and Laos, as loggers attempted to find new sites for extraction. This process implicated the Thai state not only because its policy changes helped instigate the process. Much of the capital that moved into neighboring countries was that of investors connected to the Thai military, itself a major “state capitalist” involved in various processes of “primitive accumulation.” (Glassman 2010:70)

With the growth of Yunnan Province’s economy in the 1980s, Thai businessmen likely imagined accessing the enormous Chinese market that is not far beyond Thailand’s northernmost point. And other smaller markets in Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia presented exciting new

vistas for expansion. Furthermore, reactions in Thailand's popular culture to environmental degradation caused by rapid development, such as the 1988 Logging Ban and later protests against large Hydropower projects, gave incentive for business interests to seek some natural resources outside of Thailand and externalize some of the costs of development beyond Thailand's national borders. Andrew Walker's *The Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* gives an account of cross border business projects and emerging transnational economic opportunities in the Golden Triangle borderland region of northern Southeast Asia. The Mekong Corridor and Economic Quadrangle (1999:65-66), to name a couple prevalent efforts in the Golden Triangle that began in the 1990s, aimed to reshape the region through trade links, making Thailand a center for economic activity as well as a bridge between Myanmar and Indochina. In such an area that is divided by rivers, mountains, and territorial borders of conflicting states, the construction of reliable transport linkages had long been neglected. A central goal of these regional economic integration efforts, therefore, was the construction of transport linkages that would link Kunming with Chiang Rai, via Laos, that would bring these territories into a new era of economic growth with Thailand at the center of a burgeoning *Suwarnaphumi* (Golden Land) (Pavin 2010: 83).

As mentioned, environmental resources figured prominently into cross-regional business interests. In the period from 1947 to 1988, Thailand's forest cover was reduced from about 70 percent to 28 percent of its land area (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 62). By 1988 Thailand enacted a logging ban forcing Thai development to look elsewhere for lumber resources. As such, Thai business was responsible for the resurrection of the sawmill industry in northwestern Laos to supply some of Thailand's lumber demand (Walker 1999: 67). Lignite and coal found in Viang Phou Kha and Hong Sa (both in northwestern Laos) were also important energy resources

developed by Thai investors. Furthermore, Laos has become the battery of the region as Thai and other investors have proposed and built a series of dams across the country to supply electricity to Thai and other markets (Walker 1999: 67; Baird and Quastel 2015). Although Thai businesses' search for extractive resources can be viewed as simply an externalization of environmental costs of development, within the frame of Thaksin's regional foreign relations and trade policy—particularly the Ayeyawady Chao Phraya Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS)—this movement is dubbed a maximization of comparative advantage.

This economic expansion, though touted by some as technocratic, has certainly not been an apolitical process. Attempts at increased economic integration between Thailand and her neighbors have also been coupled with efforts at political alignment. Although the 1950s-1980s foreign policy was centered on relations with the US, from the late 1980s forward, there has been an increasingly multilateral approach to Thai foreign policy and trade. In terms of foreign policy, Thaksin rolled out two regional integration models. The Asia Cooperative Dialogue (ACD) launched in 2000, and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) begun in 2003. The ACMECS major goals were:

“1. To increase competitiveness and generate greater growth along the borders; 2. To facilitate relocation of agricultural and manufacturing industries to areas with comparative advantage; 3. To create employment opportunities and reduce income disparity among the four countries; 4. To enhance peace, stability and shared prosperity for all in a sustainable manner.” (Pavin 2010: 111).

The ACD was to be a "forum to discuss region-wide cooperation" (Pavin 2010: 97). In conceiving the ACD Thaksin aspired "to constitute the missing link in Asia by incorporating Asian countries into a newly crafted 'Asian community' without duplicating other existing organizations or creating a block against others" and to function on the principles of "positive

thinking, informality, voluntarism, non-institutionalization, openness, respect for diversity and the comfort level of member countries [...](Pavin 2010: 97).

The final point regarding ACD's respect for the diversity of member nations is a euphemism for a shift towards economic rationality over the personal political commitments that characterized Prem Era foreign policy (although Prem certainly was not without economics). Although Prem took a hardline position against Laos, and Myanmar, Thaksin's proposed "Bangkok Process" allowed for an isolated and troublingly authoritarian and abusive regime in Myanmar to be brought into integration with the broader world through contacts with Thailand and continuing trade rather than sanctions. Although the success of this approach is certainly questionable, some might argue that doing business with Myanmar's oppressive regime typifies Thaksin's ideal of economic pragmatism, or possibly instrumentality, over more purist ethical commitments.

Similarly, this policy shifted the scales of (P)olitical commitment from those confined primarily within national boundaries to those increasingly across borders and thus refracted international policy needs into the realm of domestic policy. In other words, increased integration forces shifts in domestic policy to please foreign partners. As such, subnational partners that had been important to national-level politics in the past have become less important, and in the case of the Hmong Lao, even antithetical, as policy increasingly reflects the emphasis of international partners over subnational interests. Owing to Thaksin's attention to regional political economic demands of formerly more isolated nations (such as Laos), actors that had been allowed linkage into networks of national power through local political elites (e.g., Hmong linked to military via the Abbott of Wat Tham Krabok where the many Hmong lived until 2004) because of their importance to national goals have been displaced from these networks as

Thailand has integrated Laos' political economic needs into its own domestic policy. For example, the Hmong Lao that had been Thailand's border guard during Cold War times and a WTK based reserve against communist encroachment were turned into an embarrassing stain on the country's relations with Laos. And although many of the actors that formerly constituted these networks are still alive, they have been displaced from their positions in those networks; For example, Thaksin worked to consolidate his own power by reshuffling pre-existing military insider networks to the advantage of his own loyalists in the military who might go along with his foreign policy program (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 136-137).

I turn now to explain the various Hmong positionalities that found themselves within this changing economic and geopolitical landscape.

Old Village Hmong (Hmong Qub Zog)

Firstly, *Hmong Qub Zog* (Hmong for "old village Hmong") refers to Hmong people who have long lived in their village in Thailand and were some of the earliest to gain Thai citizenship. *Hmong old village* is a term frequently used in the Khao Khor area of Phetchabun, referring to groups already living in the area when later Hmong immigrants settled. Interestingly, usually, one does not necessarily reside in their original village to be called Hmong Old village (old village Hmong), many of the Hmong living in Khao Khor were resettled there to be gathered during the communist insurgency for government legibility. Thus, the name Hmong Old village seems more to refer to the fact that they chose not to go into the forest to join the communist insurgency, so they stayed in the old village rather than joining the insurgency. As such, most Hmong living near Chiang Mai city would fall under this category as well. Few of them joined the communist insurgency in the 1970s. Inversely some of them began assisting

counterinsurgency efforts taking positions in or allying themselves with the Thai Army. Of any of the Hmong groups I've listed, it appears old village Hmong are most likely to have citizenship and have had it for the longest. Their firm claims to legitimacy in Thai space is facilitated by sedentary positioning and legibility and has allowed them to become, I argue, the best integrated Hmong group in Thai society and economic relations. Because they often have well-established land rights, many are quite wealthy and influential. They are generally the least precarious of the Hmong groups in Thailand.

Interestingly, Thai government policy toward Hmong immigrants began with a tendency to encourage Hmong stasis and bring them to settle in particular spots, though my opening vignette showed an individual frantically searching for a safe place to settle in a situation which Thai government policy was inhospitable to new undocumented Hmong immigrant settling. During the first half of the nineteenth century, undocumented Hmong people had begun moving into the mountains of Northern Thailand (Prasit 2010: 13, Tapp 1989) where they, like most Southeast Asian uplanders, were living "during the period [...] in this area [...] before the creation of modern nation-state when the present boundaries of countries had not yet been set" with little government intervention until the decades of the first half of the twentieth century (Prasit 2010:13, Scott 2009). During the period proximate to the communist insurgency, although suspicion by Thais lingered about Hmong people's former insurgency and shifting cultivation practices (Pinkaw 1999), Old village Hmong had an increasing discursive claim on Thai citizenship as they became settled. However, the bureaucratic reality of this claim was often more hard-fought. "Hilltribes" were given attention through *Nikhom Chao Khao* and *Royal projects* (Geddes 1976), and the Phrathamcharik missionization program (Prasit 2001:169, Wongsprasert 1988, Keyes 1971) which devoted considerable resources to uplander

sedentarization, integration, and development. During the insurgency, old village Hmong became increasingly, though not necessarily completely, legible or formally recognized by the Thai government. Furthermore, though the geography of Hmong citizenship in Thailand was nascent and patchily implemented, old village Hmong people's story and rootedness to their villages (seen as the homes of legitimate citizens) lent them traditional legitimacy to move in Thai space even without formal citizenship and to eventually gain citizenship. At this point, it was only a matter of time before Hmong Old village and all others who were born in Thailand would be given citizenship and subsequently be allowed to integrate into Thai Society as far as Hmong of the time were allowed (Prasit 2009).

Noting such integration, Prasit acknowledges:

“that the kind of education arranged by the Thai state for highland ethnic people since World War II has contributed positively in many ways to the highland communities, for instance by helping to increase literacy and to communicate with state officials, and therefore to adapt themselves to a better quality of life; by broadening their worldview and thinking; by making them feel part of the same society as the lowlanders; and by fostering patriotism among the ethnic people. But on the other hand, the school system has had grave impacts on ethnic cultures, causing the villagers to lose their livelihoods and time-honored local wisdom. Youth who have gone through the school system feel less confident in their ethnic identities when living in a big city” (Nawarat 2010: 44)

As such, at present, Old Village Hmong were eventually able to move through Thai space with relative ease compared to their Hmong coethnics though less than Thais. Gaining citizenship opens the way for one to get a driver's license and to finance motorcycle and car loans allowing the vast majority of Old village Hmong (most have citizenship) to attain mechanized mobility. One example of this is a former president of the Hmong merchant society of Thailand who began a business selling cloth in the 1980s not long after the end of the Communist insurgency. Seeing an opportunity to fill the important niche of cloth sales in the uplands, he began selling from a motorcycle he rode through the heavily rutted clay roads of the mountains surrounding Chiang

Mai from village to village. His photographs showed his switch to a well-worn Toyota pick-up a few years later. This beat-up truck is now substituted by high-quality diesel Toyota models commonly used by Hmong people of means in Thailand. He has opened successful storefronts in a central market area of Chiang Mai City and elsewhere.

There's another example of a gregarious Hmong Old village vegetable merchant with a broad smile named Somsak. While sitting in the office of his vibrant vegetable produce distribution business, I asked him why he was so successful. He responded that Hmong people were the best at traveling and were able to make successful deals faster than Thais. He'd traveled the upland areas so many times that he was intimately familiar with the location and schedule of the crops of the Hmong and other ethnic minority farmers—especially the Karen of whom his wife was one. He knew what they produced and when it would be ready to take to market.

Also, Somsak assured me that travel to those places was easy for him because he was confident on the roads. He not only knew the roads but had a good truck and was a capable driver in dangerous mountain areas where roads wind along narrow, pothole-ridden paths or often unpaved clay or loam. Certainly, the areas that Hmong people traveled seem to be generally thought of as scary to most lowland Thai people. Many Thais have confirmed this to me, though a Thai friend who traveled the mountain roads surrounding Chiang Mai city making insurance estimates for a living gave me insight into what a lowland Thai considers dangerous would be comparably favorable conditions for some Hmong people especially those Old Village Hmong who have been driving since their youth. This Thai struggled even on paved roads in the hills because he had not invested in an engine capable of handling steep grades and uneven surfaces. Although he frequently drove in upland areas, he did so in a fairly broken down MV sedan. Neither the condition nor the make of his car prepared him for steep inclines and pothole-

ridden pavement. Most Hmong people, especially Hmong Old village, generally invest in a Toyota 4-wheel drive diesel truck (Tiger or Hilux model) and keep it in good repair. The steady engine engagement and strength of a diesel engine helps minimize possible stalling that one cannot afford on a steep mountain road. On more than one occasion, I've bounced along dirt roads with gullies so deep the Toyota TRD package truck has tipped almost to the point of flipping while the Hmong driver blithely whistled and motioned for those riding in the back of the truck to jump out and start digging to balance the truck. This driver was so confident in the strength of his truck because he had tested its limits many times. As such, Toyota trucks have become something of an ethnic marker for Hmong people not only in Thailand but in most of the diaspora communities I have visited. And though not all can afford one, there seems to be little question of what type of truck should be purchased when the time comes to buy one. I only witnessed the wealthiest among HMAT leadership splurge on a truck so unreliable as a Ford or Isuzu. There is an expectation among Hmong family members that such a truck is needed for daily life, so a great deal of group effort is put toward pooling money to finance these trucks.

Though Somsak did not make his money simply because he had a nice truck, he depended on Hmong people producing crops that he could sell. Old village Hmong people are generally well-positioned to successfully integrate into the broader Thai economy through producing upland cold weather crops that do not grow in the lowlands. Overall, they have a particular advantage over Thai farmers. Because Forest Reserves were mapped by the Thai forestry department by uniformly following the contour lines of Thailand's topographical map, mountain land is synonymous with forest reserve. This mountain forest reserve space is off-limits for cultivation by the majority of the Thai population (Vandergeest 2009:25). However, The Thai forestry acknowledges the royal projects set up to gather Hmong and encourage opium

crop substitution as special allowances to the rule. This is especially the case since the highly revered royal family have allowed upland inhabitants (including Hmong) to farmland in specific upland areas. Lowland Thai's rarely have similar claims to upland spaces (Forsyth and Walker 2012). Because Thailand's upland areas are some of the cool weather areas, this means only upland minority ethnicities are now allowed to grow crops on the cool misty upland spaces surrounding the villages they have claimed. They grow profitable crops like strawberries, greens, and fresh-cut flowers that do not survive in hotter lowland areas already dominated by Thai land control. Hmong Farmers frequently travel from their upland villages surrounding Chiang Mai to sell vegetables in the markets of Chiang Mai City, especially the market at *Talaad Mueang Mai*. On any given day, a fresh group of Hmong farmers set up shop from the back of their trucks in a warehouse amongst flows of Myanmar born Shan laborers wheeling bushels of vegetables here and there. While Hmong from surrounding areas of the city are well represented, a significant portion comes from Mae Hong Son, Chiang Rai, and other provinces.

This economic success facilitated by legitimate access to Thai space has allowed Old village Hmong to become increasingly involved in the cause of broader Hmong economic development, social integration, and visibility/representation. They feel somewhat comfortable in the halls of power within Thai space and seek their place there among the country's leaders. In recent years, they have formed the Hmong Merchant Association of Thailand (HMAT), the Hmong Eighteen Clan Council of Thailand (HECCT), and the Hmong Women's Society of Thailand (HWST). Interestingly, unlike the preceding Hmong Association of Thailand (Samakhom Hmong Haeng Prathet Thai), which holds Red Hmong as important leaders, the HMAT and HECCT core leadership is composed almost solely of old village Hmong (most of which are Christian or Buddhist rather than Shamanist). Though each of these organizations has

its particular cause centered around Hmong ethnic improvement, these organizations' gatherings kept Hmong integration in the Thai nation as a constant subject, assuming the Hmong to be responsible, rational citizens as the normative stance. This echoes what Vandergeest has suggested was the shift from Thai citizenship based on difficult to attain standards of dharmic moral rectitude monopolized by the ruling class toward the present conception which sets modernity as the primary rubric for citizenship (Vandergeest 1993:142)

The Hmong Old village positionality is more mobile and can view space through the wide-angle lens of mobility throughout Thailand, even roaming internationally. Not only can Old Village Hmong travel widely in geographic space, but they range socially and politically, even serving in places of power. Hmong physical presence now spans the country from the obvious regions in the north to less expected parts like Bangkok and Phuket, as I've often seen highlighted in presentations at events sponsored by the HMAT (an organization lead by Hmong Old village). Members of the HMAT have traveled internationally for both business and leisure and do so on a regular basis. They are fairly easily granted passage, making their way to the US or China and so forth. Unlike the starry-eyed awe of a villager traveling for the first time, the frequent travelers among the HMAT rank approach travel with familiarity. One interviewee recounted his experience with the extensive amount of time he has spent on business trips to the US state of Michigan, and offered me nuanced opinions of this destination, and tended to procedural details of his business as it interacted with the place rather than noting the novelty of the place in any naive way. Anticipating the opening of the Asian Economic Community (AEC) while speaking at an HMAT Banquet, an ethnically Thai provincial official from Chiang Rai proposed that Hmong people are the perfect middlemen to connect Thailand to important areas

of the nascent AEC. He noted with excitement that Hmong people speak many languages and have family connections in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China.

Furthermore, there are concerted efforts to stress the development of Hmong people in Thailand. Promotional videos made for an HMAT Banquet event purposefully contrasted the traditional view that Hmong people are backward upland villagers with a modern representation of Hmong people who have taken their upland traditions to the modern context of urban Thai and international entrepreneurship. HMAT leadership acknowledges that many of its members have 'arrived,' noting success in business, government, and civil society, including law, textiles, beverages, entertainment, banking, engineering, etc. However, there are places they have yet to 'go.' A prominent Leader of both HMAT and HWST confided to me that there has not yet been a Hmong person on the Thai high court. He and others in the HMAT are working to send a Hmong person to the high court, in that some wealthy HMAT members are financially prepared and actively searching for bright young Hmong law students to sponsor through the long process of legal education requisite to serving in this coveted position. Interesting to note, despite assumed prejudices against Hmong people, these Hmong Old village leaders assumed it was possible for one of their own to occupy this coveted space of power, this is premised somewhat on their legitimate status as Thai citizens and would not have been possible in the past.

However, as noted in earlier studies, although most of these Hmong have been given citizenship, they still feel discriminated against in some senses (Prasit 2001:115-116). This is even the case for wealthy Hmong among the Hmong Old village, despite their wealth or status among Hmong people, they are not given the same respect or privileges as the Thai elite. They commonly complain of being disrespected and treated because they are Hmong. HMAT members have made postings supporting this position on the HMAT page of Thailand's more

popular social media platform "line." The postings showed a link to a Thai news report describing how a bus of Hmong people who (all holding citizenship and of higher-class status including government workers or *Kha Ratchakaan*) was pulled over and searched. They viewed this as discrimination based on Hmong ethnicity. It seemed the incident was tied to an implied prejudice against Hmong people (poor or wealthy) to carry contraband and illegal substances. Similarly, there was a positive reaction when the government announced that it would reduce the number of *Dan Tamruad* (or police checkpoints) on national highways, several noting in postings that they often felt profiled for being Hmong and associated with the drug trade. The reduction in these impediments was a welcomed change they hoped would reduce discrimination.²⁵

Red Hmong (Hmoob Liab)

I shift now to the Red Hmong. This term refers to Hmong who in the late 1960s joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) armed insurgency against the Thai Government and backed by the People's Republic of China (PRC), but later returned to normal village life in the 1980s. Because the CPT was backed by the Chinese, this group is often called *Hmoob Suav Liab* (Red Chinese Hmong) by their detractors. I opt not to use this somewhat derogatory term that includes 'Chinese' in this dissertation and instead call this group simply the Red Hmong to note their communist connections, which many of them remain proud of. It should be clear, however, that members of this group most often refer to themselves with the Thai term, *Hmong Thai Phu*

25. Certainly, drug trafficking is something that warrants mention. Hmong from many groups have been linked to drug trafficking. According to informants this is something of an inevitable consequence of Hmong geographic context. Similar to Somsak's success as a produce dealer because of his heightened sense of mobility, young Hmong men in search of adventure and money use their knowledge of less traveled backroads and passages to transport drugs. They acknowledge that Hmong people tend to live near the border where drugs are trafficked. Histories of cross border trade and mobility make them the perfect candidates to transport these illicit commodities. What he did not mention is that former connections that the Hmong have had to drug trade (namely opium cultivation) in the past, might have predisposed some intergenerational connections with drug trafficking networks.

Ruam Patthana Chart Thai. This term meaning “Hmong Thai who join in developing the Thai nation” emphasizes both their ethnicity, patriotism, and commitment to national progress. This wholesome sentiment runs counter to the Othering accomplished with the ‘Chinese’ element evoked in the term *Red Chinese Hmong*.

In terms of the migration history into Thailand, this group is made up of the same Hmong found in the Hmong Old village category who were first to come in the nineteenth century from Laos into Thailand. Notably, Nicholas Tapp wrote of events related to the Hmong involvement in the insurgency, noting the response of White Hmong to claims of a Hmong kingdom raising up a 'vaj' or 'huab tais' (king or emperor) in the Thoeng district of Chiang Rai (1989:78) in the early 1960s. These Hmong were resettled through government programs lead by the military to several areas, including Khek Noi in Phetchabun; and Tak Province; and Phu Chi Fa, Chiang Rai, which the Thai military did not reach until 1982. Despite their past of armed opposition to the Thai government, they have been integrated into the mainstream of Thai society. In fact, as I will explain, Hmong CPT views their insurgency as a patriotic act that contributed to the status of Hmong in Thailand, ultimately improving Thailand more generally as a country. These Hmong were keenly aware of the inequality between Hmong people and the majority Thai population, the government had not built schools, hospitals, and roads in mountain areas, yet the Hmong people there were now increasingly aware of their responsibility to pay taxes. They evince righteous indignation at their treatment and have felt mostly justified in their joining of the insurgency.

I would like to pause here to consider a specific line within the broader Cold War history, which is the line of integration of Hmong and other peripheral peoples more firmly into the Thai State. It wasn't until after World War II when distance demolishing technologies—aircraft,

roads, telecommunications, and so forth—allowed for the Thai military to reach mountain areas and meaningfully integrate them (Scott 2009:166, Keyes 1971). Increased interactions with state authorities often gave Hmong people a sense of discrimination and hostility from Thai authorities and influenced many Hmong people to join the CPT. Although joining of the insurgency took the Hmong into the forest, and outside of state legibility once again, this act prompted, as many former insurgents have reported, a reframing of formal Thai state interaction with Hmong people, in which the state begins to show respect to the Hmong (Baird 2020, under review). In the way, the armed struggle of black nationalists in the US is attributed to the granting of civil rights over non-violent methods (Churchill 1998: 43) because their threat of violent opposition pushed the hand of those in power. During more than one interview with former CPT, I have been pointed toward the road and schools and reminded that none of these existed in this mountain area until after the Hmong CPT insurgency. Former CPT efforts to extend equality for Hmong have taken other forms. Some former CPT have worked to form Hmong organizations. The Hmong Association of Thailand, though made not entirely of former CPT, has some key members that were once prominent in the CPT movement. A former president of the Hmong association, Phor Luang Kerd, recounted an example of such efforts to encourage Hmong equality that the association successfully lobbied to have the derogatory term *ເມົ້ວ* "Meo" (meaning variously 'barbarian' or 'cat') replaced with the preferred term *ມົ້ງ* "Mong" in official government documents and business. At first glance, the fruits of this effort appear small, but the discursive story it tells fits in the narrative of progressive equality for the Hmong in Thailand and increased stability in Thai space for this set of Hmong people.

On the part of the Government, the insurgency forced a concerted effort to bring the Hmong and other people defined as “hill tribes” under firmer state legibility and encourage their

loyalty to the Thai state. Previously, except for the appointing of a few Hmong leaders as Phraya in the early 1900s, this moment of CPT insurgency initiated the first real effort at formal recognition of Hmong people received in Thailand. Resettlement and royal projects were important to this effort. Now Hmong were becoming legible to and formally recognized by the state.

“As uplanders and highlanders alike fled into the forest or into the lowlands, five major refugee centers were established by 1971 in the provinces of Tak, Nan, Chiang Rai, Petchabun, and Phitsanulok, in accordance with the policy spelled out by General Prapas at a news conference in 1968 that the hill people, in general should abandon their ‘nomadic’ existence” (Tapp 1989: 36)

In my research communities of the Khek Noi, Phetchabun, and Phu Chi Fa (Doi Pha Mon), several villages were created during the period of the insurgency and shortly after to gather Hmong people in. Instead of the more traditional Hmong arrangement of fairly wide scattered settlements in the mountains, Kheknoi—now the most populous Hmong town in the country—or villages near Phu Chi Fa were government-built, off main roads, and closely gathered with very little land between settlements. Certainly, there were fewer places to hide, and parameters could be surveilled. It would appear this increases government legibility of the Hmong. In Phu Chi Fa, Hmong families were mixed among both military and Thai civilian families, often from the lowlands. The settlement was meant to be balanced for the reforming of Hmong behavior. The complaints of one of the original military officers to live in the area, hint that this reforming was somewhat unsuccessful from the original Thai military perspective. He asserted that the Hmong are still irresponsible (*mai raphitchorb*), selfish (*henkaetua*) people who overuse resources and only care about the propagation of their own. This is evidenced, he noted, by their tendency to continue having many children.

After Russia-aligned Vietnam became the Thai and Chinese governments' common enemy following the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, China's support for the CPT waned. This, Thailand's order 66/2523 in 1980 (which the Thai government offered CPT cadres to defect and be given amnesty), diminished the CPT's capacity to continue an effective armed struggle²⁶. Thus, CPT members began leaving the insurgency in large numbers and returning to mainstream society under the amnesty program. This shift of former CPT (Party Communist Party of Thailand Hmong) back into spaces controlled by the Thai government is marked by an assertion of Red Hmong's entitlement to Thai citizenship and legitimacy in Thai space. Every Red Hmong I spoke with on the topic expressed that they always intended to be Thai citizens. They identified very firmly with Thai nationality and asserted that their insurgency was only a means to gain the same respect and access to resources and government services as their Thai compatriots (see, for example, Baird 2018). When they fought, they fought with purpose and did not feel like traitors to their country.²⁷ And so, this return was not a shameful return in which they hung their heads. In fact, they felt that even as insurgents, they were patriots.

Certainly, the vast majority of this group remains in Thailand. They are mostly legible to the Thai state and have been integrated like their Hmong Old village compatriots. As such, this group is now primarily concerned with the social and economic development of their people rather than armed struggle. Similarly, very few, if any, *Red Hmong* are concerned with cultural nationalist politics, like the Camp Hmong or Cave Hmong (see Baird 2018). This reflects their relatively firm claim over the occupation of Thailand's space that their narrative provides.

²⁶ On a related note, The ending of the CPT was also related to the position of Laos as a state aligned more with the Soviets in the Sino-Soviet split. The war in Cambodia sealed Laos' antagonistic position against China and ended any weapons supply routes for the CPT which would have come from China and through Laos.

²⁷ Though it is true that many enjoyed their life in the insurgency for the unprecedented level of equality they experienced. Insurgent camps they claimed, were largely self-sufficient and communally ordered.

Interestingly, though they hold citizenship and documentation, they are often the subject of Thai suspicions owing to the communist insurgency of their past. Though from the under-nuanced Thai perspective, this suspicion might be spread generally to all Hmong, the Red Hmong are aware of their specific legacy of assumed disloyalty though they consider themselves patriots. This might foster an over-compensatory tendency to prove one's loyalty or worth. Not only do the aforementioned narratives of Hmong unequal treatment and indignant insurgency sometimes combine to form ultra-patriotism, but several important leaders of this group have shown a tendency to stress their loyalty to Thailand, making sure to display photographs of Thailand's late beloved monarch, Bhumiphol Adulyadej, on the walls of their houses, perhaps even more prominently than many Thais would. Relatedly, they have reverently narrated to me the visits of the king to their village, as depicted in some of the photographs.

However, in an economic and social sense, the Red Hmong as a group are sometimes slightly more precarious in Thai space than the Hmong Old village. Though Red Hmong make up some of the most prominent members of the Phu Chi Fa area, Red Hmong in Khek Noi have had less stable access to land than Hmong Old village, whom they've lost out to. In Khek Noi, for example, Most Red Hmong have very little land to farm. Although they were promised land when they came out of the forest, most of the land in the area near their village was taken by Old village Hmong before their own resettlement. Most report that they make their living farming ginger on rented fields in other provinces as far away as Nan. This likely leads to the narrative that Hmong in Thailand are the best ginger farmers. A privileged observer might assume this is by choice, but Red Hmong have honed their ginger growing skill within a restricted structure. Lacking land in the Khek Noi area, they have little choice but to rent fields outside the area. Families must travel to distant locations in order to find a field with a few important

characteristics to ensure a successful ginger venture. Besides cost, soil drainage and field elevation are important factors. Furthermore, fields are usually used only for one or two years because ginger is susceptible to disease that builds up in soils. Thus, Red Hmong farmers will often leave Kheknoi for weeks at a time to complete farming tasks at their fields in places like Nan, Lampang, Phayao, Tak, etc.

Camp Hmong (Hmong Soun)

While the previous two groups would be considered Hmong Thai ("Hmoob Thaib" in Hmong), the next category *Camp Hmong* (Hmong Soun) are Hmong Lao in that they were born in Laos and later immigrated to Thailand after the Second Indochina War. The word "soun" is short for the Thai term "soun obphayop" or refugee camp. This refers to the Hmong, who came to Thailand after 1975 and lived in refugee camps along the border with Laos. Though they have lived with significant precarity during camp times and shortly after, many of these Hmong now have Thai citizenship despite often still being called Hmoob Nplog or Hmong Los Tsuas (Hmong Lao). This group is limited to those who lived in camps from 1975 to 1992. Most of these Hmong have by now left Thailand for third countries. Many Camp Hmong orient their future toward geographies of political reordering; ethnonationalists are common in this group. Their economic fortunes often seem less certain than their Thai born counterparts, but they often have overseas relatives who can help with capital investments. Furthermore, the lines between categories of Hmong Lao immigrants are especially blurred here in comparison with a few categories I have yet to discuss, which include *Cave Hmong* and *New Hmong*.

Although the Thai government reluctantly received immigrants after 1975 (Supang and Plaensri 2011: 40), that Hmong refugees were recognized formally as refugees (somewhat at the

behest of UN authorities, as Thailand has not signed the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention) represents an important transition toward emphasizing formal categorization over localized connections as the modality governing Hmong immigrants in Thailand. The formality of this recognition distinguished Hmong Lao from other Hmong Thai groups—including old village Hmong and Hmong CPT insurgents. Although virtually all Hmong Thai had come themselves or descended from those who passed through the territory, which is modern-day Laos, their arrival was under a different regime of governance, which had only recently begun making Hmong bodies legible. Lao Camp Hmong arrived under a regime of a modern nation-state that had begun formalizing the existence of Hmong people and categorizing them for government calculation, especially since the CPT insurgency. As such, that these new immigrants fit a different category is significant and helps solidify the importance of the category. The arrival of Camp Hmong (as well as other Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese immigrants) made the need for categorization clearer than in the past.

Hmong immigrant's formal categorization teetered initially between legitimate and illegitimate but was eventually given stability before it was ended. The Thai government initially announced in 1975 that all Indochinese immigrants entering Thailand after August 1975 would be considered illegal immigrants (Supang and Tawin 2011:87). They had requested foreign countries consider receiving the immigrants. However, the UNHCR helped negotiate Thailand's acceptance of immigrants the next month. Again, with the influx of Indochinese refugees in 1977, the government threatened to push refugees back to their original countries, but "after the Geneva conference in 1979, 3rd countries started to accept more refugees to be resettled than before" (Supang 2011:45) and the Thai government accepted them (temporarily) too. However, the reception by third countries dwindled, and the government threatened to push

new entries back at the border in 1980. According to Supang and Tawin (2011: 46), immigrants entering Thailand after the early 1980s were legally ineligible for settlement to third countries. However, there may have been some exceptions to this rule for people coming from Laos that were allowed to join their family, who had already settled in a third country. By 1988 Thailand started more decidedly cleansing refugees from state territory as they began patching relations with neighboring countries. Formerly, legitimate refugees either passed to third countries or stayed in Thailand to support Thai interests. Many of those who remained were eventually given citizenship, erasing them as refugees. Those who did not follow these paths relied on blending into the population or seeking protection from patrons and connections to military elites. In some cases, factions of the Thai government—especially military—worked to grant them a form of secret or crypto-formality, which I will explain in my discussion of Cave Hmong.

Because the Thai government's formal position seems to have shifted from supporting Hmong insurgents in conflicts as recent as the Ban Rom Klao battle (Dec. 1987 to Feb. 1988) to cleansing them from state territory—when they changed battlefields to market places—the particular network of power relations Camp Hmong negotiated during and after the camps closed protected them against outright precarity, especially early on. Upon dispersal of the camps, some Hmong political refugees, who were not granted protection under formal refugee status, became illegitimate inhabitants of Thai state territory. Thus, they have had to negotiate the restriction of their mobility. For many, this precarity and restriction happened during the interim period between their arrival in Thailand until they gained citizenship in the years after camp closure or went to a third country, but this was not an immediate change for many. For those who never gained citizenship—as there still are many—this precarity continues into the present and can be seen in an individual's restricted mobility and nervous perceptions of space. However, as I will

show here, some aspects of this restricted mobility are compensated for by utilizing existing cultural institutions and spiritual practices.

Beyond restricted mobility, Camp Hmong have faced precarity in the form of fear of targeted assassination. Many Hmong in Thailand believe that the Government of Laos is responsible for the killing of leaders of the insurgency while on Thai soil. The murder of Pa Kao Her in 2002 (Baird 2014) and Yang Kou in 2008 are just two examples of such actions. It is assumed following the closing of WTK after 2005 that Thailand allowed several assassinations of prominent Hmong figures formerly associated with the insurgency. Thai government officials apparently opened borders to Lao agents. Some described a belt of land some 25 kilometers or Rasmi ຮາສີ in which Lao agents were allowed to roam. Such murders were even noted in US state department cables. According to a US state department cable sent on April 10, 2006, several Lao Americans were killed in Thailand (Embassy Vientiane [Laos], Apr. 10, 2006) (see, also, Baird 2012; 2013; 2014).

Life in refugee camps allowed for freedom of movement at times and restriction at others. Interviewees from Ban Vinai (the largest camp) recall that in the early days, camp inhabitants were allowed to roam the area around the camp (in Pak Chom, Loei province). Later in their stay there, they were restricted from leaving the camp enclosure. However, freely at one time, they may have been able to move, this was de facto freedom of mobility. They were not citizens of Thailand and had a less legitimate claim to citizenship than their CPT of Old Village Hmong coethnics. They were less likely to possess a driver's license or register a car or motorcycle in their name. Although driving is a skill that can be learned later in life, the window had passed for many young Camp Hmong, and skills became atrophied for older ones who had previously driven automobiles and motorcycles.

Not only were many Camp Hmong unlikely to have driver's licenses or car registrations, but the prospect of traveling out on the road is also daunting. Interviewees recall that going on road trips before gaining citizenship and a driver's license would be a constant risk. Certainly, they were concerned about being pulled over. They often decided to take back roads which are often less safe, for lack of maintenance and mountain terrains. If one's car broke down or had any other issues, undocumented Hmong would have few places to turn for help, for fear of being penalized or extorted by police. This in contrast to the experience of Old village Hmong whom I've watched happily dig their trucks out of enormous ruts in the road, all while whistling a happy tune.

Two older Camp Hmong gentlemen who had fought in Laos explained to me that they still had not received citizenship in 2015 despite living in Thailand since 1985. One explained because he had mistakenly gone to work near the border on the day of his inspection, he missed the opportunity for citizenship. In this position, he has not been able to get a driver's license. Though he had driven most imaginable land vehicles during the war, he now only rides a motorcycle. Only his son has a driver's license, and so he stays close to home, only going to work in the field then returning home. He knows that if he leaves his subdistrict, he is more likely to be apprehended.

So, without citizenship (*Sanchaad* in Thai) or documentation, these older men use spiritual travel to ease their and other's spirits. Because of restricted movement, their practice of shamanic ritual (*ua neeb* in Hmong) now often focuses on sending their spirits to travel the farther distances, where their bodies cannot go. Though they both had been highly mobile and capable young men, as undocumented individuals, they pine to see relatives and friends overseas, in Laos, and other provinces in Thailand. Somehow talking on the telephone is not enough.

Instead, in a shamanic trance, they spiritually reunite with distant friends and family members.

One of them explained to me:

“When you do not have papers, you just go to work in the fields, and then you come home. You do not do anything else. Your family and friends...you cannot go far to see them. You just go see the ones that are close. You can only talk to them on the phone [...] When you *ua neeb* you go far when you need to you go the farthest, you go to heaven, you go to the clouds [...] It’s like when you want to see to those who are far away like in Tak Province, you need to *ua neeb* to go see them. You pass through the air on a horse. You fly all the way over there. When you get down there where they are, you check to see if they are well and eating well or whether they have any aches and pains.”

Regarding a particular visit to a family member, the other man explained:

“If we have friends in America, then we can go and see them in America [...] I’ve already seen my aunt [...] she was sick. So, a relative asked me to *ua neeb* and go see her, so I *ua neeb* and go see her.”

This act is something that is more often done in proxy for others who are unable to visit family members according to these old fellows. He compared his ability to do this as something similar to scratching a friend’s back that cannot reach their own itch. Unsurprisingly they said that they more often asked to *ua neeb* to visit family and friends by Hmong Lao than Hmong Thai since Hmong Lao families have more often been separated by the mobility restrictions of formal illegitimacy.

This phenomenon is an interesting snapshot of social and geographical relations and precarity related to the shifting away from formal recognition of Hmong Lao legitimacy. Hmong Lao are far-flung by this gradual ratcheting of formality and legitimacy in Thai space. These two men have obviously legitimate claims to political refugee status (both fought against the Pathet Lao then Lao Government since the age of fifteen), were denied passage to stay here in Thailand while individuals like their aunts, who are only attached to their insurgent husbands or fathers, were given passage to a third country.

Cave Hmong (Hmong Qhov Tsua)

This discussion of Camp Hmong brings up one important related category, *Hmong Qhov Tsua* or *Cave Hmong*. This name comes from their residence at Wat Tham Krabok Temple (WTK), which is named in Thai after the famous cave where the temple began. Generally, these Hmong were born in Laos and lived in refugee camps and are thus largely a subset of Camp Hmong. They were later forced to find a new place to live when the camps began closing in the early 1990s. Many of these people were hesitant to go to third countries, so they took up residence at the de facto refugee camp. Though they lived there under the cover that they were Hmong Thai who had come to Tham Krabok for treatment at the Temple's drug rehabilitation program, the settlement swelled to a few tens of thousands. Closure of the official camps in the late 1980s ostensibly cleansed Thailand of legitimate refugees. Again, in the early 2000s, Taksin's push toward further regional economic integration sent many Cave Hmong to third countries and to scatter from the WTK area ostensibly cleansing Thai space once more. Some in this group do not have citizenship. But many among those who were not allowed passage to a third country have often been given citizenship often under the guise that they were born in Thailand or were promised citizenship for their assistance to the Thai Government in insurgencies (Chambers 2013; Baird 2013).

Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan's market forward doctrine of "turning battlefields into market places" shifted the balance away from open support for keeping Hmong insurgents at the border. Similarly, recognizing Hmong (and others) as legitimate refugees by the establishment of the national government—including the military and civilian elements—was an obsolete commitment. Refugee camps along the border were broken up, and their inhabitants

were sent either to third countries, 'home' to Laos, or elsewhere in Thailand. Aside from the large group that traveled to third countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many took refuge at WTK in central Thailand during the 1990s where they received patronage from the temple abbot (with his various military and state connections), but this option ended in 2003 when the Thai military inserted Red Beret special forces into WTK and facilitated the immigration of thousands of them to third countries and the dispersal of the rest. Unfortunately, the residue of Hmong Lao that were not actually living in WTK in 2003 (including family members that had temporarily left the temple for seasonal labor opportunities) and those that came after soldiers arrived were not considered eligible by Thai authorities for passage to third countries and have remained in this situation of continuing liminality and precarity. Unlike camp Hmong, who have mostly gained Thai citizenship, many cave Hmong remain without citizenship.

WTK was not an official refugee camp, and the Hmong there were not given formal refugee status. The official story from the temple that the Hmong were rehabilitating and from Thailand helped maintain an illusion that Thailand had cleansed its territory of insurgent elements. Actually, it seems very likely that military connections with WTK's abbot Chamroon Parnchand arranged for Hmong to stay at WTK (see Baird 2013; 2014). As I argue elsewhere (Chambers 2013), certain powerful state factions recognized the legitimacy of Hmong claims to the occupation of Thai soil. So instead of openly acknowledging that these refugees—who were reluctant to go to third countries—were still in Thailand—as formal recognition and establishment of a refugee camp would do, the refugees were secretly acknowledged by some factors of the government and given crypto-formality. Crypto-formality refers to a formality that is not fully voiced by all formal state organs nor interacts openly with formal state organs; nonetheless, it has some degree of governmental purchase.

The closure of WTK was the last moment when we saw the Hmong connections to authorities as useful Hmong Lao as a group. After that moment, governmental categories like “illegal immigrant” or “Hmong Lao” would become more important than network connections to elites in decisions regarding Hmong immigrants. This set the stage for the next place of Hmong Lao immigrant settlement at Ban Huai Nam Khao and Nong Khai where most people there were not granted refugee status or given passage to a third country, with most being sent back to the Lao PDR, although many later returned to Thailand, albeit quietly. After this time, the Thai government considered Thai space cleansed of the problem of insurgent Hmong Lao that affected their relationship with Laos negatively. It seems Hmong at WTK were given some of the trappings of formal recognition of their refugee status without formal recognition. In this sense, they were given crypto-formal recognition

In this fuzzy space of crypto-formality Hmong people at WTK were looked at as a group in a *refugized place*.²⁸ Some were treated as a refugee by virtue of being in the right place (WTK) even though their claims to refugee status were not as compelling. Inversely, despite legitimate claims by individuals not at WTK, they have been denied refugee status simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. This became apparent for several of my interviewees who were denied passage to third countries while at Ban Huai Nam Khao, though their life stories share similarities with their own family members who left to third countries a few years earlier because they lived at Wat Tham Krabok. Or other young folks who came from refugee backgrounds and lived their whole lives at WTK were denied refugee status because they had gone upcountry to work when the soldiers came to WTK. Significantly, the rest of their families were allowed passage to third countries.

²⁸ I elaborate on *refugized place* in chapter six.

Chamroon's Once-Powerful Power-Network

Now I use the example of Wat Tham Krabok's famous abbot Chamroon Parnchand to illustrate an example of how localized patron-client relations with a Hmong group slowly lost their strength to protect the Hmong Lao people connected with his institution. This process is shown in the loss of crypto-formal claims through lost connections to important nodes of power like Chamroon. WTK's history of relationships with the Hmong, military, and police begins even before the temple was established in 1957. Chamroon Parnchand worked as a police officer in Thailand's shadowy *Santiban* secret police force. Under the direction of the somewhat infamous Police Commander Phao Siyanond, Chamroon was inducted into the elite "Atsawin Waen Phet" (Thai for "knights of the diamond ring") and did various forms of secret 'political work' for Phao during the 1950s (Thanakorn: 12). During this period Phao's ongoing conflict with Military Commander Sarit Thanarat over control of economic resources (most notably opium and US aid) and political power, would have very likely led Chamroon into actions that involved him in the trafficking of opium, which was until 1959 legally produced and traded within Thailand's monopoly (McCoy 2003: 100-106). Though a majority of Chamroon's interviews appear less than transparent on such controversial issues, Chamroon makes it patently clear that prior to 1957 when he was still in police work, that he was involved in opium suppression, even on one occasion asking for the assistance of his aunt's supernatural abilities to catch an opium smuggler. Because this occurred before the legal monopoly had ended, it seems that he was after those functioning outside of the monopoly or simply trying to stop one of Phao's competitors. Be that as it may, Chamroon was very likely in contact with Hmong opium producers -who had recently taken up residence in northern Thailand growing for the monopoly

(McCoy 2003: 103) before he entered the monkhood in 1957. Chamroon publicly expressed his dislike of opium and illegal drugs (Thanakorn: 12) and has become renowned for his opium rehabilitation program initiated in the late 1950s after the drug was made illegal in Thailand (Baird 2013). Rumors abound that place a stain of drug trafficking on WTK's reputation; Chamroon has even been called a mafia boss in the title of an article of *The Nation*, one of Thailand's most popular and respected news magazines.

There little if any evidence that Chamroon was a drug trafficking mafia boss, but it certainly seems appropriate to call him a patron or godfather. As a patron, Chamroon had an enormous group of clients that included the thousands of Hmong Lao inhabitants of the WTK Hmong village (with powerful clan, military, and religious leaders among them) a large group of Thai monk disciples, and several hundred Thai lay people living on temple grounds. Though he is more literally a *Luang Phor* (the Thai word for temple abbot), Chamroon is a *chao phor* in the sense that he fits many of the categories given to local elites who have been known to broker power relationships and simultaneously bolster their own position. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyanasang explained that the term *chao phor* denotes:

"Not only wealth and power but also an ability to operate above the law. Most are ethnic Chinese by origin and generally based in the provinces. They have wide business interests, covering both legitimate and criminal activities. They have groups of associates and followers. They move closely with powerful bureaucrats, policemen and military figures." (1994:57)

Similarly, although Chamroon was not a businessman, his patronage of this large Hmong population gave him some control over their labor. Both WTK monks and Hmong interviewees explained that employers were required to go through Chamroon in order to enter WTK and have access to the large pool of cheap Hmong agricultural and factory labor that drove much of the local Phraphutthabat district's booming economy in the 1990s. Only trucks that had permission from Chamroon were allowed to enter the temple every morning and park at the Hmong village's

soccer field to pick up their daily quota of Hmong laborers and shuttle them to a nearby cornfield or cement factory.

Furthermore, Chamroon harbored connections with important elites in the military, both the Army and Air force. Somewhat paradoxically, Chamroon received support for the temple from Thailand's leader Gen. Sarit Thanarat in the early 1960s, although it was fear of political reprisals against Chamroon's boss Phao Siyanond by Sarit that likely drove Chamroon into the monkhood in the first place (Baird 2013: 125). Sarit's support came in the form of financial backing for the purchase of land to build and const rehabilitation facilities. Although Sarit died in 1963, Air Marshall Thawi Chulasap, who had been Sarit's representative in previous interactions with WTK (and in whose name the land was purchased), continued his support for WTK, making further donations and meeting with Chamroon often enough to be called one of his important *luk sit* or religious students (Baird 2013; Chambers 2013: 77). Although WTK was not officially recognized by Thailand's Sangha National Council as a 'temple' until very recently (being listed, rather, below temple as a 'monk residence' with respective powers and obligations) and is not allowed to own land or take land in the name of the Sangha. Ostensibly, this categorization hurts WTK from formally expanding its land base; however, Chamroon was able to amass a large amount of land for his control through de facto land donations that remained in the names of faithful devotees or *luk sit* like Thawi Chulasap. This also allowed him to escape interference in the governing of that land by the Sangha National Council. Thailand's former Army Chief General Athit Kamlangek has been photographed on visits to the temple. Although I am not sure of his connection to WTK, Chaovalit Youngchaiyudh, a prominent military figure who later became prime minister, has been photographed visiting WTK with other notables.

An important node in Chamroon's network was Sutsai Hatsadin, who was a leader in both the Red Bulls anti-communist paramilitary organization and Thailand's intelligence agency, the National Internal Security Council (ISOC). During the late 1970s and 1980s, Sutsai helped transport Hmong insurgents from Ban Vinai Camp in Loei province to WTK in preparation for being sent to Chiang Khong before traveling to China for military training (Baird 2013: 137). Sutsai's high-level connections allowed him clearance to move Hmong insurgents far afield from their designated spaces along the border, allowing Hmong Chao Fa insurgent leadership to come into contact with WTK leadership allowing for the settlement of Hmong at WTK in the late 1980s.

Chamroon's networks also included important royalist elements. In the late 1990s, the temple constructed a 60-foot-tall statue of Thailand's recently mourned Monarch Bhumibol Adulyadej. In some ways, this statue could be viewed as a signal standing high above the treetops to the surrounding community that the temple's actions—the harboring of thousands of Hmong Lao refugees and insurgents—although likely controversial, had the support of the monarchy. Princess Galyani Vaddhana, the King's older sister, visited Chamroon in the 1970s and requested that Chamroon help stop the opium problem through treating Hmong addicts in his rehabilitation program (Baird 2013: 136). The strongly anti-communist and pro-royal radio personality Phra Kittivudho was also a frequent visitor to the temple. Probably the most lasting high-level royalist connection that Chamroon had was with Somkhuan Harikul. Somkhuan was a member of the Border Patrol Police and the founder of Thailand's hyper-royalist paramilitary group, the *Village Scouts*, or *Luk Suea Chao Ban* (Bowie 1997). Somkhuan was a member of the *Thamkrabok Foundation*, which became an important governing body at the temple, gaining added significance for governing temple affairs since the deaths of WTK's more charismatic

leaders--Chamroon and Charoen. The foundation is made up of temple leaders (Chamroon Parnchand and his brother and successor Charoen Parnchand) military leaders (Thawi Chulasap) and influential people (Somkhuan Harikul) Along the lines of Duncan McCargo's influential 'network monarchy' thesis (McCargo 2005) it seems safe to state that Chamroon was subsidiary agent in the monarchy's network of power. Chamroon served both the ostensible role of addiction rehabilitator and the less touted role of patron to a reserve force of Hmong anti-communist insurgents that could be set against Laos if the need arose (see Baird 2013). After the fall of three of Thailand's neighbors to communism in 1975 and the dwindling role of monarchs in these new regimes, Thailand's royalist factions appear to have become increasingly concerned with both internal and external threats of communist takeover and what it would mean for Thailand's Monarchy (Bowie 1997: 107-108).

Furthermore, as mentioned WTK was not officially made a temple until recently, and in fact more closely resembles a village or town; however, the area of the temple proper and the villages that cropped up in the 1990s on land controlled by WTK were not in de facto terms in the control of a local authority such as a village headman that reports to the Department of Provincial Administration (a department within Thailand's Ministry of Interior or *Mahatthai* which oversees administration at the level of district, subdistrict, and village). Though WTK's *Ban Thai Village* now has a village headman and receives *Thesaban* (municipal) services such as trash collection since the 2000s, during Chamroon and most of Charoen's tenures, governance at even the village level in WTK land was overseen and carried out by the abbot's executive decision. Though never given official imprimatur from the *Mahatthai*, Chamroon was the de facto village headman over the entire community of Hmong and Thai villagers that called WTK controlled land their home (some tens of thousands of people). Chamroon allowed for the

selection of group leaders in the four designated areas of settlement on WTK land that, in turn, reported to him daily and relayed news and decrees to lower officials—subgroup leaders, family heads, then the population at large.

Despite this ostensible autonomy from standard practices of the Mahatthai, it appears WTK had some level of Mahatthai support that was manifest in the form of identification cards issued to Hmong inhabitants of WTK despite their actual citizenship status. Interviewees including former Hmong Lao residents of WTK and longtime resident monks at WTK recalled a new identification card, which they often called the 'yellow card' that is ostensibly issued (as is written on the cards) by the Mahatthai. According to one prominent Monk at WTK these yellow citizenship cards were issued through the effort of another monk named Luang Ta Ert who had high-level bureaucratic connections and was possibly brought on as a WTK monk for the sole purpose of helping the Hmong resettle in more permanent locations (admittedly conjecture on the part of my source). After examining one such card presented to me by former Hmong Lao resident of WTK, I realized that the card claimed that its recipient was born in Thailand's Tak province rather than his actual place of birth in Laos, a convenient mistake which I am sure was not the only one of its kind since the common narrative was that Luang Ta Ert had encouraged many Hmong to leave WTK in the late 1990s and early 2000s and resettle in Tak to blend in with the Hmong population there. Many have since received Thai citizenship through similar channels.

New Hmong Lao

Hmong Tshiab, meaning "new Hmong," is a recently created, more general category and thus is a less well-formed term than some of the previous categories. New Hmong generally

refers to the Hmong, who have come to Thailand after the closure of WTK and do not have citizenship, as some of the Hmong Lao (Camp Hmong and Cave Hmong) now have. Some of these Hmong claim connections to the insurgency in Laos, especially the Lao Hmong living in central Thailand. Many share similar life stories as Camp Hmong or Cave Hmong. These include Hmong, who had stayed at Ban Huai Nam Khao (known as *Dej Dawb* in Hmong) and were sent back to Laos in 2009, though it is believed they have not returned to Thailand (Supang and Tawin 2011:136)²⁹) many have come back. These people fall under the *New Hmong* category. Similarly, Hmong citizens of Lao PDR who have come to Thailand through work programs, overstaying visas, etc. are considered New Hmong Lao. On the topic of cleansing Thai space of problematic Hmong Lao, at present, this group has no hope of gaining Thai citizenship or going to a third country unless they can find an overseas relative willing to sponsor them. However, this is not done through the UN, but through very expensive private lawyers. Thus, most New Hmong Lao await eventual cleansing from Thai space. This policy has made any Lao New Hmong in Thailand essentially stuck. This blockage of flow is precisely the goal of the Thai government (Embassy Vientiane, April 6, 2007). Firstly, based on the narrative that the deportation of Hmong believed to be only economic migrants³⁰ at Ban Huai Nam Khao to

29. Here General Nipat Thonglek states that "An important factor was that since the beginning of the repatriation of the Hmong Lao back to Laos in May 2007 under the framework of the Joint Lao Thai Committee on Border Security, there were none of the Hmong Lao who were repatriated to Laos that were smuggled back into Thailand again." I have interviewed several individuals who make credible claims to have lived in Ban Huai Nam Khao camp and have since come back to Thailand after an initial repatriation. To Gen. Nipat's credit, however, they returned to Thailand and remain in early 2019.

³⁰There was an attempt to categorize and manage the Hmong population at Ban Huai Nam Khao so that legitimate refugees would not be sent back to Laos. Nipat notes:

"There was an exception in the case of Mr. Samuel M. Witten Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of State of the U.S. who visited towards the end of July 2009. He displayed a more cooperative attitude towards the Thai government in solving such problem and suggested dividing the Hmong Lao into three groups which were 1) a group which received POC status at Nong Khai province. 2) Ban Huay Nam Khao screened-out group of Hmong Lao illegal immigrants who entered Thailand illegally for economic reasons and 3) Ban Huay Nam Khao screened-in group of Hmong Lao who fled to Thailand for political reasons." (139 Nipat 2011:139)

8 Percent of those in the camp were designated worthy of refugee protection "8% of Ban Huay Nam Khao Hmong Lao who were screened-in and proposed to Thai government to permit IOM to be involved in the operations so as to

Laos then somewhat secretly sending former insurgents to third countries (Embassy Bangkok, Oct. 30, 2007) formally emptied its space of political refugees (Hmong insurgents), Thailand can now restrict movement of Hmong Lao bodies into its space.

The neo-refoulement described by Hyndman and Mountz (2008) in Australia in which countries deny both refugees and economic migrants the possibility of asylum by restricting them from reaching sovereign territory through processing them in extraterritorial locations such as Nauru or Manus Island—as is Australia’s technique—is not what we see in the case of Thailand form of exclusion. Rather than actually preventing Hmong Lao migrants from coming to Thailand’s sovereign territory, Thailand simply does not recognize that they have come to their territory. The Thai government does not even have a categorical channel for them to seek asylum. Thailand has not signed the 1951 refugee convention and does not consider asylum seekers or refugees legal immigrants. And since Thailand only allows people from Laos to be processed in nonexistent refugee camps along the Lao border, the Thai government cannot conveniently admit that Lao Hmong occupy Thai territory though some Lao in the Isan have gradually been given various types of documentation (usually cards) by the government. In a legal sense, it is very inconvenient for the Thai government to accept that Lao Hmong exist in Thai territory. This is an externalization accomplished through only accepting refugees from border countries into designated refugee camps. However, these camps are only along the Burmese border and not the Lao border.

The contamination associated with Hmong Lao in Thailand was not only a contamination because it embarrassed Thailand in the eyes of Laos, but its acknowledgment also allowed for a

improve Thailand's credibility vis a vis the international community.” (Nipat 2011:140) In the end most everyone except a small group were repatriated to Laos.

legitimation of Hmong Lao immigration into Thailand because it assumed there was a category of Hmong Lao who were unsafe in Laos, thus muddying the waters at the same time it attempted to clear them. Secondly, the UNHCR is currently not taking Hmong Lao applications for asylum. This is despite the very similar life histories of some of them to refugees who have already gone to third countries; some even come from the same families. But they came to Thailand from Laos after the door had been closed to Hmong Lao refugees. None of the Lao New Hmong I have spoken with have even been allowed an NI number, which is the first step in the process of applying for UN refugee status. Because my request for an interview with the UNHCR staff at the Bangkok office was denied, I have been unable to determine the reasons for this. Considering their future geographies of mobility from within this positionality, Lao New Hmong have very little promise; thus, they acknowledge that geography of their future mobilities is quite restricted. I imagine this was similar to what Camp Hmong and Cave Hmong felt in their situation before receiving citizenship, though they held some hope for their eventual citizenship or movement to a third country.

New Hmong Viet

A very important group within this category of New Hmong are Hmong from Vietnam. You might even consider the New Hmong Lao and the New Hmong Viet separate categories. It is most commonly understood and explained that Vietnamese Hmong have come to Thailand fleeing religious persecution and land problems in Vietnam. Hmong Viet are not required to live in Bangkok, but they tend to live in Bangkok because of its proximity to the UN office. So, some live in Saraburi and Lopburi. While many who believe they have a legitimate claim to bring to the UNHCR, there is a group that is no longer seeking protected status from the UN because they have already been rejected, or they have no legitimate claim. According to the

opinion of Hmong Viet at one community in Bangkok and elsewhere, although there had initially been success for Hmong Viet in gaining UN refugee asylum, based on informal surveys over my period of research, this success seems to have tapered off more recently, with only a few gaining protected status in fits and starts. This was the case, especially after 2012, when all Hmong Viet applicants were denied.

New Hmong mobility is a prime example of precarity in Thai space. Firstly, New Hmong have limited forms of documentation. Lao New Hmong have no documentation except work permits in some cases (but those are often expired). In 2012, I met a few New Lao Hmong who had UN documents. At the time, they were unable to use the documents, but they had even gained some sponsors in Wisconsin. This family eventually went to a third country. However, they seem to be an exception to the rule or a holdover from an earlier era when the Lao Hmong coming from the jungle were still considered for processing. Hmong Viet, on the other hand, often have UN documents, but it takes some time to receive this first set of documents. These documents indicate that they are currently being processed for protection by the UN. Those who are given UN refugee protection are given new documents for this status. Those that are rejected have one appeal process to pass through, but after a second rejection, their documents are no longer valid forms of protection. In such cases, the Hmong Viet are again left in Thai space without documentation. However, because the Thai government did not sign the 1951 Council on Refugees, even when one has recognition from the UN, this positionality is still somewhat precarious even when they do have documents. Refugees under UN protection have been known to be taken by the Thai police and forcibly repatriated, as was the case with a group of refugees from China who possessed protection documents but were repatriated to the PRC.

This omission on the Thai government's part has particular consequences for Lao New Hmong immigrants, which I will discuss in a moment. Presumably, because Thailand can decide which countries it will receive refugees from, the government has decided that migrants from countries neighboring Thailand can only be processed through formal refugee camps in order to move to a third country. Refugees from further afield are more subject to UN processing. There are a number of North Koreans, Pakistani Christians, Vietnamese Montagnards, Uyghurs, Sudanese, and other refugee groups who have reportedly been recently processed by the UN in Thailand. However, because there is no camp processing Hmong Lao because Lao PDR borders Thailand, Hmong Lao cannot go to a third country. The government can decide to send refugees from Thai space at will, as has been the case several times in the past few years. There is a particular geography of the Lao New Hmong in Thailand. Firstly, the Hmong Lao stay in central and western Thailand. Despite the mobility usually ascribed to Hmong people, New Hmong Lao's travel is usually restricted.

From 1992 to 2004, the WTK housed at least 13,000 Hmong Lao refugees in its forty-eight hectares situated along the steep cliffs that ring WTK's land. Several other estimates see that number as more than 30,000 at various times (Lor 2009:8, Chambers 2013, Chambers 2015: 80). The Hmong people that lived in the area in 2012 were only a small set of stragglers. Many of them have come to Thailand in more recent years and were involved in the Ban Huai Nam Khao repatriation episode in the mid-2000s. Several had connections with Chao Fa and Neo Hom pro-Vang Pao insurgent elements and thus fled Lao PDR forests within the current decade. Despite the Lao government's reassurances of a peaceful welcome, they remain particularly fearful of the possible persecution they would experience upon return to Laos. Despite claims

that all the repatriated Hmong have stayed in Laos (Supang and Tawin 2011:136),³¹ many in the group have previously been repatriated only to flee Laos again (multiple times for some).

Members of most recent groups who have left a repatriation village in Bolikhamsay province came after the suspected murder of a clan leader by Lao authorities, not to mention several other reported cases of abuse. Despite intense difficulty, this group of several families remains scattered in small villages in central Thailand, unable to move to a third country and afraid to go back to Laos. They are in limbo. Furthermore, their movement in this area of central Thailand is restricted to certain areas of Saraburi and Lopburi provinces or other nearby provinces. In the recent past, such 'safe' areas afforded tenuous military assurances of protection from the police harassment that lies beyond designated boundaries. However, more recently, even these areas have become subject to police encroachment and increasing fear.

Geography and Mobility of the New Hmong

Communities of New Hmong in rural central Thailand leave their new homes in central Thai villages, usually for employment in a restricted set of rural provinces like Singburi, Prachinburi, Lopburi, Saraburi, and other provinces near home. They will work in those places in construction and agriculture for about a week then return home. Though the arrangement is risky, it fits a pattern established since Hmong people lived at Wat Tham Krabok in the past. Hmong workers have recounted that contractors in the area know Hmong people are hard-working, honest, and skilled; furthermore, their undocumented status forces them to take lower

31. Here General Nipat Thonglek states that "An important factor was that since the beginning of the repatriation of the Hmong Lao back to Laos in May 2007 under the framework of the Joint Lao-Thai Committee on Border Security, there were none of the Hmong Lao who were repatriated to Laos that were smuggled back into Thailand again." I have interviewed several individuals who make credible claims to have lived in Ban Huai Nam Khao camp and have since come back to Thailand after an initial repatriation. To Gen. Nipat's credit, however, they returned to Thailand around the same year as the publication of his chapter.

wages than most others. Besides working for lower pay, their lack of legal recourse makes them often subject to receiving no pay at all, even after weeks of work. Despite these risks, work in central Thailand seems to work for New Hmong Lao in recent years. Thai police have periodically tightened up enforcement of immigrant work restrictions in central Thailand and Bangkok. However, the New Hmong Viet, who hold UN protection documents, are able to travel with some protection. In Lopburi, there has been a particular set of military connections that protect New Hmong immigrants from police harassment, although several stories of arrest in Lopburi attest that they are not completely immune. When New Hmong cross into other areas outside of Lopburi \ for work, however, they are at higher risk. In fact, the draw of jobs in rural central Thailand attracts many New Hmong living in Bangkok to travel to central Thailand for work opportunities and return to Bangkok periodically. Some participants in this cycle have recounted that they live in Bangkok for their children's education and travel to central Thailand to find work regularly. Aside from this necessary travel, most New Hmong in central Thailand stay near home. On most days, women in the communities in rural central Thailand stay home with young children. They have little to do but household chores and are often left to ponder their uncertain immigration status, as some of these women have told me more than once.

Occasional trips for Hmong New Year celebrations or family trips are known to be made further northwest to Tak Province or northeast to Phetchabun province; however, most New Hmong I've met do not take traveling to the far north lightly. Very few would make trips to Thailand's far northern region, including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and other provinces. Those whom I spoke with on this topic were usually primarily concerned with the perils of bus or train travel. The identification documents required to ride the train make it simply not a regular travel option. Furthermore, frequent stop-and-search procedures conducted by police and soldiers on

the primary bus routes northward make this a very risky travel option. Similarly, taking a privately-owned automobile offers similar risks, and very few New Hmong have access to an automobile or connections to someone willing to take the risk to transport them. On temporary visits, once there, it is difficult to find a safe and affordable place to stay. New Hmong families are often reluctant to relocate permanently to the North unless they have strong family or clan connections there.

Going to Chiang Mai is not likely for New Hmong Lao. Although there are a number of Hmong Lao who have largely become citizens settled along the border with Laos, there are very few Hmong Lao who might be closely connected with the Lao New Hmong living in the central hub of the Chiang Mai area. There were only a few Hmong Lao families that were remnants of a short-lived WTK-like (possibly crypto-formal) gathering of Hmong Lao at a place called Khum Naresuan in Pong Yaeng just outside of Chiang Mai City. Furthermore, New Hmong connections must be to individuals with strong political networks with local authorities (rather than national level factions in the government) ensuring to guarantee or รักษารอง (rap rong in Thai) their protection and reasonable livelihood scenario for them to warrant permanent resettlement. If they go North, they must have family or other connections ready to receive them there as a patron. But land is scarce, and connections are expensive, so without access to land, rural northern areas have fewer options for employment opportunities to draw resettlement. It is also important that interviewees have mentioned they are scared to live near the Lao border, where they might be targeted for assassination or abducted and taken back to Laos, as mentioned in the cases of assassination mentioned earlier. Without citizenship like their Camp Hmong neighbors, such a disappearance might go totally unnoticed and would thus logically be more likely.

This, however, is not to say that there are no New Hmong in the North. I have interviewed New Hmong from Laos, Vietnam, and Burma in the far north in areas near the borders of Burma and Laos in both the Northwestern province of Tak and far North in Chiang Rai. For example, one young undocumented Hmong man from Burma had lived in Tak for several years under the patronage of a local Red Hmong. I have met a young Hmong who was from Burma but was given patronage from a Red Hmong in Tak Province. This young man worked for his patron in exchange for his *rap rong* to local authorities. New Hmong Viet were not hard to find in the area. Furthermore, I met Hmong Lao in Chiang Rai near Phu Chi Fa.

Their presence likely facilitated by the bordering condition of the area where illegal border crossings are a matter of course. Trails run across the border over the ridge of the steep mountainside that plunges from Thailand at its heights down to Laos, where there is a village at the base of the mountain. Civilian Thais in the area show some ambivalence to performing border practices. A monk stationed at a Buddhist temple along one important cross border mountain trail once related to me how he sees Hmong people crossing over often. He thought of it as a natural consequence of the border. He was originally from Chiang Khong (an important border crossing area), so he had a strong idea of having family and friends live on two sides of a border. Showing a consciousness of Thailand's border history, he lamented for a moment on the European influence in creating such an inconvenient border between Thailand and Laos.

Those New Hmong Viet who go to the north I found were often single men able to move about more freely. Those I met often left their families and took up with Hmong Lao women from neighboring villages just across the border. One of the men was reportedly a member of the community of Hmong in Bangkok, but he had been kicked out for inappropriate relationships with the women in the community. Certainly, I was worried to press my questions with some

Hmong Viet in situations where my interviewees might have been involved in criminal activity. I was assured by other Hmong Viet in Bangkok that the many of the Hmong Viet in northern Thailand were wanderers. Some had been denied UN protection status and moved to the north as a result. Some New Hmong Viet go north from Bangkok. Some Hmong in Bangkok told me that if they cannot get asylum; many of them go north seeking to blend in with Hmong communities there. Though some in the north claim to be totally honest with authorities about their undocumented circumstances, even forthrightly admitting being undocumented when stopped by police. Some come to the north because they were forced out of New Hmong communities in Bangkok. One Bangkok community forced one out for *tham poj niam* or euphemistically dealing inappropriately with the women of the community. There is a significant community of Hmong Viet in one village of Northern Thailand. However, I was instructed by other Hmong Viet that if I were to visit this community, I should always pass the bowl of food I was given to the next person to avoid being poisoned. I decided not to visit that particular community of Hmong Viet in the North, and so I cannot say much other than what I had heard that they had criminal connections.

I did, however, meet two Hmong Viet likely involved in illicit activity that involved frequent border crossing. I first met one of them on-site where a Hmong movie crew was finishing the filming a feature film. He brazenly told me that he had come to *zij* (bridge grab or kidnap) the actress playing the film's heroine because he had heard she was a Vietnamese Hmong beauty. I assumed his use of the word *zij* reflected traditional Hmong meanings following the Hmong tradition of bride-grabbing,³² not 'kidnapping' in the western sense. After claiming first

³² Some understandings of *zij* bride-grabbing practices posit that the tradition was The term *zij* is done to as a go around for couples with disapproving parents. Ostensibly, the woman is forcibly taken by the man. Despite her protestations, this showing is only meant to save the woman's face when in actuality she is being taken willingly.

that he was born in China and then second in Laos before finally untangling the lie enough to admit he was from Vietnam. He admitted he aborted his *Zij* (*kidnapping*) plan when he realized she was from a village near him in Vietnam, and he had known her family. This first meeting set my hackles up initially, his likely illicit cross border activities (possibly including human trafficking or drug trade) were made all but obvious when he asked me clumsily whether I had access to eBay and whether I would be able to buy night vision goggles and chloroform for him. When I questioned him why he would need such unwholesome items, he told me that he had a special kind of work for which he needed them. If my assumptions are correct, that he has veered into illicit work is all the more tragic since he claimed to have begun his time in Thailand as a religious refugee. He was felt forced to separate from his wife and family as he reasoned the precarity of life as a refugee could not sustain family life.

Conclusion

Though categories are always flawed and reductionist, considering the foregoing discussion of Hmong people within several endonymic or emic categories, we can see the logic which produces significant differences in precarity and mobility among them. Those categorized as Hmong Thai—old village Hmong and Red Hmong—are more integrated and their standing in Thai society is fairly firm, Lao Camp Hmong and Cave Hmong often live with a specter of precarity that has affected their lives significantly. Lastly, New Hmong find themselves with little place to turn in negotiating their existence in Thai space since virtually none of them have Thai citizenship.³³ Furthermore, discussing these differences in light of Thai immigration

Zij happens in several ways among Hmong people. Certainly many instances are not as innocently constructed as the aforementioned type.

³³ Though I met one New Hmong Viet in northern Thailand who had purchased a citizenship card through bribing local officials.

regimes constructed by economic regionalization on the Southeast Asian mainland, one sees how the logic of cleansing Thai territory of problematic categories by the government at the formal level, not only allows for regionalization to march forward but creates a series of subjectivities which show some homogeneity in their levels of precarity and types of mobility. The closing off of pathways to formal legitimacy provided by network connections of the past have given way to stressing of formal category which viewed Hmong immigrants in narrower terms and with increasing disfavor over the years has gradually cut off options for new Hmong immigrants and those who remained. So, I have answered my initial question about why immigrants from similar backgrounds—especially those involved in the post-war insurgency in Laos—could end up at such different points of precarity. One individual might now have citizenship in Thailand, and the other might be living precariously in secret. The disparity can be explained not by complicated differences in the legitimacy of their claims to refugee status. Rather a simple general answer often explains the reason. The latter individual came to Thailand too late. However, questions about specific cases certainly remain.

This chapter tells a story of its own about the political positionalities created by the shoring up of Thailand's categorization of Hmong immigrants as illegal immigrants rather than legitimate refugees. However, this chapter is also important for contextualizing this dissertation's overall subplot. The intra-ethnic cleavage between the new Hmong on one side and the Old village Hmong and Red Hmong on the other created by these categories sets up some of the conflict and suspicion which structure some of the decisions of the Hmong in my subject communities. The aforementioned Hmong Thai seem to actively establish the state effect with their suspicion of the New Hmong. Furthermore, the very existence of the New Hmong Lao illegal 'Other' is precisely the constitutive exterior that the Thai state depends on to fashion

its identity (Steinberg 2009: 469). At the same time, as I will discuss in chapter five, the mobility of the problematic migrant figure through Thai territory is obviously a possible challenge to the Thai state's effect, a simmering fact that former CPT Red Hmong are viscerally aware of in their own history.

This political cleavage among the Hmong has something to say about the overall argument of this dissertation that the Hmong in Pa Kluai establish a territorialization based on an oft-misunderstood form of territoriality. In the next chapter, I explain this territoriality, and I tell the stories of three misunderstood territories established by three different groups of Hmong people. Again there is evidence that political cleavage among the Hmong in Thailand is operative in this story because two of these territories were formed in Thailand, and they both have been increasingly frowned upon not only by the Thai government but by Hmong Thai—both Village Hmong and Red Hmong especially. Red Hmong suspicions regarding Lao Hmong and Viet Hmong occupation of Thai space is influenced by their own history of precarity in Thailand—since their time as communist insurgents. The Red Hmong's worry about New Hmong ethnonationalism or human trafficking menaced to open old wounds and create new embarrassments. Furthermore, as I will discuss in the final chapter of the dissertation, the complicated history of Hmong Christianity in Vietnam hinders Christian members of the Old village Hmong community from cooperating with the New Hmong Viet.

Although the conditions associated with this political cleavage seem negative, it was precisely counteracting the conditions of this political cleavage along with fear of government surveillance, which have helped Pa Kluai to establish the positive affective relations in their community, which facilitated the formation of their territorialization. Their goal has been to show themselves and other groups that the suspicions of the Thai Hmong and Thai state are

untrue. They've sought to lessen suspicious reports given about them to the UNHCR and Thai state. In so doing, they have made themselves more trustworthy to one another and planted a topological territorialization of trustful relations, which have allowed them to create social and cultural fruits.

Chapter 2

Tree or Trellis: Understanding Hmong Territoriality Alternatively

Having discussed in the previous chapter, Thailand's context in which Hmong immigrants find themselves in varying degrees of stability in Thailand's space, I turn now to the spatialities of my Hmong subject communities. In studying the spatialities of the Hmong people I study in Thailand, one of my primary research questions is how Hmong people in my research communities view the nexus between place, identity, and politics, a nexus commonly denoted 'territory' or 'territoriality' in the academic field of geography. For Hmong whose recent and ongoing integration from the margins of several state formations in upland southwest China and northern Southeast Asia—including Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand—the answer to what is Hmong territoriality is as multifarious as there are Hmong people; however, a few primary understandings of the connection between identity, politics, and place emerge.

Two of these understandings reflect the two botanical metaphors in Liisa Malkki's (1995) essay entitled "*National Geographic*" presents two versions of the place, identity, politics nexus, which are helpful for understanding how Hmong praxis regarding political control of places and spaces. She applies the familiar Deleuzian concept of tree and rhizome to make a distinction between a primordialist tree-like identity rooted firmly in one's original national territory with the dispersed rhizomatic rooting of identity in the places along one's life path producing an

ambivalent politics of attachment to a network of places. However, these metaphors seem to show the extremes in a spectrum of conceptions. In the end, an either-or version of this articulation, which either asserts ethnonationalist state-making or multirooted blending and hybridity/assimilation, is deficient. To be sure, both versions show up in Hmong conceptions of identity politics of places. However, Hmong are often assumed resist assimilation in the opposite way as other ethnic groups would be assumed to assimilate in a rhizomatic configuration, they might be assumed to have an arborescent relationship to territory that leads them to seek reclamation of territory through ethnonationalist endeavors (Malkki 1992:35). As I will argue in this chapter, this arborescent assumption persists in filtering the view of actors—often state authorities whenever Hmong people establish a noticeable territory. This assumption colors authorities' decisions with the persistent tint that Hmong groups and individuals with cultural revivalist tendencies, who establish territorialities, are necessarily building an ethnostate and seek to overthrow the state. Though ethnonationalism is known among the Hmong, current threats seem overblown. Even those formerly most suspected are not concerned with armed struggle or even a Hmong state. But the presumption of Hmong ethnonationalist territorialization is not without its real-world implications and even manifestations. Furthermore, the Hmong territories I observe in this chapter are not always motivated by an arborescent view of ethnonationalist territory. Rather the territorial metaphors preceding the establishment of three territories described in this chapter are of a new sort. This new sort, which I elaborate in the chapter, more closely resembles a bean pole or a trellis. This type of territory certainly seeks to control space, but not to build an ethnostate. Rather, the end goal of this territorial control of space is intended for Hmong social development and is simply superimposed on another state space, not necessarily challenging the existing order.

Some among the more radical Hmong identitarians told me that whenever a Hmong person becomes politically/religiously powerful and builds a temple, that person will be murdered. This paper tells the story of some groups of Hmong people realizing this discourse through their witnessing of significant events in Hmong millenarian and social movements.

At some peril, tropes of Hmong social and cultural movement members presented in Hmong popular culture—primarily movies—often conflate a number of categories. Recent popular Hmong film representations have depicted the rugged Chao Fa hero, holding his ground but going down in a hail of enemy fire as he protects the seeds of his country (flag, and writing system) in the battle for a homeland. The romance of this depiction focuses on the arborescent millenarian ethnonationalist version of Hmong place-based movements at the expense of attention to the revivalist millenarianism, which instead stresses the goals of everyday social improvement. Assuming that Hmong social movements are characterized by ethnonationalist arborescence assigns them an identity of transcendence from the every day, violence, separatism, religiosity, mysticism, and irrationality. In this view, they are motivated by a teleology of '*ua teb chaws*' or ethnonationalist struggle for territory, something that is thought of as a nation-state. However, this romance might unfairly overshadow how Hmong movement spaces seem to be increasingly purposed for human development in a broader, immanent sense (for the benefit of the group in mundane ways). This chapter argues that counter to conceptions which might limit Hmong social movements to the momentary millenarian gatherings of resistance (Scott 2009) in the mode of millenarian deprivation model (Chinnery and Haddon. 1917), the Hmong have a more revivalist (Wallace 1956) conception of place, social movements and propinquity which are directed at collective social development and do not inevitably lead to the formation of a Hmong country,

This ethic of territoriality for self-improvement is exemplified by the Hmong idea of "*kho neeg*" in the following quotation. As expressed by the Hmong leader Lee Zai (*Lis Txais* in Hmong RPA, the concept confirms the aforementioned relationship between Hmong people and various places in which Hmong people seek to control space for human development rather than ethnonationality.

"Whatever place in which righteousness/justice (*kev ncaj ncees*) is located, people will go to that place. [...] When there are many people, it can have a village. When you have a village, then there can be cooperation (*txoj kev sib pab*). When there is cooperation, then there is criticism, with freedom and salvation (safety), then intelligence and prosperity. That's what I always tell [Hmong people] and write. But the Hmong do not seem to fix people (or *Kho Neeg* in Hmong)."

This statement's speaker Lee Zai, a prominent member of a Hmong refugee 'millenarian' group active in Thailand's Ban Vinai refugee camp is something of an indigenous social theorist and activist, observing Hmong society with a statement that encapsulates nicely his understanding of the implications of gathering Hmong people into a single territory as the improving of people and their lives rather than the building of a country. Sounding rather un-millenarian, the version of salvation described here has a telos directed at community-improvement of the immanent, everyday sort, rather than a transcendent millennium of Hmong perfection in the resurrected Hmong state. This charting is contrary to those who imagine groups of his type as always necessarily separatist and ethnonationalist. Rather he imagines a righteous place that will gradually develop into improved people.

Lee Zai's statement shows a telos to "*Kho Neeg*" or to "fix the person," This end goal as he sees it is initiated through gathering Hmong people to various places and surfaces. This end goal is accomplished by gathering people into a state of propinquity, which allows them to cooperate toward a socialization of Hmong improvement collectively. Furthermore, Lee Zai's

statement here does not exhibit any necessary ethnonationalism or primordial attachment to the territory; instead, his view sees territory as a tool for community-improvement to be captured for a purpose.

Botanical Metaphors: Tree, Rhizome, and *Bean Pole*

Reflecting and innovating on Liisa Malkki's (1992) theorization of the connection between identity and territory in her influential article "National Geographic," I use the Hmong examples in this chapter to develop the beginnings of the more apt metaphor of the "bean pole" for describing the relationship of some Hmong people's identity to territory, beyond her *arborescent* and *rhizomatic* options for describing the identity-politics-place nexus. This new conception shows, I hope, that many Hmong people have denaturalized statist conceptions of territory and taken more instrumentalist understandings of the connection between place and politics so when a Hmong person takes control of a space, they are not necessarily claiming it for the Hmong country as many might suspect. A more apt analogy draws out the image of the bean pole or trellis. In comparing, this new idea to the arborescent conception (which seems to lend itself to a telos of naturalized ethnonationalism) or the rhizome (which yields chameleonic possibly purposeless blending and syncretism), the bean pole conception of identity-territory relations emphasizes the denaturalized instrumentalization of territory for the purpose of social justice and human development over concepts which permanently tie groups to place. In many cases, Hmong people have formed nascent movements that seek to anchor spots as settings for social justice and development rather than transcendent ethnonationalist impulses. Furthermore, these territorialities and gatherings are not necessarily millenarian uprisings or even millenarian in substance (though sometimes coming in millenarian vessels or guises like millenarian

organizations). Rather, such movements have the broader appeal of building Hmong community improvement and social justice.

Make no mistake I am not arguing that this bean pole metaphor should monopolize understandings of Hmong politics in space, as many Hmong experiences reflect arborescent and rhizomatic spatio-political articulations. Arborescent imaginations of the impending reclamation and reterritorializing of the Hmong kingdom persist. This narrative resonates in much of the Hmong diaspora, though possibly more so among overseas refugee Hmong communities. Similarly, the rhizomatic structure of Hmong “*Qhuab Ke*” funeral narration guiding the deceased spirit back through all the places that made up the person’s life (Her 2005) confirm that rhizomatic understandings are prominent in Hmong cultural and social memory of many in the Hmong diaspora.

Organization of the Chapter

In terms of the chapter's organization, I first begin with a theory and literature review that develops the aforementioned bean pole analogy through a comparison to Liisa Malkki's botanical metaphors of tree and rhizome. Furthermore, I highlight and challenge assumptions about Hmong millenarianism in academic literature, popular culture, and government. Overall, the paper challenges these assumptions. I continue with three empirical examples, (1) the Hmong cultural center at Ban Vinai, Thailand, and Yang Kou and the Hmong cultural center at Phu Chi Fa, Thailand. These examples help emphasize points in the trajectory of misunderstandings about Hmong millenarian territorialization. Then I highlight how that possible misunderstanding has led to unwarranted asymmetrical repression by governments and other (sometimes anonymous) actors. Lastly, I use the events at Mường Nhé as an example of territorialization for

social justice purposes, showing how it exemplifies a clear example of misunderstanding and the assignation of insurgency by outside parties. Furthermore, these cases show an alternative understanding of Hmong territorializing beyond *ua teb chaws* (the common term for the violent struggle for territorial control). Rather, territorializing can be thought of through a nonviolent and even non-ethnonationalist form that seeks to territorialize surfaces other than sovereign state space, such as the page, body, etc. for a cultural and personal reformation rather than an overtly political revolution. This territorializing of Hmong identity on various surfaces is directed at furthering their human development as a group. This chapter follows a modified scalar contextualization showing how this is done at different scales. First, I demonstrate how members of the Hmong cultural center at Ban Vinai instrumentally 'territorialized' their immediate bodily surroundings on the surface of the written page and adornment of the body through costume and performance. This territorializing moves up in scale as the Hmong at Phu Chi Fa influence their immediate village communities with the permanent physical construction of buildings to reach a broader Hmong community. It ends with the territorializing of a place in order to reach national and international audiences.

Place in the Literature on Hmong Studies

Accusatory evaluations of the Hmong social movements from a range of sources--villagers (including Hmong), semi-official, and government--paint Hmong efforts to territorialize as messianic, millenarian, separatist, and often assume these efforts seek to *ua teb chaws* (the Hmong word for 'make a country' or more broadly 'to territorialize') or *sawv vaj* (raise a king) or *tham kanmuang* (Thai for 'do politics'). Similarly, some prominent interlocutors in the literature

on upland Southeast Asia also make similar claims, albeit with theoretical vigor. Referring broadly to upland Southeast Asians James Scott (2009: 307) said,

"Making a new state, a new order, which is exactly what nearly all prophetic movements aim at, requires, logically, breaking an existing order. On the surface of it, such movements are rebellions. They appropriate the power, magic, regalia, and institutional charisma of the valley state in a kind of symbolic jujitsu in order to attack it. The nature of the utopia a new king or Mettreya will bring can be read as the negation of state oppressions."

Here, Scott hints at the arborescent relationship to territory and gathering in millenarian movements, which he sees as the majority form of traditional upland political organizing in an otherwise acephalous social structure. The earlier quoted Hmong thinker Lee Zai and his Ban Vinai group, as I will explain, certainly fit the picture of a group which has appropriated "the power, magic, regalia, and institutional charisma of the valley state" but it remains unclear whether this is really to attack the state with "symbolic jujitsu" in order to overthrow it. Scott's characterization seems to fit some sort of proto-arborescent conception in Malkki's sense, where although uplanders' social structure may be acephalous, their gathering in millenarian movements plants seeds they intend to grow into an ethnostate. For the Hmong, this would mean *ua teb chaws*. For some Hmong movements, especially prophetic movements, this assumption may hold true, certainly for some Hmong ethnonationalist movements like the Congress of World Hmong Peoples (Baird 2015). However, this is not constant over time or across Hmong social movements where the purpose of millenarian symbols might have once been purposed to overthrow the existing state; they now have more benign purposes such as bolstering Hmong identity and creating a language of ethnic parity without ethnonationalist goals.

Furthermore, Scott portrays the aforementioned telos of rebellious state-making to take an irrational and violent form. This is reflected in his specific appraisal of Hmong history in his (2009) chapter "Prophets of Renewal" on millenarian and messianic movements. Scott argues

that of the already fractious uplanders, the Hmong are the most given to millenarian rebellion (2009: 284). He charted millennia of events involving Miao/Hmong violent rebellion from Chi You of third millennium BCE to Thailand in 1943. Also, noting the logic of his overall argument, that normally dispersed acephalous social groupings of Southeast Asian uplanders are gathered around millenarian symbols for momentary millenarian eruptions, that he includes all Hmong rebellions making no distinction between messianic/millenarian movements and other types of rebellions leaving his topic somewhat unclear. Though I am confident this is unintentional, Scott risks conflating all social movements with millenarian movements (in the way many conflate the social goals of the Hmong uprising at Mùòng Nhé, Vietnam with millenarianism) as many seem to do.

Riffing on Marx's famous religion as the 'opium of the people' quote, Scott highlights that religion (especially millenarian religion in this case), as an "inverted consciousness" the state and society of "the world of man," expressed in "the repeated insistence among so many hill peoples on reading the world in their favor on believing in their imminent emancipation" (2009: 293-294). Noting this optimism Scott confirms his opinion of its irrationality by noting a series of seemingly outlandish convictions held by 'millenarian' groups and states, "ironically, these misreadings of the world were occasionally so widespread and massive that they touch off rebellions that in fact changed the odds" (Scott 2009: 294). He intended here to congratulate such movements for momentary success, in stressing the 'misreadings' of the movements, but instead, confirms millenarian movements as hopeless and irrational, seeing salvation in their stars where it doesn't exist.

If a perspective derived from Scott's analysis compounds Scott's conflation of millenarian movements and upland social movements in general with his characterization of millenarian

movements as irrational, it produces a view of uplander social movements as irrational and dangerous projects. This narrative prompts a violent response and in a cynical view that is conveniently instrumentalized for justifying violent repression of any Hmong social movement.

Furthermore, this tendency toward millenarianism and messianism (which can often translate to violent ethnonationalist, though hopeless, uprisings against state authorities) is assumed to be embedded in Hmong culture. Others have argued that Hmong people are inherently given to millenarian and messianic tendencies (Tapp 2010; Ngo 2016). In his final book, Nicholas Tapp argued that:

"This messianic tendency in Hmong culture, which has adopted both Christian and non-Christian forms, is closely linked to the oral tradition and to a particular view of history as loss and injustice. Again and again, as in Thailand in 1960-61 when thousands of Hmong were enticed into a northern valley (Theung) by promises of the birth of the 'Huab Tais' by the Communist Party of Thailand, or along the northern Vietnam-China border from 1978 onwards, or today in the Atherton Highlands of Queensland in Australia (despite their hearty rejection by many rationalist Hmong), movements of this nature, always linked to a form of writing, emerge, in a way which does require some historical explanation in terms other than those of mere structure and agency [...]" (Tapp 2010:98-99)

Attributing this tendency to oral tradition and a worldview of loss and injustice found in legends, he continues:

"The legends in which we find these conceptions most clearly embedded be-come activated and manifest at particular times of social crisis in actual messianic movements, although at other times they can be told quite light-heartedly or in an off-hand way as part of normal village life.

As such, the assertion that this Hmong tendency is based on reactivation and mobilizing of long embedded narratives is quite compelling. However, the tendency is not necessarily attached only to separatist/violent messianic or millenarian mobilization (a nuance I assume Tapp would agree with). For example, though initially millenarian, many groups springing from the Hmong cultural center or *Koom Haum* at Ban Vinai have dropped some millennial expectations.

However, this tendency toward striving for an ethnostate may not have taken real shape until more Hmong had gone to the US.³⁴ Hmong people have used these narratives on a daily basis to mobilize in small ways and in many small places for the purpose of motivating self-improvement, as I will note in a discussion of Lee Zai's idea of fixing people (*Kho Neeg*) and improving social relations. These mobilizations have taken the form of immanent everyday territorializations at small, even intimate scales.

As a case in point, Lee Zai, one of the most prominent leaders of a Hmong cultural organization in Thailand, assured me that Hmong ethnonationalist '*ua teb chaws*' activities are generally on the decline. Furthermore, he was beginning to believe that most other Hmong had begun to abandon these efforts altogether. He attributed this change to the fairly recent death of the revered General Vang Pao, who once led royalist forces (a many but not all of which were Hmong) during the CIA's Secret War in Laos and encouraged post-war insurgency activities in Laos.

“though in the past the Hmong had people who thought of taking part [...] (in violent insurgency), ever since Vang Pao died, Hmong [...] in America or in whichever other land, and anywhere in Thailand, [...] have set those things aside once Vang Pao left. Hmong people thought before that since Uncle Vang Pao is the Hmong leader and he has led us to do these things, then they should join him in the efforts. But when he was finishing (dying), he said to the Hmong, 'when I am finished, you shouldn't do it anymore.' And so those in America should do according to the Americans. [...] you that are in Thailand, blend with the Thais; in Laos blend with Lao; in China blend with Chinese. In order for the Hmong to live in the future, everyone has done according to his words. So, the Hmong do not do anything now, they come, and they just get educated (*kawm ntaub kawm ntawv*). [...] Hmong will blend according to the law of the country the Hmong are in. Whatever words they say, the Hmong should do according to that. However,

³⁴ Ian Baird Has shown in two separate articles that it could be possible to argue that perhaps the best known of the Hmong millenarian movements, the Chao Fa transitioned from a group advocating for autonomy over their place of residence and resistance to the Lao PDR (Baird 2014). The Chao Fa were not advocating for an ethnostate, rather they hoped for a Federalist system like the US. Though theirs was an armed struggle it was not intended necessarily to create a Hmong ethnostate. Later groups inspired by elements of Shong Lue Yang's movement shifted toward explicitly supporting the idea of a Hmong ethnostate. Ian Baird documents the Congress of World Hmong People have called explicitly for a Hmong ethnostate (Baird 2015: 61-62) .

they carry themselves; that's how the Hmong should carry themselves (coj li cas). Hmong should study to be skillful and intelligent to find a living. In America, they will do according to American law, in Thailand, according to Thai law, in Laos, according to Lao law. This will cause the children in the future to be skillful and intelligent to go amongst the others and be able to earn their bread and not be poor as in the past. If they thought that way [about ethnonationalist insurgency] in the past, it's because Uncle Vang Pao caused them to think that way. But since Vang Pao died, the Hmong are finished completely and wiped of those things."

It appears that millenarian language, markings, and symbols blithely associated with armed ethnonationalist insurgency persist in Lee Zai's usage, but those symbols are without a real ethnonationalist project. Over time, the meanings of symbols and the identity of their associated movements have changed as well. The evasiveness of polyvocal semiology keeps these symbols useful for placing on landscapes to communicate Hmong ideals and are instrumental for fixing Hmong people, not building a state.

Theoretical Contribution

In terms of theory, this chapter has something to say about the metaphor that we use to understand politics and place, known commonly as territoriality. As noted by Jessop et al. (2008), several metaphors are now used simultaneously in a polymorphic understanding of socio-spatial metaphors, including scalar, networks, places. This chapter draws on the term territoriality which in the Anglophone social sciences has been defined by Human Geographer Robert Sack's tripartite characterization of territoriality as (1) a portion of space bounded by some sort of demarcation; (2) rules are set by an authority for the use of that space, it's control, permeability, and effects; and (3) the authority enforcing consequences for that rule. The references to 'territoriality' here follow more closely Francophone understandings of the term in which territorialities are not always bounded spaces, and rules are not always strictly enforced.

Speaking of specific forms of territoriality, Liisa Malkki's influential (1992) essay on refugee identity and territory has much to say to the experience of my subject community of Lao and Vietnamese Hmong asylum seekers and migrants living in Thailand. Comparing Hutu refugees in two settings in Tanzania—the camp versus the town—she highlights the arborescent identity of the camp refugees rooted in former national territory as opposed to the rhizomatic identity of the town refugees taking sustenance from their place in their current locations. Each of these refugee group's socio-political articulations to territory said something different about their overall identity. As a group that envisions itself emerging from the tree of a nation rooted in their homeland, Malkki recounts that camp refugees live in the arborescent shadow of a national identity within which they have been uprooted from the soil of their homeland. This leaves them to inevitably return and reclaim that territory, whereas town refugees seem to blend with their current context stretching horizontally to put down a network of roots nourishing a complexly nourished identity. While these two botanical metaphors are very helpful for discussing the articulation of territory and identity for my subject community, I posit a third, somewhat botanically themed metaphor to this mix, which describes some of the experience of my Hmong subject community. This metaphor follows the bean pole or trellis.

One of the great thinkers in the Hmong Lao diaspora, Lee Zai, recounted to me that he compared having a system of writing for the Hmong was like having a pole or trellis for a bean plant. I noted echoes of Deleuze and Guattari's arbor/rhizome comparison. He compared the Hmong people to a creeping vine, which, if given no direction, would continue to grow, as he had seen, all over the ground stretching here and there without any purpose tangling in other weeds. In his experience and reasoning, however, Hmong people needed a system to communicate ideas to one another in order to gather the Hmong people and improve themselves

as a group. Like writing guides people across space, the bean pole trains the bean vine up in a unified direction around a center, which is easy for the grower to locate and harvest just as writing could gather Hmong people together to become better people.

Even in his twenties before coming to Ban Vinai at age thirty-five, Lee Zai had been thinking about the development of Hmong people, especially along the lines of righteousness, community improvement, love for the poor, and equality. He recalled for me a question he had regarding an analogy of people to fruits on a tree. He wondered, "I saw it ≠was like a fruit tree. If a fruit tree has one root, then why are some of the fruit big and some of them small? In partial answer to this question, he devised a way to improve Hmong people, specifically surrounding an analogy of territorializing and gathering through writing:

"I saw another thing; if you agree with it, you can take and use it as well, it's like beans. When it comes to bean plants, you plant four or five seeds, then four or five vines will grow. Then you go and stick a stick in the ground. It's called a *nreej* [in Hmong], that pole that the vines wrap around. Then when the vines grow, they gather around that pole. But if you haven't stuck the pole in, then this vine goes over here, and that vine goes under there. But if you stick the pole in the ground before the vines are growing, then they grow up around the pole they come together, climb the pole together. So, if you do this, it fixes people to know who their master is [...] You must have that pole."

Hearing this metaphor initially, I lumped it in with the rhizomatic conception place-politics-identity, but I have come to realize it has its own characteristics, making it a separate metaphor. One particular property of a bean pole or trellis is the nature of its placement. Unlike the naturalism of the two preceding botanic metaphors, the trellis is a human-made apparatus that is poked by a person, not rooted, in the ground. It is a dead piece of wood (though there are more complex trellis versions) that is poked into the ground in order for the vines to grow up around. In this sense, there is nothing natural about its placement in any particular spot of ground. Comparing the common tendency to naturalize the nation-state by those holding

arborescent conceptions of the identity-place-politics nexus to the beanpole's unnaturalized conception fits with Hmong experiences and spatial practice. Whereas an arborescent, primordialist, or statist construction of identification with territory assumes that identity is simply influenced by the ground which it grows from, the conception of territorial identification associated with the bean pole or trellis analogy recognizes a denaturalization of the territory, especially the nation-state, as the natural place from which a culture grows or is influenced. Furthermore, a trellis is an apparatus that can be placed in various, possibly unexpected areas, the vine is gathered and directed upward into other spaces. Reflecting on the territoriality, the metaphor represents some social groups gather purposefully in a place to create opportunities to make do the precarity and temporary nature of this gathering.

For citizens who live well within state relations, the validity of national territory is often an unquestioned topic, certainly as an abstract category, if not a lived effect in their lives. The connection by the cultural nationalist of blood to national soil is the extreme naturalization of claims to national space, which seem all too often to push national territory toward the category of sacred space, which should not be cheapened by questioning its validity. The social theorist or student of history often keeps in mind the continued efforts at state-making going on all around them, much less the unnatural character of state territory that is often lost on broader populations manipulated by the group-think of banal nationalist spatial practice. For example, Geographer John Agnew has long warned against the *territorial trap* (Agnew 1994). He reminds that territory, especially that of a state, is not a homogenous surface of sovereignty in which all holes are plugged but a complex web of performances and social interactions. The territory of a state is filled by performances of the nation-state (Ansi Paasi 2013, Mitchell 1991, Foucault 2001), and its sovereignty is subject to lapses in performance. As such, the idea of denaturalized state

territory or sovereignty is dangerous to the modern state. A state's logic falls into the territorial trap in which sovereignty is homogeneously distributed across a bounded planar territory. So, although Hmong millenarians may accept current state relations and are not trying to overthrow them, their millenarian identity signals their wholesale questioning of naturalized states, making them a perennially suspect class of people to the state.

Since Westphalia, some people have naturalized the nation-state. For integrated mainstream citizens at the center of the complex web of social relations and discourses which make up the effect that is the nation-state, the nation-state's territorial trap is easy to fall into, though a stateless ethnic group like the Hmong have obvious reasons not to naturalize the connection between identity and state territory. I have observed this awareness generally among Hmong people, but interactions with one group, in particular, confirmed the priority of this understanding for mobilizing social action. In my interviews with them, members of the *is npis mis nus movement* saw the earth as belonging to all people, though the movement's founder Tswv Mis Nus's has passed away, his brother recounted his nascent group's displacement from land near Nan Province, stating emphatically that the land is an inheritance from God, which no one ultimately owns, though he knew it was claimed as national territory. Other members lamented their people's lack of territory stemmed from the desire to remediate the assumed Hmong inability to manage and occupy territory properly. Upon my questioning of the group's apparent commitment to environmental stewardship as stated a document on their basic tenets, I was informed that commitment to environmental stewardship was based more on proving the Hmong sustainable environmental management of a single piece of land space so they would not need to move. Rather than a strong commitment to ecological values familiar to western environmental movements, a nephew of Tswv Mis Nus explained that Tswv Mis Nus attached

spiritual animals to the identities of people and countries. Tswv Mis Nus's spirit animal was evidently the rhinoceros because it was an animal that was fiercely committed to guarding and controlling its territory. The understanding of states is not that they are natural occurrences given to a group, but they must be created and maintained through the actions of people. They must be produced and reproduced.

This understanding is not just confined to millenarian groups of Hmong, the denaturalization of the state often comes as a default position—especially for those with refugee experience--and is more uncommon among Hmong in areas that have allowed state integration like the Hmong of Chiang Mai, Thailand. The frequency of this denaturalization of state space has not likely come about through their access to western social theory or deconstructionist philosophy, but through commonalities in their sets of life experiences that denaturalize state relations. These life experiences are not firmly rooted in socialization to state citizenship and set up an easy questioning of some key features of state territorial conceptions and practices.

Interestingly, even the roots of the Hmong word for country, *teb chaws*, shows no inherent politics unlike the 'count' in the English word 'count-ry,' which denotes a political component from its inception. While current usage of the term *teb chaws* certainly follows the general idea of the nation-state. 'Teb' meaning land or soil and 'chaws' meaning place is very likely originally an environmental and localized term used in Proudhonian sense of smaller scale politics of possession rather than property. It seems likely that the idea of the nation-state is more recently introduced to the Hmong. This is especially the case when considering that Hmong in Southeast Asia had only infrequent contact, with anything similar to the Westphalian nation-state until the late 1800s and early 1900s. Even at this point, such contact is far limited from what we might now expect.

This combination of Hmong ethnicity, citizenship status, and proximity to border construction has created a vantage point that does not easily allow them to naturalize state territory. History and the creation of cultural memory might have had something to do with a tendency not to naturalize the state. Hmong people, after all, have long remained outside state core categories of governance. The very term *Man* (“barbarians”), and similarly Miao, were exonyms coined by the Chinese state, ultimately imposing ethnicities on the inhabitants of the mountains (Jonsson 2005: 28) based on their peripherality. In more recent memory, incipient legibility of citizenship of the modern Thai state and imposed non-citizenship status on Hmong people excluding them from the benefits they may have seen others receive, some getting colored ID cards of various category marking them still as non-citizens (Pinkaew 2013). The modern Thai state also brought borders drawn by nineteenth-century imperialists and the indigenous kingdoms (Thongchai 1994), which crossed the Hmong. This experience is deep in the working social memory of many Hmong people, especially Hmong Lao refugees of the Secret War in Laos. Similarly, because Hmong people have made their home at the margins of nation-states, Hmong people have watched the precarious state territorialization at the edges of the nation-state from front row seats. Speaking of the Hmong arrival to the area surrounding the Northern Mekong region in around the end of the nineteenth century Prasit notes “surely, during the period when Hmong ancestors moved to resettle in this area was a time before the creation of the modern nation-state when the present boundaries of countries had not yet been set.” (Prasit 2011: 12). In this position, they inevitably had a large part in performing that border through their iterative crossings of it through their daily lives.

Southeast Asian uplanders of fairly recent Zomian fame (Van Schendel 2002,³⁵ Scott 2009) might be understood to scatter in the face of state appropriation tax and corvee, shun hierarchical social structures and tend toward a version of shifting non-territoriality. However, traditional understandings of Hmong spatial practice depict a tendency to gather together more than several other upland groups and to have more territorializing spatial practices.

Anthropologists have connected Hmong opium as liquidable capital, which has funded capital intensive trips, to Hmong people's ability to make distant migrations (Grandstaff 1976). Thus, allowing Hmong people to tend toward pioneer swidden practices that sought out old-growth forest rather than maintaining rotational swiddens in the same general area. The prospect of the richness of pioneer swiddens elsewhere could have kept Hmong groups in their settlements for about ten years and significantly depleted the soil fertility before exhausting the soil of their fields (Grandstaff 1976). In this arrangement, Hmong people have been said to depend on kin ties to gather enough men who were assumed to be needed for muscle strength to clear the large primary growth trees in pioneer swiddens versus secondary growth of rotational systems. This gathering of critical muscle power in a settlement encouraged their settlements to be larger than some other upland minority groups that did not practice pioneer swidden. Still, these settlements were assumed impermanent and not very large compared to lowland settlements. Beyond this, everyday form of gathering, funerals weddings, New Year's celebrations, and other life events were cause to call far-flung kin and friends together for occasional large gatherings.

A beanpole relationship to territory thus sees territorializing as temporary and intended for sustenance and community improvement. They do not seek to *ua teb chaws* or establish a

³⁵ Interestingly, Van Schendel's evocation of the term Zomia was coined in order to decenter the state centric understanding of region, and to interrogate the naturalization of regional designations. Scott, possibly not picking up on this, ironically names a new region Zomia

nation-state, I will argue many Hmong people have realized the denatured way a people can connect to state territory. Ian Baird has shown in two separate articles that one could argue that perhaps the best-known Hmong millenarian movements, transitioned toward increasing ethnonationalism after Hmong people moved to the United States. Early on in Laos, groups like the Chao Fa advocated for autonomy over their place of residence and resistance to the Lao PDR but not for an outright ethnostate (Baird 2014). Later, after Pa Kao Her visited Angola and the United States, the Chao Fa hoped for a Federalist system like the United States. Though theirs was an armed struggle, it was not intended necessarily to create a Hmong ethnostate. Indeed, Shong Lue Yang was himself half Hmong and half Khmu, and he spoke both languages. Later, groups inspired by elements of Shong Lue Yang's movement shifted toward explicitly supporting the idea of a Hmong ethnostate. Ian Baird documents the Congress of World Hmong People as a US-based group having more recently called explicitly for a Hmong ethnostate (Baird 2015: 61-62).

This conception does not connect with territory to hold it in perpetuity and claim it as a nation-state. In many ways, this conception *prima facie* acknowledges superseding claims of majority ethnic groups to nation-state territory. However, the Hmong seek some form of sovereignty. This sovereignty comes in an infrapolitics of sovereign performance (in the Butlerian sense) of Hmong identity, which momentarily territorializes a variety of surfaces for the purpose of building Hmong social cohesion (*kho neeg*). As such, the territories upon which the Hmong perform these acts of sovereignty become spaces of activism. This sovereignty is formed on sections of earth and realized on other surfaces. This is sort of an endosocial sovereignty which is an ersatz substitute for ascendant state sovereignty. Hereafter, I use the term endosocial sovereignty to denote this tendency to territorialize sovereign Hmong cultural space.

Territorializing different surfaces as a way to attain a negotiated control of those surfaces, but the idea of control of land or sovereignty or country is not always thought of. This idea of territorialization can happen on various surfaces, landscapes, bodies, pages, screens, and so forth.³⁶

A Moment of Endosocial Sovereignty: *Koom Haum Haum Xeeb*

This compares rooted gatherings (territorializations) at two different places, Koom Haum Haum Xeeb at Ban Vinai refugee camp in Loei province Thailand and Vaj Loog Teeb Keeb in Seng Meng Village Chiang Rai Thailand. In each case, the territorialization seems motivated by a concern for developing the Hmong people. This might be assumed to follow millenarian, separatist, or ethnonationalist logic.

I begin with a discussion of *Koom Haum Haum Xeeb*. By way of contextualization, *Koom Haum Haum Xeeb* (hereafter *Koom Haum*) in Loei Province was founded in the primary Hmong refugee camp Ban Vinai after the Second Indochina war ended in 1975. This gathering of refugees—of mostly Hmong, some Lao, and other ethnicities such as Iu Mien—filled Ban Vinai camp near the border with Laos. Ban Vinai was representative of a new phenomenon in Hmong life. Large settlements of Hmong had previously taken place at Xam Thong and Long Thieng Laos (known in Hmong as Looj Ceeb). Ban Vinai was the newest iteration of a burgeoning Hmong urbanity. In this setting of Hmong urbanity, the Hmong cultural center was established. The center was a complex of simply built shelters that housed icons from Hmong mythology,

³⁶ Using the page as one such surface example, Lee Zai presented an analogy to me relating Hmong writing with the pole commonly used to train beans in a garden. The staking of a pole prior to planting allows for the beans to grow in concert wrapping themselves around the single pole, whereas those without a pole sprout in all directions climbing various areas of the garden landscape and making the harvest more difficult. The learning of writing he said gathers the Hmong together and teaches them to be a people. Just as the pole gathers the vines.

shrines, and cultural artifacts, especially musical instruments. The structures were used for teaching and the practice of Hmong cultural skills and traditions (called *txuj ci* in Hmong). This temple was the next iteration of religious expression begun by the Hmong prophet and “mother of writing” (Shong Lue Yang)³⁷ (Smalley 1990), who had begun teaching his system of writing in Laos but was murdered on the order of General Vang Pao. This was possibly due to pressure from ethnic Lao people high up in the Royal Lao government. Koom Haum Haum Xeeb was begun by a few millenarians such as Lee Zai, whom I discuss.

Though the gathering of a large group of Lao Hmong people together in one place had begun first during the war in Long Tieng (looj Ceeb), the refugee camp experience in Thailand was a continuation of that gathering which allowed Hmong people to experience increasingly shared identities and draw identity boundaries. Here I focus on the effects of gathering in refugee camp life may have had in forming Hmong millenarianism tendencies. Stated briefly, spatial gathering, boundedness/carcerality, and effects of propinquity in concert with the ideological and material effects of cultural imaginaries can be seen as both a cause and effect of millenarian logics but are furthermore the technology by which individuals and groups are exposed to counterposing narratives and reformed. The exemplary Ban Vinai case illustrates how gathering for political ends is seen as social justice

Realizing they had a wider audience than usual in the camp, they used a number of surfaces to territorialize practices that could improve people or *Kho Neeg*, including the body and its costuming and presentation to people who were now newly close to them in a large group. Though some of the symbols had millenarian meanings, that transcendence was not always apparent in daily life. The costumes and statuary marked parity with other ethnic groups

³⁷ Shong Lue Yang which in Hmong RPA script is known as *Yaj Soob Lwj*)

Firstly, formal refugee camps like Ban Vinai as well as informal camps like Wat Tham Krabok went through periods of spatial bounding, aka fenced enclosure and regulated passage. Not only were they physically bounded by fences, but their inhabitants often occupied dubious legal standing, which restricted them to a narrow range of movement for fear of discovery by state authorities. This was especially the case at Wat Tham Krabok and the surrounding areas where later years of life there and surrounding areas saw increasing police harassment in surrounding communities. These two factors limited Hmong mobility and confidence respectively in Thai spaces beyond refugee camp's fences or boundaries, but not all such gatherings were set apart in space by linear boundaries. However, it is important to note that some Hmong involved in insurgency activities had more privileges to come and go from both Ban Vinai and WTK than others.

For Hmong people at Ban Vinai, propinquity and urbanity (defined by high densities of people gathered together) might more often be spectacular affects which happen less frequently for this usually rural (mountain-dwelling) ethnicity. This meant that there was a high population density in Ban Vinai:

"The Ban Vinai temporary shelter for displaced persons was located in a mountainous area. The area of the shelter was about 750 rai. It was divided into 9 sections and had space for 360 buildings. Each building had 16 rooms, and the area of each room was 3x5 square meters. One Hmong family stayed in each room." (Supang and Tawin 2011: 53)

While this is certainly not the case for Hmong people in the Chiang Mai area of Thailand, where trips and permanent relocations to the city seem increasingly frequent, the spectacle of New year celebrations in mountain villages are often limited to once yearly gatherings of villagers for not more than a week at a time. However, at the point when people who are used to rurality are suddenly put in dense propinquity, and the spectacle of urbanity begins to fade that

individuals caught in this hybrid situation begin to recognize it for its pedagogical potential for opening liberatory social possibilities. Gathering in space teaches their condition as a group and presents a new modality/avenue for changing (usually ameliorating or manipulating) that condition.

The principal explanation of this Koom Haum Haum Xeeb (termed *koom haum*), this gathering provided a mirror for ethnic bordering practices clearly seen in Koom Haum Vinai's apparent "cargo cult-like" syncretic appropriation of Thai, Lao, Chinese, American, and other practices.

Nicholas Tapp's chapter on the "Hmong reformation of culture" moves in the direction I am describing. In his chapter of sovereignty and rebellion, Tapp recounts a trip he made in the 1980s to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand's Loei Province, where he encountered the Koom Haum movement. He passes briefly over the stylistic uniqueness of the group's clothing and moves on to highlight their syncretic adoption of Lao folklore in their version of the Lao story *Xeev Xaim*. Applying Walter Benjamin to an analysis of folkloric enactments of the 'realness' of historic slights in the lives of the Hmong people in the present, he posits something of an overriding narrative of deprivation in Hmong history. He states (2005: 188-189)

"Despite the severity of 3,000 years of conflict with arguably the most powerful state in the world [China], hardships under the French in Indo-China, and persistent attempts to colonize, assimilate, and subdue the Hmong by the Thai, Lao, and Vietnamese, probably the severest challenge yet to the cultural identity and ethnicity of the Hmong is now posed by the dispersion of the Hmong to the 'four corners of heaven' and their settlement abroad as members of post-industrial nations. Yet, it seems that, at least for these first- and second-generation migrants, the strong ethnic boundary mechanisms formed by Hmong society through its historical experience as a minority in China and Indo-China, have proved adequate to reconstitute the society in its new status as an ethnic group on a global scale. International visits by groups of Hmong to other groups of Hmong are becoming increasingly common, and this, together with the entry of the oral tradition of the Hmong in McLuhan's post-literate society through the extensive employment of the telephone and cassette-recorder, marks a new state in the

internationalization of Hmong consciousness as an ethnic group. We may be able to link this to the emergence of the Hmong as an 'ethnic group' proper, which Ross (1979) distinguishes from the stage of a 'minority group' on the grounds that the former entails a stage of conscious mobilization and redefinition of identity, which only occurs under modern conditions of development (cf. Cohen 1969)."

It might be that Tapp citing Cohen (1969), though on the right track, leaves out spatial aspects of ethnic boundary construction, in relation to the Koom Haum's formation. Cohen, followed possibly by Ben Anderson in a related notion of nationalism, would assert that "Ethnic boundary mechanisms" are activated as a community imagines themselves and imagines themselves in relation to other communities. 'Modern conditions of development' allowed for communication between different points on the globe. However, the Hmong sequestration at Ban Vinai created an urbanized space fairly new to Hmong people, which allowed them daily interactions with people they increasingly thought of as Hmong co-ethnics and those of outside ethnicities.

As many of my informants have argued, this conceptualization hinged on somewhat newly prevalent comparisons of clan and lineage-based divergence and confluence in ritual practice, afforded by day-to-day interactions in camp settings less available in more clan bounded *lub Zos* (village)³⁸ settings. Hmong people saw differences and similarities in funeral practices and weddings. Even beyond funerary practices, imagine the boundary forming experiences of a Hmong child now coming to play with a friend when that friend's family has erected a "Caiv" marker (taboo markers) meant to divert visitors from the household. This marker may be set for reasons foreign or perhaps faintly familiar reasons than one might have at

³⁸ The Term *lub zos* or *lub zog* translates to 'village', however, there is often a clan component in more traditional *lub zos* groupings. A *lub zos* has been understood to be made up of people from a particular clan. In my experience villages may have begun this way, but have given way to mixed clan settlements. This is especially the case since many hmong villages in Thailand have become permanent villages rather than temporary settlements which Hmong of the past stayed in for five to ten years. It make sense for there to be less mixing of clans in each village when there was more frequent movement. Clan networks become emphasized and localized connections deemphasized.

their own home. The inability to play with a friend for the day or week may stand out in one's memory as an indicator of ethnic dissimilarity within the group or might suggest a splintering of what might have once been a unitary practice now contaminated by the interference of time.

Proximate to the same time that Lee Zai and his co-leaders, like Khaiv Tim (whom I will mention briefly) was coming to understand the implications of unified Hmong, there seems to be a similar attention to the expanding economies of attention afforded by such a large gathering of folks speaking the same language and sharing similar semiotic repertoires. Culturally appropriate practices such as storytelling and musical performance were familiar tools that now gave one access to larger audiences on a daily basis (not just during festivals, i.e., New Year's, etc.). Using his gift for oration and musicality, Lee Zai, recalled to me that when he saw his fellow Hmong at Ban Vinai fighting or brawling or otherwise, he would compose a song on the occasion and sing it for those in conflict and later the gathering crowd. He did so in an effort to fix people themselves, *Kho neeg*, as opposed to *kho neej* (fixing the aspects of their lives). This burgeoning pastoral governmentality appears to pervade his writings. He has developed whole volumes devoted to "fixing people":

“LZ: we began singing *paj huam* when people came to Ban Vinai refugee camp. At Ban Vinai, we [ban vinai residents] began to be sad and thoughtful. There, you began to think your thoughts, and I also thought my thoughts, and then we expressed them. I am the one that expressed the most. When I would see the Hmong brawling, I would write a verse telling them not to brawl. Or if they were fighting, I would tell them just to do good. Or if I saw them arguing, I would sing another verse to teach them.

DC: Did it have any benefit?

LZ: Yes, it had a benefit. It made the Hmong surprised and realized (*ua rau Hmoob ceeb Hmoob ras*) that I said the right thing. Some of them would cry. This would heal their hearts. This happened in Ban Vinai

He later continued by explaining that he had been thinking of ways to fix people *kho neeg* and love the poor and promote equality since his early life but realized his audience at Ban Vinai was a way to do this. Lee Zai understood that gathering allowed his people to come to common realizations about ethnic identity and to educate one another regarding those facts. Later in his life, Lee Zai has followed similarly captive audiences, involving himself in the legally dubious gatherings of Hmong at another grouping of undocumented Hmong people in Chiang Mai, at Camp Naresuan where he continued his efforts to teach ‘Hmong techniques’ (or *txuj ci* as they are called in Hmong)

Writing in some ways filled a similar function of prefiguring ideal Hmong characteristics which can be territorialized on a surface (i.e., the page), Recalling that Lee Zai’ original bean pole analogy referred to writing as a gathering technology, in interviews he stressed the ability for Hmong people to read Hmong script allowed for them to fix themselves. He hinted at the efficaciousness of haptic practices of writing, reading, and the reflexivity that comes with reading helps people to fix themselves. Furthermore, like other teachers of Hmong *Phaj Hauj* messianic script revealed to me (with no apparent qualms) that not only does the text itself hold didactic symbolism, but the process of learning the text reveals elements of a messianic worldview. For example, a mnemonic device used to remember the first three consonants *Vau Nrau Fau* or V Nr F, is *Vaj Nroog Faj* or the king’s city prospers. Though this mnemonic seems pretty easy, considering a total of 148 total characters with randomly placed diacritics, the task of learning the script is a truly formidable task. It requires a great deal of self-discipline

LZ: You must have that pole; the pole is writing. Writing teaches people. We who know how to teach must teach it. Just as you are a doctor and if you simply teach us, no matter how smart *you* are, *we* still cannot remember everything. But if there is writing and we are all literate, then we just need one doctor to teach our entire people (*peb haiv neeg*). So, you are the pole. [...] If we have not learned

how to write, then you can explain it in whatever way you like. but when the explaining is finished, then that's the end of it.”

Here Lee Zai explained that the pole which gathers and fixes people is writing. This is especially significant because he is making his version of sovereignty external to the body of the Hmong messianic leader. Lee Zai knows that the hopes attached to a leader can fade. Their charisma and ideas disappear into history after they are murdered. As a response, Lee Zai suggests that writing is a bean pole which will have endurance and will not depend on the life of any one person being sustained. The ideas once they have left the mind of the thinker can be given to many people to gather them to a particular way of thinking. Thus it should be remembered that Lee Zai did not see the leader as the bean pole, he saw the external acts of sovereignty such as writing, and performance of Hmong arts and culture as the means to establishing a Hmong community.

He continued in this discussion by making several important distinctions. Primary among those is the difference between "improving the person" *kho neeg* and "improving the life" *kho neej* (note the tone difference indicated in the final letter of each word). By improving the person, Lee Zai is referring to the internal development of a person's character. He counterposes this to *improving the life*, referring to the improvement of external factors to the individual—money, status, etc. Throughout, Lee Zai laments that the Hmong do not yet know how to improve the person, which he sees as the greater goal. Referring again to his proverbial pole analogy, he believes writing is the way to improve people because it territorializes beneficial ideas, holds them in place for others to gather to.

"The Hmong do not have writing. In Laos, Hmong learned [to write] Lao. So only those [who learned Lao] learned how to fix their lives. If I learn Lao, then I go and become a leader. I am someone that watches over others, so I have people. But my own people I cannot even fix. It's the same in Thailand and in the US. When the Hmong have good times, they just fix/heal their [outer] lives. They do

not fix their [inner] selves. When they can heal the person, that's when their sickness will be gone. Then they can go and work. But for those you have not been healed, no matter how good everything else is, they cannot work. You have to fix the person first.

Shifting now to a comparison, he said:

“But we [Hmong] do not fix people as you [literate people] would, we argue and say all manner of things, take pictures, doing all manner of base things because we do not know how to fix people (*kho neeg*), we do not know what fixing people even entails, what the basis is for proceeding in that way, or what to do in order to blossom and produce fruit (*tawg paj txi txiv*). Since *peb tsis tau kho neeg* (We don't fix people) . and so in the future, we should have an organization that will fix people before so that people know what people really are, and then at that time, fixing lives will be possible.”

In his attention to language as a force for developing Hmong people, Lee Zai is keen to use new Hmong words that could be seen as evidence of development. For example, Lee Zai uses a less commonly used word *tab zag*³⁹ for wife instead of the more commonly used *poj niam* (also the general term for 'woman'). He explained to me that in other languages, the word for 'wife' is not the same as 'woman.' This usage shows that Lee Zai is layering up the specificity and distinction used in his version of the Hmong language to gain parity with languages of people he sees as more developed. This is an inner development, evidence that is "improving the person."

This example helps illuminate Lee Zai's thinking on improving people through this kind of language is not cultivated unless there is writing with which you can help one remember the intricacies contained in the language. He wants to territorialize the writing so it can be viewed controlled, in more familiar terms, "made legible." However, his understanding of this legibility is not necessarily from the view of the state but could also be viewed as a democratization of control over discourse through the facilitation of access and transparency of language to the mass

39. I have never heard the term *tab zag* used by anyone in common speech other than Lee Zai. *Tab zag* is a term used in traditional *kvw txhiaj* verses.

of people. Viewing language through the bean pole metaphor as a human-made instrument, we can see rather than a naturalized process. It is accepted that these Hmong words are new. This seems to evidence the territorialization of the Hmong language for the purpose of improving the person and their life.

It was, as some members have explained, Koom Haum's responsibility as *Shong Lue Yang's* (Yang Shong Lue's) legacy to carry *Hmoob Txuj ci* (or Hmong techniques, methods, or practices) outward in both Time and space. They did so in performances of power, which showed their parity with great ethnicities and nations of the world. Continuing Hmong messianic expressions of supernatural strength and dexterity, they performed tight rope walking and acrobatic and martial art skills, including *Tes Taws* (or Hmong Kung fu). This act resonates with Scott's (2009: 307) "They appropriate the power, magic, regalia, and institutional charisma of the valley state in a kind of symbolic jujitsu in order to attack it." They did so wearing clothing reminiscent of the appearances of the Chinese Kung fu stars they watched on screens in the camps with distinct Hmong innovative elements. Similarly, ritual clothing resembled Theravada Buddhist Monks but with white hats resembling Hmong iconography in the Koom Haum complex space. In this case, you can see this expression of new costumes as a less contested territorialization of Hmong millenarianism on the surface of the body bounded by the skin and controlled in voluntary somewhat sovereign performance with the threat of reinforcement from the strength of the individual (that was transcendent in the sense that it prefigured a future Hmong identity of strength. But he gestured at generalizing this territorialization to mundanity as some members of this group apparently wore these costumes not just for ritual purposes but in their everyday lives. And they had no reason to prefigure the reality as it existed. They were, in fact, quite strong and certainly just as good as everyone else.

Vaj Loog Teeb Keeb: Cutting down the Tree?

This second example of endosocial sovereignty took place in Thailand's northern province of Chiang Rai at a place known as Vaj Loog Teeb Keeb temple. Although he was not solely responsible for building this temple, an acquaintance of Lee Zai named Yang Kou took sovereignty over this space for the purpose of building a Hmong cultural center. Vaj Long Teeb Keeb (hereafter VLTK) was built very near the border between Thailand and Laos in Seng Meng Village, Tap Tao Subdistrict, Thoeng District. The village in Hmong is called "*Av Liab*" after its red soils. It was here that a Japanese NGO funded the building of a "Hmong Cultural Center." This area of Thailand has a fraught Hmong history. The region is home to a large population of Hmong people, many of whom were insurgents backing the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) beginning in the late 1960s. They are commonly known by non-communist Hmong as Hmong Suav Liab (Red Chinese Hmong). This group has since come back to mainstream Thai society and now enjoys leadership roles in government and business in the area. They are, in many ways, quite patriotic. In this paper, we refer to them as former Hmong CPT or Red Hmong. There is also a large contingent of Hmong Lao refugees of the Second Indochina War, in Seng Meng and surrounding villages. Seng Meng is not the site of a former refugee camp. The two communities intermix freely, but there have some differences which, as I will show, lead to the contestation of space.

In 2004, I visited Seng Meng Village in Chiang Rai's Phu Chi Fa area. Although I had lived in Thailand for almost two years at that point, it was the first Hmong village I had visited. After visiting a scenic viewpoint at Phu Chi Fa, Chiang Rai, I saw a sign advertising a "Hmong cultural center." When I reached the yard of the local school, I met a young man with a rifle

strapped on his shoulder and asked if he knew where I could get Hmong language learning aids. He led me to a dark house with a thatched roof and shiny dirt floors where he rifled about in the dim light of a foggy early morning for a bit then handed me a laminated sheet of messianic Hmong Phaj Hauj script used for teaching this writing system (Phaj Hauj is the script received by the Hmong prophet Yang Shong Lue described earlier). He then led me past a beautiful round temple with a multi-tiered roof to a less ornate though beautiful square-shaped building to meet a Hmong teacher of sorts. Standing in front of a chalkboard, in this less ornate interior hall, the teacher read my newly acquired laminated sheet onto my tape recorder, giving me an audio overview of Hmong phonemes. This was my first substantive lesson in the Hmong language, which became the basis for my own study of the language. This meeting stuck in my mind, and although I did not know the teacher's name, my best recollections combined with the later investigation have led me to understand that it was Yang Kou who gave me that first Hmong lesson.

Furthermore, I learned upon my return to Thailand during my master's fieldwork in 2012, that he had been murdered just a few years after I met him. Visiting the Hmong Cultural Center in Chiang Rai thereafter, I found the once beautiful structures there sitting in disrepair with broken windows, peeling paint and cracked plaster. Other than the occasional teenagers who broke into the space to drink a beer there were no occupants, despite the large following the temple had once had, complete with rifle-toting guardians. Although the village headman held the keys to the structure, there was no one interested in reviving the Hmong Cultural Center in Chiang Rai to its former glory. The place seemed to be tainted with an unfortunate history.

This reluctance stemmed from the identity that this temple was given during its period of use. The Hmong Cultural Center in Chiang Rai was originally intended by its Japanese

donors to be a space for Hmong cultural practice. It was certainly used for this purpose, however, with a distinctly Hmong arguably millenarian aesthetic, arguably devoid of Thai national symbols and identity. To some, this was evidence that the founder of the Hmong Cultural Center in Chiang Rai intended to become a Hmong king. Former CPT Hmong in the area repeated the idea that Yang Kou was raising himself up to be a king (or *Sawv Vaj* in Hmong). There is certainly an argument to be made that, based on his connections to insurgent efforts, especially those of his father, who was a key leader of the widely known Chao Fa insurgent group lead by Pa Kao Her. Yang Kou's intention in building this temple was to build Hmong ethnonationalism on the cultural front in preparation for an eventual Hmong state. However, from the mouths of some of his closest associates and even rivals long after his death, I was assured that he was not involved in becoming a king "*sawv vaj*" or building a country "*ua Teb Chaws*." His love for and dedication to the spread of Hmong cultural techniques and practices *Hmong Txuj Ci*, especially language and writing, is not directly attached to the establishment of a millenarian state. Furthermore, although those who belonged to his movement in the area do not occupy the Hmong Cultural Center in Chiang Rai, they continue with several of the activities that they originally practiced at the Center, including the teaching and spreading of awareness about the messianic Phaj Hauj script (even at government-funded schools and cultural events) and the teaching of *Tes Taws* (Hmong Kung Fu). This teaching is not only tolerated but funded by government cultural departments as a salutary activity.

Despite doubt about whether he was an ethnonationalist insurgent, Yang Kou certainly seemed to be concerned with establishing territorial control of a smaller place, for the purpose of furthering Hmong cultural ideals and practices which to develop the Hmong, not establish an ethnostate. Similar to Lee Zai, with whom he worked earlier at the Koom Haum Hmong

Cultural Center in Ban Vinai Refugee camp, Yang Kou knew that marking the landscape with Hmong markings drew Hmong people together in a place where they could learn about being Hmong in a positive way. He was adamant about keeping the Center distinctly Hmong.

When A Japanese NGO offered funding to a Thai Doctor named Acharn Prathip to fund the building of a Hmong Cultural Center, a design for the structure was sought out. Although several members of the Hmong community, including some who had been a part of the Koom Haum at Ban Vinai, Yang Kou's design was chosen. Several of his followers recounted with pride that the funders acknowledged that this design showed the true identity (or *ekkalak* in Thai) of the Hmong. The design and detail were true to several Hmong traditional cultural themes, but there seemed to be innovations related to the Soob Lwj Yang movement. For example, the writing on the temple was done in the Phaj Hauj Script. According to a prominent relative of Yang Kou from the Yang Clan, who is incidentally a former Hmong CPT leader, this was looked at with some suspicion by the Thai Ministry of Culture. The relative entreated Yang Kou not to foreground the Phaj Hauj Script in signs and postings on the temple and to feature Thai script more prominently, but Yang Kou was adamant that Phaj hauj script was Hmong and should be the means of communication.

Construction of the project began in 1999 and was completed officially on January 1, 2001 (1-1-1). The project included a classroom/meeting building and a round Temple (or *Tsev Kheej* in Hmong) complete with intricate glass inlays. Overall, these are beautiful and impressive structures. Both the square meeting house and round temple were built in exquisite style on par with any Thai Buddhist temple but with a uniquely Hmong aesthetic. Yang Kou intended that the square classroom building would be a space for the instruction of Hmong culture and practices,

and the roundhouse was set up as a space of reverence and worship to Shong Lue Yang, the spiritual inspiration for the Chao Fa movement (Baird 2014).

This last fact is important to the story. At the dedication of the temple (the round house), prominent members of the community were present, including Thais, Hmong Lao refugees, and former Hmong CPT. Upon seeing the finished product of the temple with a shrine to Yang Shong Lue featured prominently, local Hmong Thai, especially those who had formerly served in the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), were somewhat surprised by this semiotics of the space commonly associated with millenarian ethnonationalism. Although followers and close confidants consistently confirmed to me that Yang Kou was not concerned with political revolution, CPT Hmong joked loudly that the proximity to the border of the temple would make it easy for the Lao to shoot bombs at the temple, presumably in any armed conflict that would ensue as Yang Kou attempted insurgency.

Suspicion of Yang Kou inciting ethnonationalist insurgency in the area seems to be connected to his murder. Although he frequented this area of Chiang Rai, Yang Kou also spent time in neighboring Phayao Province's Chiang Kham District. He was murdered there in the mid-2000s. The case is especially fishy, considering his murder was reportedly committed by someone dressed as a woman; similarly, strange stories surround the murder of Pa Kao Her some years earlier. Though I cannot confirm with absolute certainty, several members of the community formerly close to Yang Kou believe they know who was responsible for arranging his murder. I have met and interviewed this individual, and he is a prominent former CPT Hmong now involved in business and government in the local area. Speaking about Hmong in Thailand, this individual expressed to me a concern that Hmong people's image needed to be rehabilitated in Thailand and was concerned with boosting the image of the Hmong in Thailand and their

relationship with Hmong in Laos. It is certainly the case that other former CPT Hmong have been involved in diplomatic efforts in Laos, including traveling to Laos to attend the dedication of statues of Hmong Lao communist war heroes. If this individual was responsible for Yang Kou's murder, as is widely believed, it isn't likely that he was any surer that Yang Kou was working toward insurgency when his closest compatriots did not believe him to be. Maybe his father's involvement in insurgent activities led to such a conclusion. Sadly it seems, the building and nascent control of this territorialization in the physical structure of Vaj Loog Teeb Keeb was a step too far in the eyes of a leader concerned with harmony, and it ended violently.

Mường Nhé: Tree or Trellis?

In the second week of April 2011, something began happening in northern Vietnam involving a large gathering of Hmong people--estimated at 5,000 to 11,000 (Ngo 2016: 2016). It has remained unclear by some accounts what exactly happened at the event, why it occurred, and what were the motivations of its participants. However, it seems clear that the Hmong people who had gathered in Mường Nhé where they were subject to some level of violent repression by government forces at the beginning of May. My subject community gives the following sequence of events. People began gathering together by April 2011 at Mường Nhé. By May 1 and 2, the authorities arrived and began watching over the gathering. They would not allow the Hmong to leave to the outside. On May 3, the authorities, in an apparent effort to disperse the crowd, sent two aircraft and sprayed something in the water of the area, which caused people who drank the water to become ill. On May 4, soldiers and police came and surrounded all of the entry and exit roads. May fifth, is the day the big event happened in which the authorities came and beat, arrested, and shot members of the gathering, so everyone dispersed.

Reports of the level of violence range from one source claiming Vietnamese authorities killed participants and buried them on the premises, while others recount the use of beatings and tear gas. The details remain murky, to say the least. In any case, the results of this movement seem to have had profound consequences for Christian Hmong in Vietnam. The government's repression at the Mùòng Nhé event was something of a watershed moment, which catalyzed an increase in the movement of Hmong people to Vietnam's neighboring countries, including Lao PDR, China, Myanmar, Cambodia, and eventually Thailand. At the very least, the event acted as the narrative backdrop for the lives of Hmong Christians in Vietnam.

In this section, I discuss some of the surrounding events which occurred from the point of view of one member of my subject community now living in Thailand, who claims to have knowledge of the leadership and organization of the Mùòng Nhé movement. This perspective is absent in the literature on the movement. After a period of incarceration following the event, Sha Seng (*Sam Xeeb*) has now fled Vietnam and taken residence in my primary research community in Bangkok. His view allows us to peer inside one corner of the movement and say more about how the event was actually organized and executed. This view provides what I believe are some key insights about the event and addresses a previous paucity of Vietnamese Hmong voices who were actually involved in the movement, in the literature on the subject. Furthermore, I allow some members of the movement to pose some of their own reasons for their participation, making the rationale of this movement more than a knee jerk response of some supposed frenzied Hmong millenarians. This view interrogates—but does not completely discard—the notion that Hmong millenarian movements have separatist elements and some of those elements are involved in Mùòng Nhé, but this section questions the notion that Hmong movements are

always--as most characterizations seem to posit—irrationally separatist and millenarianism but are sometimes rationally conceived for purposes of social justice activism.

Perhaps a caricature of some the aforementioned explanations but the Mùròng Nhé movement has been portrayed as the irrational pipe dream inevitably set on separatism and portraying Hmong people with a cartoonish millenarian expectation, which is predetermined by a cultural background which switches on when presented with the mere thought of a messiah. Though explanations of deprivation theory may not be *en vogue*—according to my sources—those who led this movement explicitly stated that they were seeking to right the wrongs of an unjust political situation through gaining the attention of the Vietnamese government and international observers. However, the assumptions regarding motivations for the event have leaned decidedly toward explanations based on the cultural predisposition of Hmong toward millenarianism and separatism. While I acknowledge that millenarianism and possibly separatism played roles in the movement, the prevalence of these factors in explanations of the event unfairly overshadow social justice explanations, which my Hmong Viet informants considered the preceding rationale of the movement.

A number of authors have posited the reasons people gathered to the site in Mùròng Nhé district of Điện Biên Province. Radio Free Asia (Quynh Chi 2011) reported that the events were motivated by human rights concerns on the part of Hmong involved. However, reports from Vietnamese media reports that a group of Hmong men involved in the incident was acting with separatist intentions seeking to create a Hmong state "Vuong Quoc Mong," as shown in Viet language headlines (Đất Việt. 2013). However, Tam Tam Ngo favors a more Christian millenarian explanation for the events, crediting the 2011 predictions made by California Pastor Harold Camping regarding the end times. He had worked with Hmong pastors to spread his

message as wide as Vietnam. According to Ngo, this fervor was coopted by a Hmong messianic leader named Zhong Ka Chang, who later took the name "Tu Jeng Cheng" (Ngo 2016: 96). Chang harnessed Hmong millenarian expectations and apparently called for Hmong across the country "to rid themselves of their homes and lands and belonging[s] to converge on Mùròng Nhé and wait together with their messiah for the prophesied event" (2016: 96). Further still, Seb Rumsby (2019:11-13) credits more random factors, that Hmong people seeing Hmong in the area simply gathered, not really knowing what was going on, but joining in the gathering.

Tam's discussion of reactions from Christian organizations to the gathering highlights that Western-based Christian organizations wanted to distance themselves from the movement, but her criticism, though needed, of Hmong American activist narratives of human rights stops short of acknowledging that some of the Hmong involved in the Mùròng Nhé event were organizing for human rights reasons. She notes the FEBC (Far East Broadcasting Corporation) missionary organizations condemned the Hmong Christians involved in the movement as those who were attracted to:

"false teachings,' which mixed various false beliefs and messiahs into one confused whole, and [were] manipulated by false leaders, who were interested in their own gain. According to FEBC Black Hmong Radio, this happened because there was still a very limited knowledge of Christian doctrine from lack of sufficient teaching." (Ngo 2016: 101)

She goes on to criticize US Hmong political activists' strategy, saying:

"US Hmong often connect their advocacy of human rights for Hmong in Vietnam with their own political agenda of advocacy for a Hmong homeland. Hmong conversion and the Mùròng Nhé incident are often interpreted as 'protests for political freedom' or as a 'calling for more autonomy.' It is this kind of narrative of advocacy that the Vietnamese government uses as evidence to suppress Hmong conversion." (Ngo 2016: 100-101)

Here it appears that Ngo reduces motivations for the Mùròng Nhé event strictly to millenarianism and specifically precludes "protests for political freedom" based on the external

issue of cooptation of their cause by Hmong American ethnonationalist activists. By her logic, Hmong American activists would only *assume* the event had human rights origins or that they would view the event itself as an example of abuse of human rights. Admittedly, Hmong American activists might do something like this. But is this completely without cause? Ngo's silence surrounding human rights and social justice motivations in the context of the Mùòng Nhé event seems to affirm a stance that social justice was not an underlying motivation. Perhaps upon reflection with new information, she would reconsider.

When I began my fieldwork, I was largely unaware of any other explanation than millenarian uprising for these events and had only passing knowledge of them. Then I met a few Vietnamese Hmong in northern Thailand who claimed to be a part of the events, which they described as horribly violent). When I asked the knowledgeable informants in my Hmong Viet subject community in Bangkok about the millenarian connection to Mùòng Nhé event, I was told that the movement was "not really like that." I was more often given an alternative interpretation, which a few of my informants seemed very sure of. They asserted that the Mùòng Nhé event was a time when the Hmong gathered together to "*taij kev ncaj ncees*" (beg for justice).

This interpretation was further confirmed by a 2016 arrival from Vietnam to my research community in the Pa Kluai area of Bangkok, Thailand. This arrival, Sam Xeeb (Sha Seng) had been involved first hand in the events and associated with the leaders of the movement. I initially took his story with a grain of salt, since I had heard from others (especially one man I met in northern Thailand) that they were 'involved' in the event (which is often worn as a badge of honor), but these other stories dubiously described fantastic violence and brutality by the Viet authorities that did not seem supported. However, when he was able to produce photographs of himself on trial for his involvement in the incident listed in Vietnamese newspapers, I began to

believe his story much more. Furthermore, he described with relative ease and consistency the events, people, and locations involved in his experience of the Mùòng Nhé event, other than his admitted unsureness about the exact dates of events. His story seems to pan out. Although Sha Seng had communication with those that prompted the movement and met the elders who were responsible for representing the movement to authorities and the media, Sha Seng did not claim any special status. However, he did offer his opinion in devising something of an official statement for the movement. This statement recounted the significant forms of discrimination Hmong people face in his region of Vietnam for the leaders to use as talking points with Vietnamese authorities (which he, admittedly, very proudly reported that they had adopted his ideas).

Though Rumsby emphasized millenarianism as a cause for the Mùòng Nhé gathering (2019), he posits that motivations for the mass of people involved in the Mùòng Nhé movement were mixed. I accept that millenarian likely played some role for the general population of those involved in the event, but I deemphasize millenarianism as a motivation for the movement's key players. Instead, the testimony of my subjects brings social justice concerns of the Hmong to the fore. Furthermore, it appears that the Mùòng Nhé event was thoughtfully planned and purposefully executed. According to sources involved directly in the organization of the event whom I interviewed, the primary concern for the gathering in a pseudo-territory at Mùòng Nhé was to raise social justice concerns to the national and international stage. From this view, the Hmong gathering at Mùòng Nhé exemplifies a core group's nascent organizing practices intended to create a territorialization to assert group autonomy. In so doing, this territorial gathering would bring light to their grievance that Christian Hmong in Vietnam lack social parity with the majority Kinh ethnicity. However, following common, almost traditional, narratives

which pigeonhole Hmong people into a category of 'Brigand' 'bandit' (Ngo 2016: 27) or 'millenarian ethnonationalist separatist' this gathering was immediately suspect and, according to many, was repressed violently by Vietnamese authorities. Similarly, since Vietnam's government had dealt with the Christian Dega movement, they likely would have been somewhat sensitive to religious gatherings. Recalling that only a decade earlier, Kok Ksor—a Montagnard then in America—helped incite a 2001 uprising and exodus to Cambodia of many Christian Montagnards in the Central Highlands, likely drove the Vietnamese government to this violent repression (Human Rights Watch 2002 54,81).

In contrast to other accounts of the organization of the event—vague millenarian organicism fueled by associations with "Vaj Tswv" movements, millenarianism of Zhong Ka Chang, or diffuse Hmong-ish organizing tendencies often naturalistically or culturalistically assigned to Hmong people, the event was planned and organized by individuals primarily concerned with social justice for the Hmong. According to Sha Seng, the organization of the event was not spontaneous and certainly not leaderless. Sha Seng was made aware of a plan to meet when he heard messages on the radio sent out by three other Hmong men. These men were not imprisoned for their initiation of the event as Sha Seng and others involved ultimately were. According to Sha Seng, these men were:

"the ones who set the goal for justice. In the end, they did not get caught. They used to be in Si Ma Cai, Lao Cai, Nam Bi. They said that Hmong people are poor and have been abused. So, they came up with the idea of doing something to speak to the courts. They decided to telephone all over. [...] I heard, and I prepared to see what I needed so I can call the leaders and speak with them. If we are going to ask for justice, where will we go? If we ask for justice, how will we ask?"

Thus, rather than some sort of spontaneous gathering brought together by obscure messiah figures activated by innate cultural mechanisms, there appears to be an asserted and

planned effort by these organizers to collaborate in the execution of this event for different purposes than awaiting the arrival of a Hmong Messiah. To say, however, that this was not a leaderless movement, it does not assume any rigidity to the leadership. It appears that those who initially suggested and advertised the event handed the reigns over to elders deemed appropriate to carry the leadership. Furthermore, they allowed for the open proposal of ideas from the mass of people about the direction and motivation of the movement. It is certainly possible that people came to the event for diffuse purposes, even millenarian. However, the same could be said of many social movements that are not labeled altogether millenarian or ethnonationalist as Hmong movements often are.

It seems quite possible that having heard of the gathering of Hmong people to Mùòng Nhé, this group of leaders saw an opportunity to get attention. Social justice movements—from Indian Independence, Civil Rights, and Black Lives Matter—have caused a stir to get attention. They are intentionally disruptive. Otherwise, no one will listen. In the Mùòng Nhé case, it is possible that stoking the government's fear was intentional to leverage attention to their plight. But it would seem the activists ultimately overplayed their hand and were violently repressed as a group, tortured afterward, with some being sent to prison even though their original intentions were not necessarily to overthrow the state.

Sha Seng's account reflects the deliberate planning and correlation between Hmong in different regions of the country that went on before the gathering took place. Sha Seng recalls, "They asked me regarding my area in the south to think about the things I've faced, what have been the biggest things. So, I thought and thought and knew there were three things that were the biggest." This deliberate gathering of information, preparation, and consideration of Hmong issues across the country was a preparation directed at speaking "to the courts" and "to the

leaders." There was a desire for this meeting to result in communication with leaders of the country to solve a problem of injustice, not to overthrow the country and establish a Hmong state as many have assumed. Sha Seng was very proud to share with me the part he took in the movement. Recalling that the elders had called for suggestions for statements to use in communications with authorities and reporters, Sha Seng took up the challenge and thought about what the most important issues were.

"They asked us to ponder events in our southern area [the central highlands]. Since you are believers in God, you have experienced hardship (*kev txom nyem*). Which has been the biggest of those hardships? So, I thought and thought and knew there were three things that were biggest. [...] So I thought about it and wrote these three things down. I wrote them, and when we went there (to see the elders) and talked, then their three selected items became the three items I proposed.

Mường Nhé took place in Bản Hội Khuan (listed variously as Bản Huổi Khan on google maps and Bản Huổi Khon in news articles) Village, Nậm Kè Commune (Xã), Mường Nhé District (Huyện), Điện Biên Province. Sha Seng spent about four days at the event. He recalls arriving on May 8, 2011, and was taken by police on May 12. Others recount that the dates were May 1 through 5. As Sha Seng recalls, the gathering was held on a mountain. Because I have not been able to visit the area, my understanding of Sha Seng's explanation is somewhat incomplete. Furthermore, I should make clear that Sha Seng is not an inhabitant of the village described here. He, like most others involved in the Mường Nhé event, was visiting from elsewhere. Though originally born in Northern Vietnam, he had relocated to the Central Highlands and traveled from there to join the gathering in Điện Biên near the border in an area Ngo notes as sensitive (Ngo 2016: 96). The events took place around the village of Bản Hội Khuan 1 and nearby Bản

Hội Khuan 2. He described the area as a village that lies off a road that crept up a hill after branching of a larger road running alongside a river (likely the Sông Nậm Nhé River or Sông Nậm Kè River) downslope from the village. Some Hmong people clustered along the smaller road before reaching a hill area where most of the Hmong people were gathered during the event. Bản Hội Khuan village is located in this higher area.

Both Bản Hội Khuan 1 and Bản Hội Khuan 2 are very small and are apparently made up of only ethnic Hmong and Iu Mien (Yao) peoples. Its small size lessens chances that there would be large numbers of people there to begin with and more likely that the gathering was mostly made up of outsiders. The gathering happened on the upslope of a hill where a very small settlement of only two houses existed. The elders were staying in the first of two houses as you move up the hill. In the second, a few people were living. Aside from this, just downslope of the two houses, the hill was covered in a circle in tents where Hmong people began to gather. The Hmong had been going back and forth in the entire area, but the elders asked that they should be restricted to this hill area before the Vietnamese authorities later guarded entry and exit roads. So participants were gathered in a large group. So, they were in their tents. Sha Seng describes this as a gathering of "many, many" people. There was another hill across a stream that ran to the river below that ran along the main road. Adjacent to the village were steeply terraced rice paddies making the hill areas where the people had gathered the only places in the area to gather. Sha Seng stayed with his wife and children in a tent just down the hill from the permanent house where the elders were staying.

According to Sha Seng, his apt summary of the discrimination Hmong in the Central Highlands faced was adopted by the Hmong elders in the movement's leadership and relayed to the Viet leadership. Though the leadership mentioned by Sha Seng could have had some

connection with the young man Zhong Ka Chang, noted by Tam Ngo, they were not him. It could be that he saw the opportunity of creating a gathering in a particular spot or harnessing this gathering's messianic expectations. Furthermore, the elders leading the group, in this case, were not the same men who had sent out the call for a meeting but were apparently among those in the meeting. Elders (known as *Txwj Laus* in Hmong) is a Hmong position traditionally assigned to the senior men of a village or clan lineage. In this case, the *txwj laus* of the Mùòng Nhé movement, according to Sha Seng, were not the original organizers and were not from the Mùòng Nhé area. These individuals (only male) stationed in one of the few permanent houses in the village, were those Sha Seng said were:

"The ones who had been soldiers, they had been leaders in the community. They had all been Christians. They knew about our beliefs well. They knew about education (*txoj kev kawm ntaub kawm ntawv*). They were the ones that knew about how others came and stole the Hmong land. These were the ones that knew well about all of this."

While it is not clear how the elders were selected, it appears to be related to their general respectability, legitimacy in the eyes of the Hmong community, and possible legitimacy in the view of the Vietnamese state. The fact that they had been soldiers said something to their patriotism and strikes against the idea that this gathering was necessarily separatist or ethnonationalist, or disorganized and mob-like for that matter. Furthermore, according to Sha Seng's aforementioned recounting, these men had good knowledge of each of the three major issues affecting the Hmong community in Vietnam: Religion, education, and land issues.

The meeting was in the house where the elders were staying. There, Sha Seng came and sat for discussion with the elders. Although ultimately, the elders adopted Sha Seng's three proposed articles as the appropriate articles to take to authorities, this was not a foregone conclusion which came after a long discussion in a *sib tham kom haum* meeting (a political practice common across the Hmong diaspora). Sha Seng is very proud that he was able to make

this contribution. He recounted the process in which his three articles adopted by the elders of the movement as the motivating reasons for the need to ask for justice "*taij kev ncaj ncees*."

"I wrote to them [in preparation]. Then they set the time we would meet together. They also said that if anyone had anything to say, then they were to bring their speeches with them [to the meeting] so that we can compare. [...] So I said, 'oh if that is the way you want it, then take these three lines.'"

He continued:

"Number one was the authorities of the country take our land and sell it to big companies that come and plant trees leaving us citizens without any land to make a living (*tsis tau av noj*). Number two was about our Christian beliefs. Ever since we have believed in God, the authorities have persecuted ("*Caij Tsuj*") us. And before even two or three years before that time, the authorities had destroyed a church in our village ("*lub tuam tsev*" not a house church). And the third item was regarding the children of those who believed in God, especially regarding their education. If anyone of them is a good student, the country doesn't seem to need or want them. In the country, one thing is said. Teachers would say, "when you graduate, you will not become leaders."

These words of these teachers represent a problem I have heard Hmong people express with local authorities in several instances in Vietnam and Lao PDR as well. It makes sense that Hmong people would feel the need to jump scale beyond local authorities to national leaders or even to international in order to solve the problem. According to Sha Seng, the Hmong leadership at Mùòng Nhé wanted to jump scales to pursue contact with the national government, journalists, and the world. They would do this, it seemed first, by gathering to a hill in numbers large enough that they would be visible to the authorities of the country. That the elders told them to stay on the hill and that they said we should go to a hill for the country to see, and the government will come, and their grievances might be addressed. This cuts against the notion that they were ethnonationalist, rather they were seeking validation and recognition from the nation as a whole as citizens who should have parity with other citizens. This was evident in Sha Seng's description of preparations for the event.

“When I got there, we discussed and said we should go to a hill [...] to discuss and gather together to have the country see, so the country will see, and so the government will come and see. And when the government comes, we will request permission from the government. The Viet government will send their people that govern the country to come and speak with us, and we can ask for justice.”

I should acknowledge, however, that the meeting at Mùòng Nhé could have been manipulation or cooptation on the part of the organizers, who would have either incited millenarian expectation or coopted the wave of popular sentiment about a Hmong Messiah already fomented by someone else. They would have done this in order to get a large enough gathering of people to the site to gain attention from the government, journalists, or international observers. This attention would allow them to make their voices heard beyond local authorities, despite accompanied risks. Essentially, some key parties involved had a notion of making global networks in some ways comparable to the Zapatistas, who gained international attention by using internet activism in the 1990s to take control of space (Featherstone 2008: 20; Harvey 2012: 122).

We wrote these three things so that if someday an important leader of the country or someone else who knows how to speak, came to us, we would be ready and able to take these three issues out and talk about them."

Despite the movement's willingness to seek redress from Vietnamese authorities first, Sha Seng recounted that they would also, if need be, leverage publicity from foreign journalists to their cause.

If they do not give justice to us, we will ask for permission to the foreign journalists to come, and when they come we will give them these three paragraphs to them to take to the world to make the world know about our case, if you will investigate the claims these three articles about our oppressions, you will see whether the Vietnamese are truthful or if we are just saying these things (*Lam hais*.)

This jumping scale did not necessarily extend to international agencies, as is often assumed. For example, Sha Seng claims the leadership was not very familiar with the UN. When

I asked whether they had planned to send the statements to the UN, Sha Seng seemed caught a little off guard

"No, we did not send [the statement] [to the UN]. At that time, we did not. At that time, it was like the three leaders (*coj noj coj ua*) did not know about the UN. They just had the idea that if reporters came, then they would go outside and tell the world."

Upon further reflection, Sha Seng seemed to see the logic in my question.

"like these days when you ask for justice you should send such things to the UN organization or to the big countries, and then they do the work and see if they agree and you decide it's good, these three verses until you go and say them. But at that time, our leaders did not know who the UN was. They just heard that there is the UN (*Koom Haum Ntiaj Teb*), there's a white house (*Muaj Tsev dawb*) and such. But you did not know what you do in order for them to help you. The leaders of the country did not want to give us justice. they decided to take the way of force and oppression (*quab yuam caij tsuj*), so they sent the soldiers and police to beat and arrest us."

Prior to meeting with any Vietnamese government authorities, there was a meeting of the movement leadership.

"Before we went the elders and the clan leaders leading the request to be given justice, they all spoke together, including those elders (*txwj laus*) who knew how to speak and the three leaders. I was also there; they all spoke together. Then the two big leaders from the province came, and we spoke together. They asked why we had all come here, and the elders (*txwj laus*) answered that the country does not love us enough (*teb chaws tsis hlub peb*). So, we have come to ask for justice. Can we talk with you?"

Sha Seng recounted a fateful meeting between the leaders of the movement and Điện Biên provincial authorities, two provincial leaders. Despite an attempt at progress, talks appeared to break down before they really started.

"Two provincial leaders had come to the house where the elders were. They were led directly to where the elders were, and they spoke together, and the elders said you cannot speak with us because you are not the ones that control justice in the country (*Kav kev ncaj ncees hauv lub teb chaws*) and so if you would like to speak with us you go and speak with the big leaders in Hanoi capital we do not want that much if they cannot and said one Chinh Phun (leader) from that city (Hanoi) must come one of them and speak with us in order for this to happen. The

elders said this (not me). We spoke to them in this way, and then they said. 'If we cannot speak to you, then we will go.' We thought there was no problem also, but then just a while later, those two went and told the soldiers to come and arrest and beat us.”

Sha Seng recalls that the soldiers and police had surrounded the camp the day before. But eventually, when they entered the camp, they came to the big road, and then they spread out, and they came where there were no roads. He continued that “They came from many directions. They surrounded the whole Bản Hội Khuan 1. So when they came, they saw you, or they came to find you. They encircled the large group of Hmong and now would not let anyone out.” Sha Seng is unsure how many there were since his view of them was not clear as he was further down on the mountain when he noticed them coming in. But it seemed to him they had come from the side where there was a set of rice paddies and from the area where the road was.

“When they came, the police and the soldiers had cameras, and each person came carrying a club. They surrounded the Hmong (*vij tag nrho*) and would not let anyone out. I do not know how many there were. At that time, I wasn't able to see everyone. It was not in a flat area you could see. It was on a mountain, and I was down further on the mountain.”

Since the area was not a flat area with an easy vantage point of the entire area, he could not see everyone. Sha Seng did not actually see the soldiers until they passed the area where he was staying. He recalls what happened when they arrived.

“[The soldiers and police] came [...] to the house of the elders, then the soldiers began to beat the women and children here. I was here [down the hill from the house]. I came this way to see what was happening and saw that they were pulling and shoving the women and some children and hit and kicked (*tsuj*). So, I went and said to them [the soldiers]. 'What are you doing, if you have something you can just say it.' Then I did not hear them say anything and just saw that they were carrying two large guns, and they passed by me a way off.”

Sha Seng, being unfamiliar with guns, was not sure whether they were tear gas launchers. He only remembered that they are the kind with big bullets, which are fired from the shoulder. Otherwise, he was unsure what type of gun they were. Shortly thereafter Sha Seng saw police:

"When the police and soldiers came to hit us was about 9 or 8 o'clock. [...] So the police came and beat us, beat women and children, punched me one good one and I was knocked out, I did not know backward and forwards (*tom ntej tom qab yog dab tsi*). They used these black clubs. They do not hit you with the club they hit you with the heel of it on the head. They learn to know very well where they need to hit you to knock you out. So, they hit you just once, and you are already knocked out."

After being knocked out in Bản Hội Khuan, the police took Sha Seng to the district center. It was here where he claims he was tortured and beaten. He recalls being beaten and questioned twice the first morning of his incarceration, to the point that he had to be revived with water thrown in his face. The room was about 12' x 12', and the police would close the door to their 'interviews' so no one could hear the commotion outside. Sha Seng recalled there being a drain on the floor to take the buckets of water poured on those being questioned and a working bathroom very close by. Sha Seng was beaten severely during the first three days of his incarceration. His wounded nostrils and mouth covered the front of his clothes with blood. He was given only water to drink, and no food was provided. Although he was left alone during the day, from the early evening onward was when beatings and electric shocks (probably by taser) were administered. Sha Seng, who has by now lost most of the hair on his head, blames his baldness partly on rough treatment while incarcerated.

"At that time, my hair was still black and full. They beat me, after that the third day they took me to Điện Biên and [...] then after a day or two they took out my eyebrows and shaved my head. They put me in a chair and said I was the *Minister of Health of the Hmong Country* (*tuam thawj kho mob ntawm teb chaws Hmoob*) and the Viets called [...] the *Bộ trưởng Bộ Y tế* which is a country's lead doctor. Then they said that we are the Hmong that were going to rise up and create a country "*ua teb chaws*"

Contradicting this assertion that Sha Seng had ethnonationalist rather than social justice goals, he responded to his interrogators: "I told them that we do not want to create a country, we just want to ask for justice." Whether Sha Seng's interrogators intended only to mock him or they

believed he was part of an effort to establish a Hmong kingdom seems confirmed by news reports on the event. News reports describing accusations against Sha Seng explain that although he and eight others were not masterminds to the movement, they were part of an effort to buy land to establish a Hmong kingdom and were awaiting the arrival of the Hmong king. They were sentenced to 24 months in prison and 24 months of probation, while another two were sentenced to 30 months in prison. Sha Seng denies the correctness of this sentencing. Unfortunately, it seems almost a foregone conclusion that Hmong people were working toward a Hmong state.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this chapter has been to open the discussion on a newly described type of territoriality. Building on Liisa Malkki's botanical refugee territorialities, I take Lee Zai's proposed bean pole territoriality and draw out the metaphor. The beanpole is artificial and temporary, and above all, it is a type of territoriality which allows for the gathering of social relations to a place. The stability of these social relations allows for the social development of the people gathered there. The gathering vines represent the topological power relations across space, which help to strengthen the center. Aspects of this type of territoriality can be seen in the three locations described in this chapter, especially Yang Kou's temple in Chiang Rai and the Hmong gathering at Muong Nhe. New territoriality also describes what the Hmong community of Pa Kluai, which I will turn to in the latter part of my dissertation. It is possible that Hmong people have developed this type of territoriality as a result of their history of frequent migration. Baird (2010b) notes an interesting instance of Hmong people migrating to Southern Laos and outpacing the preexisting inhabitants of the area. Their endosocial tendencies to gather together

helped them to organize and begin to dominate their neighbors. In this case, as in others, neighbors have become suspicious and defensive toward the Hmong.

Since the Hmong are often foreign migrants, the governments of their new homes are also suspicious of their territorial aspirations. Furthermore, building on Chapter one's discussion of intraethnic political cleavages, I should point out that some of that suspicion is misplaced. Despite Yang Kou's respect for Shong Lue Yang and the assumedly millenarian stylistics and use of Hmong Phaj Hauj script in his temple, there appears to be little evidence that Yang Kou sought to establish an ethnostate. Or that he even thought of himself as a king. However, it could be said that his use of space to promote Hmong cultural revitalism could be interpreted as a challenge to the state effect. Be that as it may, His temple complex now sits empty. Although several followers of Yang Kou linger in the area, they hesitate to take the reins of the complex. It is widely circulated among Hmong people Thailand that he/she who does so will likely be killed just as Yang Kou was killed.

This assumption follows more than just Yang Kou's particular territorialization. For example, during an interview with two members of the Yang Shong Lue movement, whom I will keep anonymous, I attempted to reconstruct the history of Hmong people building of churches and the construction of places of worship by Hmong people with an intent of understanding their differentiation between sacred and profane spaces. Speaking with a small gathering of interviewees, I pointed out that prior to Shong Lue Yang's movement, it was dubious that many Hmong people had an indigenous practice of worshipping God in a building specially built for religious purposes. Rather, they paid honor to spirits of ancestors and other beings in their own homes, or other profane spaces. Here I was asked politely to turn off my tape recorder. Though I cannot give all the details of what I was told thereafter, they made it clear to me that the reason

for the absence of Hmong houses of worship was not due to the lack of desire for them among Hmong people, or even a lack of people able to build them. Rather, it had become clear to Hmong people that whoever builds a Hmong house of worship will be murdered. This was the case for Shong Lue Yang and Yang Kou. Though this opinion is not universally held that builders of temples will necessarily be murdered, it seems generally accepted that such individuals are, at least, under threat.⁴⁰

Hearing my interviewees make this statement solidified an assumption I held regarding cautions to blatant territorializing of Hmong identity. In thinking about the murder of Yang Kou, I assumed Hmong people evaluated his murder in terms of his millenarian involvement and failed to recognize Hmong people drew some connection between prevention of territorialization of Hmong cultural identity. However, these interviewees' made explicit connections between the building of a church and having a place to build themselves up in an autonomous way, *kho neeg*, as Lee Zai would put it. This building for them was specifically attached to the prevention of the building of a gathering place. The Hmong were kept down by dividing them up and making them unable to gather in large numbers.

⁴⁰ Of course, fear of bodily harm befalling advocates of millenarian ethnonationalism would modify my interviewee's willingness to discuss possible underlying goals, but I had confirmed from interviewees in several positionalities the general waning of Hmong ethnonationalism.

Chapter 3

The Long Journey to Thailand: Hmong Viet Migrants

This chapter explores the lives of the Viet Hmong subject community in Vietnam before they immigrated to Thailand. I demonstrate that aside from religious persecution, the Hmong in my subject community in Bangkok were driven to leave Vietnam because of land conflicts generated by inequalities in land access after the creation of a de facto land market in Vietnam after 1993. Surely, Hmong People from Vietnam can point to a number of reasons for emigrating from Vietnam to Thailand. Although the UN often does not recognize their refugee status, due to the lack of war or open conflict in Vietnam, the people at Pa Kluai claim that they were subject to persecution. Although I have been somewhat skeptical at times of some claims of fantastic violence made by some Vietnamese Hmong, including the description of the Mư̄ong Nhé event, their narrative consistency, and confidence convince me that there is an atmosphere of oppression for Hmong Christians in some places in Vietnam. Admittedly, this oppression is not completely unprompted and comes in response to assumed disloyalty to the country by Vietnamese Hmong. For example, zealous interpretations of scripture bent on purist loyalty to Christian practice pushes some not to fly Vietnamese flags on churches.⁴¹ Further still, some Vietnamese Christian Hmong have indeed become involved in ethnonationalist activities. However, the generalized response to Hmong Christians seems disproportionate. Beatings, police surveillance, imprisonment, forced denunciations of their faith, and even poisonings and

⁴¹ A few people at Pa Kluai shared this issue with me when discussing being miffed at the hypocrisy of foreign missionaries (sometimes Hmong Thai) from the Christian and Missionary Alliance. These Hmong were told by the missionaries not to place nationality above Christ, then upon coming to Thailand they found that members of those missionaries' organization were flying Thai flags on the tops of their churches.

murders were all on order, according to the members of the Pa Kluai community. After facing persecution in northern Vietnam and moving to the Central Highlands in the late 1990s, Hmong faced similar persecution with the added complication of unsecured land tenure. With the enacting of the 1993 Land Law, added security to semi-privatized land formalization made outside investment in rural lands more secure and subsequently displaced preexisting rural land occupants with less formal tenure recognition. This inaugurated a new round of persecution and conflict that follows them today.

In the long stretch of Vietnamese history, Hmong people have come to what is currently known as Vietnam fairly recently, during the last 200 years. After the defeat of Hmong rebellions by Yi landlords and Han settlers in Guizhou, Hmong emigrated further south, swelling the ethnic group's population in China's southwesternmost province Yunnan, Vietnam's northern areas of Tonkin, and Laos. Importantly, by 1868 10,000 Hmong arrived in Tonkin (northern Vietnam) following the defeat of a portion of the Taiping rebellion in 1864 (Lee and Tapp 2010:9). By 2009 there were 1,068,169 Hmong in Vietnam (Ngo 2015: 278). They live mostly in Vietnam's northern highlands in border provinces near both Laos and China. Hmong make up the majority over all other ethnicities in Lai Châu, Hà Giang, and Điện Biên Provinces. In Lào Cai and Sơn La, they are second in number only to the majority Kinh (Ngo 2016: 22). Aside from these provinces, since the late 1990s, there is a significant number of Hmong living in southern provinces of the Central Highlands of Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông.

The Hmong of Vietnam are broken into a few dialectical subgroups as well, each speaking their own mutually unintelligible dialect of Hmong. These include the most numerous Moob Leeg, whose language is most similar to Moob Ntsuab (Green Hmong) of Thailand, though, with a somewhat Sinicized accent, they describe as lighter than Moob Ntsuab. There are

also Black Hmong (Hmoob Dub), White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb), and Hmong Sua⁴². In Thailand, the distinction between Black Hmong and other groups is minute, but Black Hmong in Vietnam speak a very different dialect. Furthermore, the Hmong Sua are another dialect group that has not lived in Thailand but make a significant minority of Hmong in Vietnam. Though only the Black Hmong and Hmong Sua tend to speak their own and all the other Hmong dialects, the majority of Hmong in Vietnam, including those subgroups, speak Hmong Leeg. However, white Hmong is the international Hmong lingua franca.

The history of Christianity among Vietnamese Hmong begins with French Catholicism, which was advocated by the colonial authority in Vietnam and Laos, though initially, Father Francis Savina's missionary work was in Lao Cai's Sapa area. Later Protestant missionaries from American organizations began teaching in the mountains. American Baptist and Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries were prominent. These efforts were virtually fruitless in Vietnam, but more successful in Laos. It was not until the late 1980s that large numbers of Hmong began converting to protestant Christianity (Ngo 2016:125).

Churches in Vietnam

Anthropologist Tam T.T. Ngo, who has written the most extensively in the academic literature on Vietnam's Hmong Christians, has written about the early history of religion in Vietnam. She explains that Catholics had faced some level of persecution in the past, especially after the 1742 Papal bill, which prohibited Catholics from ancestor worship. Furthermore, they faced persecution by emperor Minh Mang in the nineteenth century, as he ramped up opposition to French influence (Ngo 2016:125). In more recent times, a noticeable change has taken place

⁴² Hmong Sua (pronounced Hmong Shoua) should not be confused for Hmong Suav (Hmong Chinese which is a different tone). Hmong Sua are found in Vietnam and are one of the least commonly spoken Hmong dialects.

with the conversion of hundreds of thousands of minorities to Protestantism. Protestantism was “Introduced into Vietnam in 1911 by missionaries of the Christian Missionary Alliance (C&MA),” but “Evangelism was not supported by the French colonial authorities” (Ngo 2016: 125). Until 1916 when French gave C&MA Permission to work in French Possessions” (Reimer 2011: 30-31). By 1927, the Vietnamese Protestant church was established as the Vietnamese General Confederation of Churches (Ngo 2016: 125). Though allowed, protestant proselytizing was, at times, hampered by French authorities. C&MA had divided missionary work in the country into three familiar regions: Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin-China (southern Vietnam). Church growth in Cochin-China went along with the more relaxed French rules there and outpaced growth in Vietnam’s middle area and Tonkin in the north: both areas where French rule was more restrictive to protestant proselytization. By 1929, these regions were united into a single church organization, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN). In 1954, this organization would be divided into the ECVN(N) above the 17th parallel and the ECVN(S) below it (Reimer 2011: 33. After 1956, a missionary couple previously affiliated with C&MA returned to Vietnam, representing the World Evangelization Crusade (WEC). This organization, which worked with tribal groups, was transferred to the United World Mission (UWM), which is now the second church to be given legal recognition by the Vietnamese Government after the ECVN (Reimer 2011:40-41). It should be noted that the missionary organizations active in Vietnam encouraged the “planting” of indigenous churches, which are, financially, administratively, and institutionally independent. Indigenous congregations were to be organized to ensure sustainable growth. This is true to C&MA founding missionary in Vietnam, D.I. Jeffrey’s statement:

“Institutional work should take its proper place, with primary emphasis on the planting and growth of indigenous churches. Direct evangelistic preaching of the gospel, translation of the Bible into the vernacular, the establishment of a Bible school to train

native pastors and evangelists, should all be started and maintained. The publication of Christian literature should be emphasized.” (Reimer 2011: 26-27).

This attitude toward missionization has been maintained to the present. Reg Reimer is a scholar of Christianity focusing on Vietnam, admittedly he is also a practitioner of Christianity and has served as a missionary in Vietnam himself. According to Reimer, the departure of foreign missionaries from ECVN(S) congregations after 1975, from the newly reunified ECVN(N) and ECVN(S), and the arrest of prominent pastors in the early 1980s, led other Christian leaders to begin secretly printing scripture and literature. Rather than fading away from religious activity, protestant religious communities had been taught by missionary organizations to function on their own. So when there was suspicion of government encroachment in the leadership of ECVN and suspicion of *quoc doanh* or “state enterprise” pastors (often called *xib fwb dag* in Hmong) who openly acquiesced to what many saw as unfair government demands and requirements and reported to the government on the activities of their members to benefit their churches (Reimer 2011:69), schisms and conflict resulted in the ECVN religious groups. Some pastors, those often seen by my subject community as authentically faithful, were forced from the EVCN to continue their fellowships underground and began meeting in private homes (Reimer 2011:62). This resulted in a few major house church networks, including the Christian Fellowship Church, Full Gospel Church, and Inter-Evangelistic Movement (IEM). According to many, ECVN(S) 1972 and 1973 Church growth training courses—based on Fuller Seminary courses on church models and church planting in varied circumstances—had lasting impact on the birth of the house church movement in Vietnam (Reimer 2011:69-71). These activities paved the way for the growth and missionization of unaffiliated Hmong House churches that begin appearing in the 1980s and

1990s in northern Vietnam. However, it made these organizations illegible and inevitably suspect to government authorities.

It so happened that Montagnards in this southern area began converting to Protestantism in significant numbers through the work of Gordon and Laura Smith and others (Reimer 2011:41). In the anti-imperialist eyes of the current Socialist State of Vietnam, this conversion is notably suspect. Montagnards converted in large numbers during the Second Indochina War since

“Missionaries from a number of American based churches were supported by the American Army to proselytize in South Vietnam. [In this way, they] successfully convert[ed] the Ede, Jarai, Churu, Koho, and Lat[...]. This suspicion is compounded by the fact that many Protestant converts were also soldiers recruited by the American Special Forces“ (Ngo 2016:125).

Hmong Conversion

Tam Tam Ngo’s recent (2015; 2016) work discusses in-depth how Hmong Viet interception of Hmong language radio sermons broadcast for the proselytization of Hmong Lao refugees in camps in Thailand led to the massive conversion of now about a third of Vietnam’s 1,000,000 Hmong population. These 300,000 new believers proliferated in a loose grouping of house church congregations, which were eventually ministered to by foreign missionary organizations. Furthermore, this conversion was sparked by Far East Broadcasting Company’s (FEBC) Pastor John Lee’s (Xf.⁴³ Vam Txoov Lis) ability to connect with Hmong listeners, presenting relevant guidance on questions about societal and family relations in a time of rapid change under Vietnam’s Doi Moi economic liberalization reforms. This was especially the case since Pastor Lee took letters on the program from Hmong believers all over the world. The flow

⁴³ Xf. Stands for the Hmong honorific ‘Xib Fwb.’ This Hmong term generally means teacher. It can be used to mean professor or—in this case—pastor.

of letters from Vietnam signaled the growing Christian community in that country and shared with Pastor Lee their hopes and concerns, which he duly responded to with sermons tailor-made for Hmong Viet listeners, addressing topics as varied as marriage and Christian persecution. With some beginning to see Hmong traditional ritual practice as a burden, with expensive bride prices and costly funerals complete with cattle and pig offerings needed for *Laig dab* and *Nyuj dab* (Ngo 2015: 281), the Christian faith presented Hmong people with a way out of increasingly economically unfeasible ritual practices and a compelling entre into modern relevance in Vietnam's ethnic milieu. This was similar to Tapp's portrayal of Hmong conversion to Christianity in Thailand (1989). Members of my subject community praise Pastor Lee's ability to speak right to one's heart/liver (*Lub Siab*). It is fair also to mention that FEBC's use of the term *Vaj Tswv* in Hmong (transliterated as *Vàng Chúa* in Vietnamese), the commonly used word for God in Hmong, stoked a less obvious constituency who saw it as a reference to the Hmong messiah king. FEBC's millenarian predictions about the second coming of Jesus Christ were somewhat too conveniently aligned with preexisting messianic tropes mobilizing Hmong conversion to protestant Christianity. This millenarian observation does not appear lost on the Vietnamese government (Ngo 2016; *Đất Việt*. 2013).

Although the majority of my subject community of Hmong Viet asylum seekers in Pa Kluai Thailand are mostly under the age of 40 and were not primary players in the conversion, simply following their parents into what they literally called the new way (*kev cai tshiab*), a few of the older members recounted that the conversion period of the late 1980s and 1990s represented a profound change for Hmong people. One older gentleman in my research community recalled for me how profoundly he was affected by Hmong people's ability to have their voice broadcast on radio, create recorded music, movies, and so forth. To him, it was

evidence of a new era for the Hmong people. According to one of the older individuals at Pa Kluai, this new era was even culturally marked in that the preface to sung poetry verses known commonly as *Kwv txhiaj* or *Thaam Txuj* in the Green Hmong commonly used among Vietnam's Hmong.

The Vietnam Government's Initial Reaction

Understandably, though, unfortunately, the sudden, unforeseen, and massive conversion of Hmong people was a cause for concern to the Vietnamese government. Also, as I earlier mentioned, the 2001 Austronesia and Austroasiatic uprisings likely set the Government on edge. In Vietnam, Hmong people had already been characterized as susceptible to messianic revolt and banditry throughout history. Somewhat unfairly, highlighting even the sparse Hmong conversion to Catholicism (even compared to ethnic Kinh) and some collaboration, French authorities made Hmong people already suspect for disloyalty and accused them fawning admiration for foreigners. Some Hmong expressed sympathy for French forces during the Indochina wars (Ngo 2016: 26)—though it should be noted that Hmong had fought on both sides in both Indochina wars and have a record of Vietnamese patriotism). Now the Hmong had joined a religion already seen as playing a part in the “peaceful evolution” of the American empire and its unnamed allies, whose goal is to fight against revolution” (Ngo 2016: 129). The government seemed to view Hmong conversion as an issue of missionaries and foreign activists preying on Hmong backwardness and sociocultural deprivation rather than genuine conversion (Ngo 2015: 276). And that Hmong religious conversion came as a surprise. It appeared they had joined in secret collaboration with foreign actors. In the opinion of Hmong and human rights activists, this suspicion fails to justify the Vietnamese government's response. By 1991, when

conversions were discovered by local authorities, they simply denied that any Hmong had converted and began persecuting those who claimed to be Christians (Ngo 2016:127). Beatings and destruction of homes were reported at this time. This appears to be in line and something of a continuation of government treatment of Montagnards since the 1980s and 1990s, especially the Montagnards linked with FULRO (French acronym for “front for liberation of oppressed peoples”), a group of Montagnards militants, many of whom were Christian, fighting against Vietnamese communists during and after the war who remained active from the 1960s until 1992, the year after Hmong Protestants were discovered by authorities (Reimer 2011: 43). FULRO members turned in their weapons to the UN, and the last group gave up in Cambodia and ended up going to North Carolina. Though many former FULRO members no longer remained in Vietnam, Montagnard Christians remain suspect to Viet authorities. Similarly, though the government considered the Hmong converts bad elements and dupes of foreign agents who promised the Hmong wealth and prosperity accompanying Christian conversion, the aforementioned heavy-handed attempts to discourage conversion gave cause for mounting criticism of Vietnam’s human rights record (Ngo 2016: 128).

It would appear that such repressive actions as beatings, destruction of homes, and forced renunciations of faith enacted against a religious minority do not match Vietnam’s formal laws. As Reg Reimer asserts, “None of these commitments are honored by Vietnam inconsistent, conforming practice” (2011:96). After all, Vietnam’s most recent constitution written coincidentally in 1992 (the year of FULRO disbandment and discontinuation of collaboration with the Khmer Rouge) guarantees:

“unqualified “freedom to believe or not to believe.” It further states that “no one is allowed to infringe on this right.” Vietnam is also a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political

Rights. Both international agreements have clear clauses guaranteeing religious freedom” (Reimer 2011: 96).

Setting aside the question of whether Vietnam’s record aligns with her commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, we should discuss whether repressing religious groups aligns with Vietnam’s constitution:

“While the Vietnamese Constitution explicitly provides for the freedom of religion, it also states that all aspects of the polity and society are controlled by the VCP as the “vanguard of the Vietnamese working class,” and allows the government to impose restrictions in the interests of the state and the VCP. In April 1999, a government decree specifically defined the government’s authority to prevent “all activities using religious belief in order to oppose the state of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” and to punish those who prevent the believers from carrying out their civic responsibilities” (SarDesai 2005: 209).

As such, the government, under the direction of the party, has issued decrees and ordinances regarding religion. One important decree was issued in 1999; however, another important ordinance on religion was later issued in 2003 (Reimer 2011: 96). The 1999 decree formally recognized but categorically discouraged Hmong conversion to Christianity. Despite the repressive treatment being now legally defined and apparently constitutional in Vietnam, other world actors viewed this position and foregoing repressive measures as human rights violations. The US state department viewed Vietnam’s treatment of Christians among other things as cause for particular concern, placing Vietnam on the department’s Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list for the two years after 2004, despite a new effort by the Vietnamese government to address some human rights issues in that same year (Reimer 2011:95).

Even in 1998, the year before the Decree on religion was issued, a special action committee made of Vietnamese intellectuals and government policymakers developed guidelines in preparation for the issuing of the 1999 decree (Ngo 2016: 127). This committee developed a nation-wide strategy coded “plan 184” to manage Christian movements with draconian measures engineered for Hmong and Central Highland Montagnards Christians to leave their new religion. Unlike measures used prior to the 1999 decree which denied Hmong people were even Christian, and extralegally persecuted them, this plan (which would be supported by the 1999 decree) formally recognized such religious movements, but labeled them good or bad, thus condoning the persecution that results when Christians are found to be enemies of the state. Ngo notes that leaked documents by July 2001 anti-Christian campaigns in Lao Cai Province were being carried out through a “special bureaucratic infrastructure” to “deal[...] severely with anyone who has illegal beliefs” to ‘restrict to the lowest possible limit any prayer meetings. (Ngo 2016: 127) The 2001 Jarai protests and government repression—which included the burning down of a church and killing a Jarai Christian man—in Plei Lao village of Gia Lai Province (Human Rights Watch 2002) and later protests in 2004 (Reimer 2011:43) surrounding the confiscation of Montagnards land, seems to foreshadow the government reaction to Hmong conversion and the reaction to protests in Mường Nhé in 2011.

Vietnam’s New Ordinance and Improved Human Rights Record

Vietnam’s concern about political unrest stoked by the “peaceful evolution of American empire” (Ngo 2016: 129) led to repressive policies. Ironically, those policies have been somewhat reversed over a concern of Vietnam’s low human rights score affecting its relationship with the United States and thereby its possibility of accessing Western-dominated economic

networks. Similarly ironic, it seems that these policies are what may have encouraged some Vietnamese Hmong to consider later joining ethnonationalist projects. Under scrutiny from Christian and civil rights activists, President Bill Clinton normalized trade relations with Vietnam in 1995 (SarDesai 2005: 204) and began working on a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) between the US and Vietnam in 1996 (SarDesai 2005: 206). Though initially, Vietnam sought rapprochement in the 1970s and 1980s with the US, mostly to balance its relationship with the USSR, the fall of the Soviet Union and its Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA or Comecon) at the turn of the decade pushed Vietnam into relations with the US. By the 2000s, Vietnam's slated 2006 hosting of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and planned visit of US President George W. Bush that same year shined a light on Vietnam to get off of the US State Department's list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) to gain permanent trade normalization with the US in preparation for joining the World Trade Organization. In order to do this, Vietnam would have to improve on its repressive policies on religion and other human rights violations (Reimer 2011: 95-101).

Vietnam began meaningful improvement to its human rights record with the June 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion. This ordinance thought to supersede the legal heft of a decree, allowed that "religion was still a need for some citizens." Furthermore, the prime minister openly stated a new special directive No. 1, which dealt specifically with protestant Christians. Though the official party communique noted that these actions would "increase state control over religious affairs" (Reimer 2011: 101), this control seemed to mean increased formal recognition and thus legibility of religious groups. The possibility of having one's religious group formally recognized presents the option of legitimacy and protection under the law. However, the task of registering churches is tedious and likely fraught with politics.

Furthermore, though registration is ultimately preferred over operating underground, some say that the regulations and documentation that come with formal recognition make conducting religious life much more difficult than prior to registration.

Under the ordinance, the government began identifying protestant Christians in 2006. Once again, however, the rollout of this policy was executed by non-Christian teams. However, according to Ngo, many of the members of the teams had been involved in executing plan 184 which was “implemented in 1998 to aggressively eradicate Protestantism among ethnic minorities,” and they were “known to be hostile to converts” (Ngo 2016: 129-130). These interviews were meant to classify the Hmong Christians into three groups:

“*Category one* designated Christians who seemed to know their faith by practicing it for at least twenty years and had a need for communal worship activities. These were eligible for registration. *Category two* designated those who called themselves Christians but were not knowledgeable about their faith and met irregularly. These were to be encouraged to return to their old ways, but if they insisted on remaining Christian, they would be allowed to worship alone in the confines of their own homes without teachers or other Christians. *Category three* included the new Christians, those who had converted within the past five years, and who were now the largest group of Christian Hmong in Vietnam. They were given no choice but to be “mobilized and persuaded to return to their traditional beliefs” (Ngo 2016: 130).

Though Vietnam initially considered Protestantism among the Hmong categorically illegal for reason of its newness and possible association with Vàng Chứ religion and possible ethnonationalist millenarianism, none of the more than one thousand congregations was formally recognized by the state. However, the new legislation began the registration of Hmong church organizations, including house churches. But the registration of Hmong churches by the Vietnamese government has lagged for a decade and left most Hmong congregations unrecognized and thus illegal. The ECVN(N) submitted 500 registrations, but by 2009 only 160 of the more than one thousand Hmong congregations were registered (Reimer 2011:183). This

possibly owed to an ironic requirement of the legislation that congregations must boast twenty years of stable (though illegal) operation before they can be registered and be legally recognized (Reimer 2011: 102). Even for those recognized churches,

“officials required lists of Christians’ names or imposed time limitations on how long the registrations last. The registrations were also sometimes used to exclude people and prevent impossible-to-foresee church activities not [...] listed on the registration applications” (Reimer 2011: 82-83)

In short, many Hmong at Pa Kluai make strong claims that they have been persecuted in Vietnam and, despite a love for their homeland, feel it is no longer a viable place for them to live. Several shared with me a variation of a recent arrival to Pa Kluai, Tub Ger Yang’s following idea “if you are in a country without justice, you cannot have any good.” Dao Hang, recalling his conversation with an aid agency representative upon arrival in Thailand, confided to me that:

“I knew that in coming here, it would be impoverishing, but the important part was the ending of my life. If I was in Vietnam, I could eat. I did not have to pay rent for my house or land. Also, I did not have the problem of not having citizenship documentation. But my life was going to be cut short, "*tiam si kuv txoj sia yuav tu,*" so because of that, I should leave everything, and I come here.”

The local and sometimes regional authorities took part in this persecution of Hmong Christians for reasons of religion and ethnicity. As summarized in the last chapter, the Hmong at Mùòng Nhé sought to publicize three main complaints: that they were persecuted for religious beliefs, their land was taken, and their children were denied opportunities because they were Hmong and Christian. Persecution narratives figure prominently in many branches of the worldwide Christian movement at present, and the authoritarian one-party Vietnamese state seems an inveterate and easily identifiable bad guy. However, in actuality, Hmong Christians are caught in a historical entanglement in which the past interaction of several parties—Viet

communists, Hmong people, Christian organizations—has created an atmosphere of distrust, accusation, discrimination, maltreatment, and violent control. The arc of Vietnamese history has been shaped by colonial and imperial encroachment first from China, then France, and, more recently, the United States, so a strong postcolonial resentment continues today. Though it certainly does not excuse human rights violations, much of the current persecution of Hmong people owes more to Hmong Viet Christian’s assumed connections with outside forces—such as western missionaries involved in a peaceful evolution of American Empire (Ngo 2016: 129), or Hmong-American ethnonationalists than to concrete personal histories—for example, whether they or someone in their family were connected to anti-communist insurgency, as Hmong in Laos were. It appears that many of the Hmong in Vietnam became more aware of Vang Pao as a result of being told they believe in Vang Pao rather than Vaj Tswv (God). Rather than preventing a largely imagined alliance between American based ethnonationalist insurgency, Vietnamese government policies may have created the discontent through maltreatment sufficient to engender such a constituency.

Pastor Kong Meng or (*Xf. Kong Meng*), figures prominently in the story of Pa Kluai, here I quote extensively from his summary of the experience of his Hmong Christian refugee group and their reaction to Vietnamese government mistreatment. The following quote gives a good summary of how Vietnamese Hmong asylum seekers in Thailand understand the motivation of Vietnamese government actors.

“When we were in Vietnam we told them that we are Christian [...] at first, they [government officials] told us we actually believed in Vang Pao, then they later changed and said we believe in America. They said that because Americans use their religion. They take it and teach it to the people in the mountains, and now we [mountain people] will attack their country. [...] So they arrested us and beat us, took us and tied us up, some were even sent to prison. Then after this, we wondered whether we had some people that

will take up this problem and argue our case against them and fight for it. So there were some people who did fight, and they were poisoned to death.

Though much of this persecution took place in northern Vietnam, most of my subject community came to adulthood in south Vietnam, thus experiencing more persecution there. This persecution was one of the primary reasons for their coming to Thailand. The treatment included: forced renunciations, imprisonment, forced confessions, beatings and physical torture, and even poisonings and murder.

In many cases, the target of persecution were the leaders in the Hmong Christian community or local government leaders, known collectively in Hmong as *thawj coj*. A close associate of Xf. Kong Meng in Pa Kluai named Dao Xiong shared with me that “if you are in Vietnam today and you are the leader of the village, you are the type that loves and helps the citizens you will not last long. The longest you’ll be there in 10 years.” He continued,

“The ones that are around long...they eat the authorities money (*noj nom tswv nyiaj*)[...] The authorities say you ‘go back and see who is a Christian and who has received foreigners to come and teach them. If you come and tell us and we arrest that person, then we will give you money.’ If the people do this, then they will have the work for a long time and will stay around. Those who do not want to work like this cannot stay around.”

Religious leaders were sometimes approached in the same way. As has been discussed, “state enterprise pastors” or *quoc doanh* are known among the Hmong (Reimer 2011: 69). Those who do not cooperate with authorities are often seen as true pastors and are subject to persecution.

Though I have not asked every single one, it is not unlikely that all, to a person, have experienced some form of harassment from Vietnamese police and government officials. This often-had direct relation to religious activities. Furthermore, this harassment was likely directly related to order 184, which sought to ferret out seditious activities and identify those fit for remaining Protestant and discouraging those who were not. Though some of these interactions

may have been earnestly motivated on the part of the police and government authorities, the government stance often presumes the interviewee's guilt and ties with foreign agents.

Admittedly I am hearing one side of the story, but the lines of questioning recounted for me seemed too often veer into the unnecessary in order to assume the worst about the Hmong interviewees from the start. For example, Pao Her shared:

“I was the leader of a congregation like the group which meets together here. I had a problem with the authorities. They did this over and over again, saying that I was not a believer in God, rather I just believed in a foreigner. So they got a big bible we had, and they asked who the person that got this bible is. I answered I am the person, I admitted that I did it. They said, ‘if that is the case, who taught you to study the words there so that I knew whether the words in the bible were Hmong or English’ and I answered them that it was just Hmong words. They asked, ‘who taught them to you [the words].’ I responded, ‘I just learned [to read] them by myself.’ The police kept saying that I could not just know it on my own, that I must have contacted an English person to teach me. They said if I did not tell them, they would imprison me and prosecute me. In the end, they had arrested all the people I worked with, and I was the only one left. They were going to arrest me too, so I could not stay. So I left.”

Since the majority of Protestant leadership training until 2007 has been done underground (Reimer 2011: 83), there is a good chance that Pao had some training from foreign missionaries; however, the line of questioning used by this interrogator to try to come to this conclusion is somewhat absurd. It seems likely, having lived in Vietnam where a Latin-based alphabet is already used, that many Hmong Christians took up Hmong script with that preexisting knowledge. It is quite common in the United States and Thailand for Hmong Christians to be the few Hmong people in a community who know how to read Hmong RPA simply because their regular religious activities require them to look at the Hmong language bibles and other literature more often than non-Christians. It would be simple enough for a government authority to come to the same reasoning. Instead of based on some conspiratorial logic, if Pao Her is correct,

authorities arrested his companions for secret collaboration with foreign actors. Some credibility can be given to Pao since he staked his Vietnamese citizenship on this claim.

This police persecution has become especially worrisome for Hmong people in Vietnam. They are aware of police surveillance somewhat akin to a panopticon-like presence in their lives. Several of the Hmong people I've spoken with in Pa Kluai shared stories about being surveilled. This surveillance came in old-fashioned ways, sometimes by force and sometimes through new technology. Older forms included for several Hmong having been put under house arrest and a few being forced to wear monitoring devices and report to police stations. Their homes and belongings were searched, undercover officers came to question their household members while they were gone, not to mention the new experience of having to report all church activities to the government was a new intrusion and inconvenience unwelcomed by most Hmong. One oft-noted concern during fieldwork was the *xib fwb dag* or a fake pastor who was working with the government and reporting on the activities of congregants. A few particular cases also came up. According to Kong Meng's brother-in-law and Pa Kluai's resident English expert Ger Tha Fang, A Vietnamese activist who Ger Tha knew in Thailand was apprehended at the border when she decided to return to Vietnam. Upon her apprehension, in Vietnam, her computer and cameras were confiscated and searched by officers of the Vietnamese Government. Ger Tha was worried about this because Ger Tha had taken photographs with her at a refugee conference in Bangkok that were probably still on her computer. If so, the Vietnamese government would now surely be aware of his living in Thailand and his 'reactionary activities.' Hmong at Pa Kluai also noticed what looks like sophisticated cyber-surveillance while in Vietnam. More than one has shared stories about incidents in which they made cellphone calls to international phone numbers while living in Vietnam. The day after these phone calls, the police came to their homes and

questioned them. Wiretapping is an enormous concern for Hmong people because they are very well connected through cellphones. All of these surveillance claims are of particular interest when we consider Pa Kluai residents' perception of the Vietnamese state's ability to investigate and prosecute those they see as criminals. For example, Kong Meng explained to me that the Vietnamese state would never stop investigating a murder case. He told a story about a man who had committed murder early in his life. He managed to evade capture and prosecution at that time by fleeing the area. A few decades later, after the man had made good and lived an upright life, his former identity was discovered, and he was put in prison. Similar to this murderer, having fallen from the government's good grace as Hmong Christians, they know that this identity will stay with them unless they renounce their religion. Their future decisions are shaped by this context.

Arrest and imprisonment for Hmong in Vietnam became common in the late 1990s for the leaders of congregations. Several Pa Kluai residents had been imprisoned in Vietnam, and the majority had been called to report to the police at least once. It was precisely the threat of imprisonment that acted as the final tipping point for several of them to leave Vietnam. I should note that in most of their experience, one prison visit can often be tolerated. Several members of the community had gone to jail for a time and placed under house arrest. However, going to jail for a second time was worrisome. Sha Seng, the participant at Mường Nhé, told me, "If you asked for justice and were imprisoned once. Then if it happens a second time, then the chances of you coming home are very small."

Sha Seng has left the country, but he worries about his younger brother who stayed in Vietnam:

"I have the idea that I caused lots of problems for my younger brother since I've left. I do not know if he'll be able to stay; he has not done anything wrong. The police, however,

came and arrested him, and he said, “I do not know anything. I am just here, and you arrest me. Why have you arrested me?”

Such arrests are a common problem. Xf. Kong Meng’s younger brother Vang Meng Thao was arrested in 2008 and taken into custody and questioned about his religion for more than two weeks with no charge.

The police officer [said] it was because my belief in Jesus is of another country. [And that][...] America had used this religion to do war with many countries. The police officer said that he must investigate the people who change their religion to follow religions from other countries.

They prohibited him from continuing his duties in his church, although he was an important leader in his congregation. In 2013, Vang Meng was arrested again. This arrest seems linked to the recent departure of his brother Kong Meng from Southern Vietnam to Thailand. Though he had not helped his brother to move to Thailand, the police tried to force a confession. Because he resisted the confession, he was jailed for six days and beaten severely, and his house was searched while he was jailed, and religious literature was found. The police came a second time two months later and arrested him in the night. On this occasion, he was severely beaten, electrocuted, and had his fingers crushed with pliers. He was then sent to jail for more than a half year. While incarcerated, he was forced to memorize and repeat a statement in public settings. Though he knew it was untrue, he repeated the following:

“I would like to announce to inform every citizen to let them know. You should all not break the law in Vietnam as I have done. Because I was misled by foreigners, I committed this wrong. I would like to inform every mother, father, brother, and sister that there is not another country that will love us as much as the leaders of our country. I want to tell the leaders and citizens from the young to the old. I would like to accept my punishment for you all. I ask you to accept me as a citizen and a brother. From this point forward to the future, I will not break the law again. In conclusion, I thank the authorities at every level, each one that loved me, and also I thank all the citizens.”

Beatings and other physical mistreatment were common. Often household heads were beaten and sometimes tortured beginning in the 1990s. It was at this point that many of the Hmong in Pa Kluai began moving to the Central Highlands in south Vietnam. Beatings were a common form of mistreatment Hmong Viet report suffering at the hands of Vietnamese authorities. I was quickly made aware of this fact during my early entrance into the Pa Kluai community. It was customary when I first came to the community for each family head to meet with me and tell me about their life's story. The first of these meetings was attended by several men who sat in a circle with me, asking questions and sharing stories. An abnormally tall member of the group, Toua Ter Her, was noticeably soft-spoken. He and other members of the group explained his demeanor came from the head trauma he experienced after several police beatings. Although the severity of his continuing symptoms years after being beaten make his story noteworthy, the very fact that almost everyone in this group shared multiple stories of being beaten by police seems, from my perspective as someone who has never been beaten by police, even more, remarkable for their utter mundanity. A recent arrival, Tou Ger Yang told me matter of factly, "if you do not follow their rules, then they will hit you. Among other dustups with officials, Xf. Kong Meng recalls being beaten severely "*raug ntaus sab heev*" in 1998, 2001, and 2006. Vang Meng Thoj, Xf. Koob Meng's brother was beaten in 2008 and 2013. The abuse was not limited to beatings but could include electric shocks, and hair removal as in Sha Seng's case, mentioned in the previous chapter.

Such beatings were not always done at formal venues. Some Pa Kluai residents have witnessed or experienced beatings from individuals they believe to be authorities in disguise. Xf. Kong Meng's younger brother Vang Meng shared about an occurrence in northern Vietnam where he stayed until he came to Thailand:

“I went out to Cu Cai village in Phong Hai Subdistrict to lead a group of new members to worship God and also taught the people who wanted to become Christian. Four of us had left before it was dark. We remaining two brothers left by motorcycle later in the evening. When we came close to Cu Cai village, there were three complete strangers with covered faces who came and blocked our way. They spoke in Vietnamese, asking the two of us where we were going. At this time, my younger brother was driving the motorcycle (I was riding behind). So I then got off the motorcycle and ran away. The three people beat my brother very severely, near to the point of death. We know very well that the people beating him were the authorities. Because hearing their voice as they spoke, I clearly knew it was a leader of the police in Phong Hai Subdistrict. His name is Le Van Cuong). Because this officer lived close to us, and we grew up close together, we all recognized his face well and recognized his speaking voice very well. I hid until the three people had gone away then I came out to see my younger brother who had been beaten severely. I ran and called my family members living in Cu Cai. They all came and saw, at that time, we took my younger brother to the Phong Hai hospital to fix and wash his injuries from his beating.”

A generous reading of this event would be that authorities beat Vang Meng’s brother to discourage him and others from participating in religious activities. Less hopeful interpretations could posit that the authorities meant to kill him.

According to several at Pa Kluai and elsewhere, there were times when the Vietnamese authorities went beyond beatings and torture intending rather to kill individuals, especially leaders, in the Hmong Christian community. It is certainly unclear who commands such acts. Pa Kluai residents have only their experiences to piece together an understanding. However, the occurrences seem widespread enough that many in the community have either had experience with losing a family member due to persecution or nearly losing someone in suspicious circumstances. In fewer instances, members of my subject community believe Viet authorities attempted to kill those individuals themselves. Though Xf. Kong Meng and Vang Meng’s father had been respected in Vietnam. He died after being beaten to death in 1993. Also, Dao Hang tells an interesting story about the passing of his own father. After a battle with local authorities

regarding his land being confiscated, he sent a letter to the central government. In 2007, his father appeared to have been poisoned. He shared that:

“Local authorities sent a letter which called my father to the village council. So my father went. When he got there, there was no one there. So they [village authorities] called my father and invited him to come to eat rice with them...eat phở with them. When he finished eating, my father was sick from that time forth. He was sick and then he died. He was sick from that day, and then we tried to heal him unsuccessfully for three or four months, then my father died. Some of the traditional herbalists (*kws ua tshuaj ntsuab*) said that my father had eaten poison. Then in 2007, he died.”

After drinking coffee given to him by local authorities, Kong Meng spent several months with major health problems. He even went to China to seek help from Hmong medicinal experts.

Poisoning was seemingly not the only form of killing. Some shared with me that authorities used arranged accidents to deal with disobedient Hmong leaders. This was apparently done through arranging automobiles to crash into the leaders on their motorbikes as most Hmong ride motorbikes rather than automobiles. Dao Hang shared:

“If you do not want to do what they say, one day they'll say come to this place so we can meet with you. Then they drive a car and run you over. They hire someone to drive a car and hit you (killing you). [...] the reason they crash into you with a car is that there is no way to accuse that the government killed the person [...] they are using their strategy (*siv lub tswv yim*).”

Dao also shared with me the particularly suspicious close-call of one of his family members

“That brother in law I told you about who was a village headman. Someone in the government [of Vietnam] called him to go somewhere. He thought, “going alone was not a good idea, I should bring someone else with me,” so they sat on a vehicle [motorcycle]. They got to the spot where the big road intersects with their road, and there is an intersection. A big car (one of the cars with 4-wheel drive) the car crossed over to their side of the road and was going to hit their motorcycle. Just as the motorcycle was going to be hit, they flew into a ditch on the side of the road. On the side of the road there is a ditch which they dug for water to pass by, they fell into the ditch and then the car ran

over their motorcycle and destroyed it. God really helped them that they fell into that ditch because if they had not fallen in the ditch, they would have died.

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My subject community at Pa Kluai is composed mostly of Hmong who had moved from the Northwest Highlands to the Central Highland provinces of Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, and Bình Phước. Anti-protestant campaigns in Hmong communities certainly played a part in this move southward. It should be noted that this antagonism was not only between Hmong and Vietnam's majority Kinh ethnicity. Since not all Hmong in the North became Christian, conversion of one-third of the Hmong created serious social division. Rejection of ancestor worship and spirit offerings by Hmong Christians severed vital community ties. Events such as weddings (*ua Tshoob ua kos*), funerals (*ntee ploj*), and soul callings (*hu plig*), which previously were moments of inter-community cohesiveness became divisive events where Christian members of the community would no longer participate. Taunts and names have been lobbed between non-Christian and Christian Hmong. With non-Christian children asking whether their Christian peers are practicing to fly (apparently in preparation for the return of the Hmong Messiah as is common in Hmong messianic practice). And Christian children calling the non-Christian Hmong "long tails" because of what they view as backward traditional beliefs dragging behind them and slowing them down (Ngo 2015: 288-289).

These divisions fostered actions far beyond name-calling. It should be noted that some authorities and members of the interrogation teams that persecuted Hmong Christians were sometimes non-Christian Hmong themselves. During the 1990s and early 2000s, this social division and persecution influenced many Hmong Christians to leave the north and settle in the Central Highlands of southern Vietnam. This region is known in Vietnamese as Tây Nguyên. They are Western Highlands and include the provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Lam Dong, Đắk

lắk and Đắk Nông, though the Hmong of the subject community lived mostly in Đắk Lắk and Đắk Nông and are also known to live in Kon Tum and Binh Phuoc. One of the first Hmong to move there was a Hmong leader, helped by an indigenous missionary organization, who fled northern Vietnam to move to the Central Highlands in 1996. He was taken in by the preexisting Montagnard Christian community there and was later joined by his family (Reimer 2011:81). Dao Hang explained that his own father needed to leave Lao Cai because he was a leader. “We had land. We had vehicles and buffaloes. But because the government was arresting the male leaders of the religion, and since my father was a leader, they came to arrest him, and we left.” Beyond this, Dao’s narrative gives some idea of the panic sweeping through his home province of Lao Cai’s Christian community, causing them to move southward.

When I was in the North, and I was just a child, my father and others began believing in God (Vaj Tswv).[...] we joined in 1990 when I was two years old. Then the Vietnamese started to persecute (*tsim txom*) us. My father was someone who spoke Vietnamese and was educated. So the Vietnamese kept coming and calling my father to the district office (*huyện*). They would call him to talk until 1998. Then the Viet government had issued a law that Christian leaders should be arrested and imprisoned in order to make there be no believers because the religion is from the West, and Vietnamese do not have beliefs like this. So at that time in Lao Cai, they took many of the leaders and imprisoned them. So when the people heard this, the people in the village fled.

I ask whether the whole village left en masse.

Mostly the leaders...the men fled. [...] the authorities were looking for them, so they left. Eventually, many of them went all the way to the South. But when they got to the South, they did not tell that they were Christian. Since they did not tell, it seemed they were going there just to make a livelihood.

However, it was not just religious persecution that brought Hmong Christians to the South. Vietnam’s government policy was changing conditions in the northern highlands drastically. Following a liberalizing logic, subsidies for Hmong “necessities such as salt, sugar,

and medicines” were dropped, leaving cash strapped uplanders like the Hmong to pay with cash (Ngo 2015: 282). Furthermore, since opium production was also recently banned, Hmong people were left with their previously primary means of making cash to buy these necessities. This was especially the case because of the 1993 national land law that limited each family to 10 hectares of land and issued documents approximating title, though the government still technically owned all the land. These new circumstances effectively ended the Hmong practice of shifting cultivation over large ranges. Furthermore, more secured titles allowed upland areas to become newly crowded with more cash-rich ethnic Kinh who were able to gain land titles in the mountain areas with higher quality land (Ngo 2015: 282).

A few of my subject community recall these were hard times living in the northern hills. One shared that in those times of his childhood, they were forced to eat *Mov Kuam*, also called *mov pob kws*, which is what he saw as a lower quality substitute for steamed rice made from ground corn, cooked to approximate the taste and texture of rice. The significance of this meal for him was that it symbolized poverty among Vietnamese Hmong. He explained that eating *Mov Kuam* had to do with one’s access to good or bad land. In areas where paddy is available, one produces fragrant steamed rice, whereas those with access only to steeper lower quality land could only grow corn in a dry field. Though the food holds this significance, several in my subject community admit developing a taste for it in their youth, they wear this experience as something of a badge of honor. In actuality, this change in the land law contributed to restricted land resulting in *Mov Kuam* consumption, which would create larger problems than having to eat *Mov Kuam* for several families in my subject community. These problems would be realized when they move to the central highlands as the land market became the interest of larger capitalists actors.

With this difficult situation, some thirty-seven thousand, mostly Christian Hmong, have migrated to the Central Highlands according to government statistics (Reimer 2011: 82). Upon arrival, the transition has not always been smooth. Under Vietnam's system of citizenship registration, which is somewhat similar to China's and other Asian countries with rural agrarian populations, each citizen holds two documents, *Chứng minh nhân dân* and *Sổ hộ khẩu*. *Chứng minh nhân dân* is one's citizenship identification card and *Sổ hộ khẩu* is one's household registration which can change as one changes residence. *Sổ hộ khẩu* is roughly equivalent to China's *hu kou* and is one's household registration, which formally recognizes a person's right to live and work where they reside. Hmong people, having lived in mountainous areas of the North and being fairly recently and tentatively integrated into the Vietnamese state, were, in some cases, not very familiar with the process of attaining *hộ khẩu*. Sha Seng, who had lived in Kolombong of M'drak, complained to me that many he knew were not given full citizenship with proper *hộ khẩu* household registration. This was especially a problem when it came to those who moved to the South. Although local authorities might have been initially excited to have ancestor worshipping Hmong move into the area possibly to balance out the plurality of Austronesian language-speaking minorities who had converted to Christianity, officials were unpleasantly surprised when the first few of these new Hmong arrivals to Pa Kluai filled in "Christian" in the religion line of their household registration. Tou Ger Yang, one of the more recent arrivals to Pa Kluai who is from the same village as Kou Lee and brothers Dao and Sia Hang in Đắk Lắk, recalled that:

"They [local officials] divided up land in 1999, then in 2000 they came to do our *hộ khẩu* (household registration). They wrote our names and asked for our religion. When they had finished the papers, they asked again about our religion. I told them that I was Christian, and that made the police unhappy. They asked, why would you not worship as

your mother and father. I told them that my mother and father also believe in God. God is the one who created the earth and resources.”

Because hộ khẩu signifies one’s right to occupy the space they are registered to, a person without hộ khẩu is subject to police questioning, interrogation, even harassment when they are found somewhere outside of their registered area. Dao Hang recounted a few stories about visiting relatives in other provinces where he was harassed by police because he was not registered in that area. Sha Seng complained that without hộ khẩu “the police follow you around [...] wherever you go; they send the authorities to follow you.” Their migration, in fact, was considered unregulated migration (Reimer 2011: 81), likely making their hộ khẩu process more complicated. In reference to Sha Seng’s complaint about not receiving hộ khẩu, Tub Ger Yang noted that people were allowed to get hộ khẩu, but some did not know how to get it. Furthermore, authorities were not as likely to tell Christian Hmong how to do it, especially those who had migrated in an unregulated fashion. This may have contributed to the problems Hmong people had with land, which I will discuss.

It is important to note that this mistreatment was not only in the context of religious persecution. Conflict over land became an important factor in this story, especially after thousands of Hmong moved from the Northern Highlands to the Central Highlands of southern Vietnam, though Ngo argues that Vietnam’s *Hạ Sơn* minority sedentarisation program very likely helped initiate the shedding of several thousand Hmong families from the Northern Highlands (Ngo 2015: 282). Many, if not most of my subject community in Pa Klui, left Vietnam at least in part due to persecution resulting from land conflicts in the south. Bitter fights against land confiscation by prominent Hmong activists, including Kong Meng, created a backdrop for the persecution of other Hmong who were not even directly involved in the fights.

Landlessness and land alienation is a struggle for Hmong people that has affected their decision to leave Vietnam in combination with issues of religious persecution. As is mentioned in the previous chapter's section discussing Mường Nhé, one of the primary talking points the leaders of this movement brought to authorities (according to my interviewee Sha Seng) was land and property issues. The story of Hmong Viet land issues closely follows the broader history of land use in Vietnam since:

“Family farming was formally relegitimized in 1988. Struggles for access to land in Vietnam were central to the movement for independence—as important, for many rural people, as the removal of the French. The Viet Minh seized property from fleeing landlords and distributed it more or less equally to the landless. An estimated 73 percent of the northern population benefited from land distribution by 1956. There followed a period of collectivized agriculture (extended incompletely to the South after 1975, but returns were very low, leading farmers to quietly expand household production. Under the new rules stipulated in 1988, families were granted use rights to land for a period of 15 years for annual production and 40 years in the case of perennials. The 1993 Land Law that superseded this decree allowed for individual landholdings under 20-year leases with a 3-hectare ceiling for annual cropland, and 50-year leases with a 10-hectare ceiling in the lowlands and a 30-hectare ceiling in the uplands for land planted to perennials. Researchers concur that the post-collective reallocation of farmland to families after 1988 was relatively egalitarian. However, farmers demanded the right to pass land to their offspring, lease it, mortgage it and “transfer” it. The result was a de facto land market ushering in the possibility that land could be accumulated and some farmers excluded by the everyday” processes [...]” (Hall et al 2011: 161-162)

It was precisely at the point that Vietnam again began allowing for families to hold family plots in 1988, that Vietnam's Hmong began converting to Christianity in the north through FEBC's Hmong language missionary sermons broadcasts. And it was not much longer after that when the 1993 land law allowed for de facto privatized land holdings—effectively creating a land market and setting the stage for agroindustrial interests to displace small scale farmers.

In a conversation about land registration in Vietnam, Some later middle-aged Pa Kluai informants remembered the change in 1988, allowing more exclusive rights to family plots.

D: In Vietnam, do they have you register your land?

Pao Her: When we were in the north, we did not have the legal process. We were up in the mountains. Where you were was where you were.

D: Did you have to tell your village head ‘this is my land’?

Pao Her: Yes, we certainly told them

Sia Ser Moua: Our village was the same. You knew where your land was, and your village head knew that as well, they did not print a land registration card...now they have them though.

Pao Her: When I was in the north, it was like this. Before they came out with that law, the forest that you were near...you would cut it and take care of it, and they knew it was your land, and the government recognized this. This was back in about 1989 or 1990. I used to plant sour bamboo, and the Buo Yi would come and cut it down and steal it. I talked to authorities and said for me to watch and see. if anyone comes and steals it, then I should catch them and fine them (*Ntes tau ces muab nplua*).”

The Hmong at Pa Kluai can name several instances they view as examples of Vietnamese local and provincial government officials, especially the police, dealing unjustly with Hmong regarding land issues. Despite apparent assumptions about someone who leaves a country, several at Pa Kluai have expressed their patriotism for Vietnam. Despite the negative distinction they make between *Teb Chaws Ywj Pheej* (free or liberal countries) and *Tebchaws Koom Tsha* (Communist countries), they are proud of their father’s and grandfather’s service to Vietnam during the Sino-Viet War in 1978, where most guarded the border and some fought. They refer to their hero status to claim credibility for Hmong Christians and seek their representation. Some of their brothers gave military service as well. In a few cases, they themselves had worked for the government, and two that I know of were even police officers.

However, the people at Pa Kluai all function under the same basic assumption that they have been mistreated by authorities in Vietnam, especially regarding their land. In most conversations, Pa Kluai residents assumed that the upper levels of the government were somehow more trustworthy than those at lower levels, though not totally. And in the case of Dao

and Sia Hang, even that the local officials that originally divided up the land for them were more trustworthy than the ones who later sold the land to companies. Though it stands to reason that the Hmong's sense of panopticon-like surveillance of the state would usually follow western tropes of totalitarian states, thus pushing western readers to attribute cyber-surveillance to the higher levels of the state, this goes unspoken in conversations over land. Be it as it may, they attribute some hypocrisy to the state and its policies, especially regarding policy and action related to land-use and land grabbing. Tou Ger gave a fairly representative lamentation that:

“Vietnam's communist law is difficult (*Nyuab* or causing concern), they have a law that says the people are supposed to be wealthy (*Pej xeeem nplua muj*), Then the authorities (*nom tswv thiaj muaj zog*) will have strength. But if you take all the land, where will the wealth come from?”

Problems with land for the Hmong began very soon after coming to southern Vietnam, as it is more often a problem for Hmong in the south than in the north. In Tub Ger's village, where Dao Hang, Sia Hang, and Kou Lee are also from, authorities divided up land for the villagers in 1999.

“Then in 2001, they sold our village. We were still there when in 2007, they came and cut down all the trees. [...] In 2007, I had planted some plants, then they came and took it in 2008. I told them that the leaders had given us this land in 1999. Why then did they now take it from us? I also told the police at the district (*huyên*) if you are going to take all my land, you need to pay me back the money for my plants because I am going to lose money. The trees had grown for two years and were about 3 meters tall now. The police said, if *we* had bought the land from *you* we would have paid you. They had not paid me anything. This made me very worried (*nyuab siab*). We could not do anything. [...] Then, in December 2015, they came and took the land that my house was on too. In 2016 in May, they wanted me to knock down my own church, but I was not going to do that. They will beat and arrest you, so I left. I think that land is God's he created it the government holds it and then the people should have rights to use it.”

In these circumstances, Hmong in southern Vietnam became very desperate. Dao Hang even resorted to a fistfight with a provincial authority when his house was being taken.

Dao Hang also remembered that in his family's case, they had lived in Đắk lắk for a year (1999-2000) on land that had been apportioned by local authorities, but when the officials learned they were Christian, they sold that land to a company to grow trees for paper. When they questioned the company, they were referred to the local government. Dao is under the impression that local authorities sold their land once they found out the people of the village were Christian. This sale did not solely affect Dao's family. His village "had more than 5,000 rai (Thai measurement of land). This was most of our village's land. Our village was very big, 100 or more families. They took all their land. So we did not have land to plant fruit crops on." Without warning, the company hired Vietnamese laborers and began digging holes, added fertilizer, and then planted trees. At this, Hmong villagers began complaining. A while later, a meeting was called by local officials for villagers to come. Dao recounts the meeting:

"So they said now this company called *Công Ty Giấy Đồng Nai*⁴⁴ has come and planted all its trees and now they are this high. So if you would like them to remove all these trees, they cannot do it. If you would like to buy these trees, you do not even have the money to buy them. So now that they planted these trees, ten rai—as the Thai say rai—is worth 70-80 million VND. You do not have the money to buy these trees, so allow them to cut them down first. Then you can buy your land back. if you have the money now, then each of you can pay them 80 million VND."

Dao's father's approach to the issue was to be conciliatory. In this way, he was able to get information about the transaction between the authorities and the company. Dao explained that:

"My father became friends with the company. My father is a person who the Vietnamese like very well. Wherever my father goes, his name is well known. My father was very famous among the citizens [...], so my father became friends with the company and the leader who watched their company that planted trees. So he said to my father. "I've got to tell you that your land that they sold to us, they sold [leased] it for 50 years. We will not be planting just one season (*ib cim*). We will be planting for 50 years. [...] so my father

44. Though he calls it *Công Ty Giấy Đồng Nai*, this company is listed as *Công Ty Cổ Phần Giấy Đồng Nai*, Meaning Dong Nai Joint stock paper company.

wrote a letter to the low and the highest levels they spoke at the level of the village and the district they came and told us, civilians.”

So they waited from 2001-2006 before they sent this matter to the higher authorities. In the meantime, villagers used smaller areas of land where they grew rice. Dao explained that because there was a smaller river valley where the soil was too wet to grow the company’s Eucalyptus trees, the land was left for villagers to grow paddy rice for their sustenance. For cash, they also worked for the company for about 20,000 VND a day, which converts to about 26 Thai baht or about 85 cents. After a half-decade lull, in 2006 and 2007, the plants that some Hmong had begun to plant on land that was to that point unused by the company was then cut down by the company. Tou Ger explained that:

We could not do anything. In 2013 we wrote papers to ask the leaders to build a chapel, but they did not let us. We only had a small area of land left over that we were living in, which was just a small area near the houses. Then in 2015, in December, they came and took the land that my house was on too.

Property was also at stake, especially the houses and churches of the Hmong people in southern Vietnam. In 2000 the village church and two other houses were burned down by authorities in Xf. Kong Meng’s village in northern Vietnam. Similarly, a year after Dao and Sia’s Father’s recent suspicious death, a demolition crew came in 2008 and destroyed three houses in their Đăk Lăk village—which included houses belonging to Dao, Kou Lee, and another house owned by someone who did not come to Thailand. To add insult to the injury, they were given a bill from the demolition services company, costing something like 14,805,000 VND for renting the two bulldozers used to do the job plus labor. Tou Ger remembers that during the event, “we went and stood in front of our houses trying to stop them. Then the police would come, and they knock you over.” Furthermore, Dao and Sia recorded grainy videos taken on a cellphone and posted them on YouTube and Facebook— which they showed to me—of

some of the events following the razing of Dao's home. Dao was quite proud of his home, which he had covered in tile and made quite permanent.

Several Pa Klui residents indicated that even getting permission to build a house or a church is difficult for Hmong in Vietnam. This likely has something to do with church registration lagging for most Hmong protestant congregations. However, Hmong people have often shown willingness to go through proper channels and ask for permission to build churches. However, when these churches are built without approval, there can be severe consequences. Tou Ger's indirect connection to a church built in his area complicated his overall land occupancy in his village in Đắk Lắk. This ultimately drove him to leave Vietnam for Thailand. Speaking of the leaders of his church, he said:

“They asked if there was any way they could be allowed to build [a church]. But [government officials] said they could not build a church. They built the church in the name of one person and said it was their house. Then they built it. They called the police afterward and told them they had built it, then the police called them in and told them that if they did not disassemble the church, then they would have lots of problems. We told the authorities that we had built this building for God, and they would not destroy it. So they gathered all of our land and sold it to someone else. The other people in the area that were not part of our group though, the authorities did not sell any of their land, but they sold all of our land.”

Beyond the destruction of houses and churches, Hmong people have a distinct impression that Vietnamese are suspicious, possibly envious when they see a Hmong person with a beautiful house. It seems Vietnamese authorities assume that Hmong Christians are assisted by foreigners to build such houses. This understanding follows Hmong perception that ethnic Kinh view Hmong as breaking rank when they attain markers of material success, such as fine homes:

“The Vietnamese say that the Hmong desire for Americans to help them with money. When we were in the south, and we built a house that was a bit nice. They would say, ‘oh, the Americans must have helped you pay for this, right?’ The Vietnamese criticize us Hmong saying that we all just want help paying for things. I had a friend from the Lo

clan who was building a house that wasn't really that nice. But an official did not want him to build a house, so he said. 'Oh, do not build a house; you just come live with me.' So the Hmong man brought his wife and children. [And the Viet authority responded] "Oh you cannot, go back. I was just kidding.' He had brought three children and his wife! [...] In our country, if you build a house kind of nice, then they always say to you that Americans sent money to build it. But if Vietnamese build a big house, who sent the money for them? I do not know anyone that sends money.

Alienation from land and property for Hmong at Pa Kluai's came in other ways. Pao Her, another man from Đăk Nông, describes how he was displaced when his home and fields were flooded by the construction of a hydroelectric power project. His house was on the road near the river off of the main road that led to Ho Chi Minh City. "[His] land and village all disappeared under the water" in 2010. Before the flooding, he, like many in the south, had planted coffee (one hectare), manioc (one hectare), and a small amount of paddy rice for household consumption. Pao claims payment for those that lost land was spotty. "Some were paid a lot, some a little, some not at all," and he was one of those paid next to nothing for his land.

"The area that they sent us was on a mountain. It was very steep, and it did not even have water to drink. You could not make terraces. You could not even plant corn. The coffee that we planted did not even grow. It stayed small like this since we did not have water and coffee really needs water."

Another type of land alienation involved resettling Hmong to new areas away from their ancestral lands, where they practiced shifting cultivation through Vietnam's Hà Sơn sedentarization program. As Ngo notes, the program's intentions were to "bring ethnic minorities, mainly the Hmong, down from the mountains" (Ngo 2015: 282). They did so based on "[t]he ideology underlining Hà Sơn [...] that the traditional Hmong lifestyle based on shifting cultivation results in deforestation, and that living in the highlands results in their social and cultural isolation." (Ngo 2015: 282)

Government resettlement programs—meant to redistribute populations—were not intentionally nefarious. They were initiated after government studies showed economic and social disparity; however, Hmong interviewees I spoke with had trouble seeing the logic of the resettlements their own villages had gone through. Furthermore, resettlements were sometimes coercively conducted. To be sure, Hmong interviewees understood uplanders were meant to come to the lowlands and lowlanders were meant to go to the uplands (Hardy 2003), but for Pao Her, Sia Sher Moua, and Thao Tou Kue from the positionality of a Hmong villager, it seemed a unidirectional movement of Hmong from the uplands to the lowlands. Pao Her, speaking of resettlement of lowlanders to the uplands, said

“This was just a law. They said it like that, but they were just talking. They did not actually do it. They wanted the people up in the mountains to move down to the city. But in the city, where will they get land to make a living? They do not even give you land. So then why would you go?”

Their idea that lowlanders are not moving upland flies in the face of a widespread understanding to the contrary (Ngo 2015: 282) and beg the question of why these Hmong would see things this way. It has mostly to do with where the lowlanders were being moved in the uplands. Pao Her is speaking of the far-off upland areas where Hmong people are living unconnected to the roads where of course, the government would not resettle ethnic Kinh people. In fact, Pao Her and Sia Sher Moua saw the road as the primary reason Hmong were moved from their ancestral villages. They were moved to somewhere that the government could have access to Hmong villagers through roadways.

“They (the government) want everyone to be near large roads, so they can go there easily. So the paddies and fields that our grandparents had they move us away from there. So we go [to the new place], and it’s impoverishing for us (*txom nyem*).”

It is notable that the government of Laos has adopted a similar strategy of moving uplanders down to the lowlands and next to large roads (see Baird and Shoemaker 2007).

Offering an alternative to moving the villagers, Pao wonders:

“So if you had four villages over here and you have four villages [which are connected to a road] over there, why is it necessary to move the people from these four villages over to those four villages. They ought to build a road that goes all the way to the original group of villages. Making things easier, rather than making everyone move to the other village.”

The reasoning for the resettlement is not always apparent to the Hmong, noting that it is problematic to move Hmong into cities or preexisting villages where there are already populations, Pao Her conducts a thought experiment after drawing his own map on a piece of paper. He ponders resettling from the original Hmong village (here called “village 1”) to the destination village designated by the government (here called “Village 2”).

“For example ‘Village 2’ is a village that’s very far from village 1. Village 2 is very far from village one, where your grandfather and grandmother lived. There are paddys and gardens in village 1, and farming and living here is good. But they (the government) can access village 2. They do not have a way to get to village 1, but there are a lot of people already living there [in village 2]. [...] they want the people who were here in village 1 to go over here [to village two 2].”

He continues now questioning the logic of the plan

“If they all move to the other village (village 2) and there are lots of people, what are you going to have all the people who moved over here (to village 2) do? What are they going to eat? We Hmong are not the ones that do business to survive (*ua laaj luag noj*). If it’s going to be that way, they better help find us some businesses to do.”

Ethnic minorities, including Hmong, in Laos, had similar experiences and concerns regarding resettlement (Baird and Shoemaker 2005; 2007).

Besides the fact that Pao Her’s reasoning seems apparent to most, including people facing similar problems in neighboring Laos, other Pa Kluai residents I spoke with corroborated with

similar stories of resettlement. Sia Sher Moua's village in Son La was treated in a similarly resettled, just after he moved from there to Thanh Hoa Province. He concurs that such resettlements do not make sense. Though he was not pushed, some people reluctantly move, and Sia Sher knew of cases when "they force you by sending border soldiers (*tub rog peem foom*)," as was the case with another Pa Kluai resident Thao Tou Kue, whose family was forced to leave their village in.

After this treatment, many Hmong were looking for ways to either solve their problems in Vietnam or leave them behind. Kong Meng Thao still had faith in his country until 2013, when he decided to fight the persecution from within the borders of Vietnam. Similar to his Pa Kluai neighbors Dao, Sia, Tou Ger, Kou, and others, he had his land taken. It was sold to a company that grows rubber (*ntoo roj* in Hmong and *cây cao su* in Vietnamese). Because Kong Meng has grown quite famous among the Hmong of Vietnam, others in the community could tell the story of how his village in Đắk Nông was treated. This is a recounting from Pao Her:

"Hmong did not plant rubber, only Viets planted it, and now it's just the companies that plant it: in Đắk Nông, in Lao Cai near the China border, in Son La, he hadn't seen it. They do take land to plant rubber. They took Kong Meng's village to grow rubber. His village has a big road that goes into the heart of the village, so they came and took the village and the land together, they took their vehicles that clear land (*tsheb koom*) and cleared the land completely smooth. They knock down all the trees and take all the land from the people. So Kong Meng rose up and spoke up against them, he said this is not fair to the people (*tsis ncaj ncees rau pej xeem*). [...] The company was Vietnamese, not Chinese, [...], so they contested and argued, and so [authorities] brought a large gun that sat at the mouth of the way to the village to stop [the villagers] from coming to the village. [...] This translated to mean that they would shoot. They pointed the gun. Kong Meng argued with them. They took him and beat him and whipped him. [...] This issue with their village, I went to see it. They brought those huge trucks that plow the way (bulldozers), and they bulldozed the crops and trees and threw them all away. They made it smooth and took it all away. Then dug the holes for rubber."

Similar problems of minorities being displaced by large Vietnamese rubber plantations have also been recorded in Laos (Baird 2010; 2011; 2017; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Global Witness 2013) and Cambodia (Global Witness 2013; Baird 2017).

Kong Meng did not accept being plowed over in this way. He recalled his overall experience fighting to have his grievances recognized and addressed by the Vietnamese government before eventually coming to Thailand in 2013.

“The Viets would not let us believe in Christianity—in English. It’s called protestant. They were not satisfied, so they first took some of our land and then later took it all. Our houses, they knocked them down. So no one could say anything. If anyone says anything, then they take you and arrest and put you in prison.”

Now continuing but directing his words to the Vietnamese government, Kong Meng laments:

“We are unhappy, and we rise up and fight. We do what we can to fight unfairness according to your own laws within the country. So even though you treat us according to *your* laws in *your* country, it says that we should all have equal opportunity. So why, when you are unhappy with us, you lock us up?”

In this frustrating situation, what would Kong Meng do to solve his own problems of persecution and help his people? This time in a way, went beyond using Vietnam’s internal laws. Kong Meng began to change his perspective. He realized that it might not be possible to change the Vietnamese government or help Hmong people from within the country. After becoming sick from what he believes was poisoned coffee and having taken several severe beatings from police, Kong Meng made his way to China to be healed by Hmong herbalists there. Having lived along the border with China in his early life, he could easily make this journey. Although he is somewhat unclear about his relationship with the Hmong gathering in Wa territory, he admits having met with the US Hmong ethnonationalist Dr. Nao Shoua Her, who was close to Pa

Kao Her of the Chao Fa, while in China, while Her was attempting to get assistance from Chinese officials for his ethnonationalist activities. Her was denied any sort of assistance. Though Kong Meng claims he only went along to witness the meeting and was not involved in Dr. Her's ethnonationalist activities, Dr. Her's failure at the meeting proved to Kong Meng that Her was generally inept and he wanted to have nothing to do with his ethnonationalist activities. Dr. Her has come to visit Pa Kluai seeking recruits, but Xf. Kong Meng has summarily restricted him from entering the community. He has not returned.

Rather than following some illegal route of change, Xf. Kong Meng instead has appealed to what he sees as a higher legal authority. He claims to be the first of the Vietnamese Hmong who came in contact with Laura Xiong of Hmong International Human Rights Watch, who was involved in the Ban Huai Nam Khao problem in Phetchabun Province, Thailand. Xf. Kong Meng became increasingly aware of the possibilities that the UN presented him and his people:

“The older people would just say ‘forget about it.’ But the younger people, they see the twenty-first-century world, and how developed it is (*vam meej*), and we know according to UN rules, people are supposed to have equal opportunity. The Vietnamese the majority (*haiv neeg loj*) are constantly persecuting us the minority (*haiv neeg me*).”

Similarly, Kong Meng told me how he began learning about the UN around 2004 “because in 2004, some Hmong Viet had already come to Thailand, and they went to America in 2007.” He recounts that in a show of indignation toward a Vietnamese government official, he threatened that if justice was not met, he would take his people to Cambodia and get help from the UN. However, due to an MOU between the Vietnamese and Cambodian governments and the UNHCR, which has been repatriating Montagnards in Cambodia back to Vietnam, this option was closed. Reg Reimer notes,

“For some years, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) worked with Cambodia to provide safe havens to Montagnards fleeing Vietnam’s crackdowns. But under Vietnam lobbying and pressure, the UNHCR and Cambodia agreed to abrogate that arrangement in February 2011. Now Montagnards, including Christians, who continue to suffer harassment, abuse, persecution, arrest, and imprisonment in their homeland have nowhere to flee.”

Rather than taking his people to Cambodia, he shifted to thinking about going to Thailand. Particularly after the events at Mùòng Nhé, he and many others made the trip from Vietnam to Thailand, seeking refuge and help from the UN.

Coming to Thailand

Some individuals and families left Vietnam long before 2011. Some of the earliest I spoke with were Chi Nou Chang, who left Son La Province in 2001 and lived in Laos for several years before coming to Thailand. Cha Thao and his family left Vietnam for Laos in 2003. A few other families, including Pao Lee’s family, had left Vietnam by 2005 and lived in Laos half a decade before coming to Thailand. Hmong Viet in Lopburi and Bangkok and Chiang Rai recounted leaving Vietnam in those early years and moving to Laos. A couple of them were even involved in the Ban Huai Nam Khao⁴⁵ episode and were sent back to Laos with Hmong Lao even though they were Vietnamese Hmong. Still, the majority of the Vietnamese Hmong I spoke with in Thailand had come since 2012. There has recently been a spike in immigration to Pa Kluai. It appears that the settlement has grown through quiet organizing and vetting. Immigrants are restricted to Individuals who have possible cases of asylum. For example, a family whose son was allegedly beaten to death by local authorities and buried in a shallow sandy grave on a

⁴⁵ Ban Huai Nam Khao was a refugee camp in Phetchabun Thailand’s Khao Khor District. The camp began in 2004-2005 as an informal settlement took shape along one of district’s main roads. The settlement was composed of Hmong who came from Laos and elsewhere in Thailand and settled after the closing of Wat Tham Krabok. Even a few of the Viet Hmong I interviewed also had lived at Ban Huai Nam Khao. The settlement turned to a formal camp controlled by the Thai military but was eventually closed in 2009.

riverbank came to Thailand seeking asylum after a long case and national news reportage on the case. The number of families in Pa Kluai has grown in the past three years since 2015 by almost double from 17 to nearly 40.

Prior to 2011, very few Hmong people had left Vietnam. Of the many Hmong Viet people I've interviewed, only three came before 2011. Two had come together around 2008 and another slightly early enough to be part of the Ban Huai Nam Khao encampment in Phetchabun province. Though I would not doubt that more came during this period with whom I have not spoken, the bulk of them left Vietnam after the Mùròng Nhé incident. Although the details are fuzzy as to what exactly happened in the minds of many Vietnamese Hmong, they all seem to know it happened. As such, it represents an inflection point in the arc of the Hmong Christian narrative of their history in Vietnam. This was the point when many knew that they were certainly oppressed by the government and that there might be a reason and a way to seek some help. For many, it meant they should leave.

Many of the Hmong who have left Vietnam did not come to Thailand. I've been told by Hmong Viet in Thailand that many have gone to Laos. A colleague doing research in Laos confirmed that there are many Viet Hmong living near his fieldsite. Similarly, some claim the majority of those who have left Vietnam have gone to China. Though it is uncertain where all of them are, a large group lives on the border between Burma and China in Wa territory. A few have reportedly gone to Cambodia. The ones that have come to Thailand have come primarily to seek asylum. The common narrative is that 'we who have come here [to Thailand] are the ones that want to talk to the UN.'

Under the aforementioned circumstances or threat of further persecution, Hmong people in Vietnam are keen to watch their relationship with local authorities. In some cases, they know

when it is time for them to leave. The necessary time sometimes came after increased attention from authorities or a police summons was ignored. Interviewees decided, based on circumstances, when it was time for them to leave, sometimes fleeing by a hair. At this point, these individuals have gone into hiding in forested areas, often leaving their families behind at home. A few of them would hide during the day and return at night for short visits. Though situations varied from this point, the individual might spend weeks in the forest before finding the right time to move further afield. I have known of whole families who had gone to live in the forest without necessarily planning to emigrate, as I've seen in a video sent to a Pa Kluai community member. Furthermore, there are also those who have fled the country without transitionally staying in the forest. Whether the individual traveled alone or came with their family, left in stages, or left suddenly, their departure was ensured through some preparation. One interviewee made the journey on foot and nearly died in transit to Laos. Journeyers from Vietnam have become more and more savvy about the documentation they need to bring, not for passage across borders, but for proof of the refugee claim, they will make to the UNHCR. Notes of police summons, meetings with police, land titles, receipt household registrations, etc. are perhaps the most important of the documents brought. However, the journey can be rough on these documents, an interviewee lamented at how his documents had been soaked in the mists of Vietnamese highland rainy season while his family was without a home after eviction from his land.

Modes of Travel to Thailand

Once the decision has been made to leave Thailand, the preparations to leave, however, go beyond packing the right documents. The success of the journey depends largely on the

method of travel chosen. Making the trip from Vietnam to Thailand involves crossing at least two borders, usually through Laos or Cambodia, and follows a few different possible routes and modes of transportation. Also, the decision to go to Thailand is not always made when a person or family leaves Vietnam, as I will show in the case of some who move across Laos quite slowly and those who travel through China and Burma before coming to Thailand. These trips can be within days, as in the case of those who take taxis through Cambodia, or years as it is with those leaving northern Vietnam who might stop and live in Laos or Myanmar for years before finally coming to Thailand.

If the traveler begins in northern Vietnam, they will generally come through Laos. Those starting in the Central Highlands of southern Vietnam tend more often to travel through Cambodia. The mode of travel is also important and seems to hinge on where the traveler is coming from. Hmong traveling from southern Vietnam tend to depend on outsiders to arrange travel, so they often take taxis, whereas Hmong in northern Vietnam share stories of travel through Laos, sometimes stopping and staying with family members, other connections, and strangers along the way. This type of journey seems to involve pick-up trucks and foot travel more often.

Air travel as the most formalized and regulated means of travel, is simply not an option, for many obvious reasons: lack of documentation, prohibitive costs, and conspicuousness in travel. As is the case for undocumented Hmong in Thailand already, busses are not useful for emigrants. One shared: “You cannot take a bus, if you take a bus then you need to know their language, you have to talk to them to pay and everything. You do not have documentation.” Trucks are another more viable option, but the offer of a friend who might not know the way to drive from Vietnam to Thailand in his truck (which cannot fit many people) cannot compete with

taking a series of interlinked taxi trips driven by local taxi drivers who know the region, language, and will not likely get lost even on backroads. So most people do not take a truck through Cambodia as an interviewee shared,

“it doesn’t happen very often. A truck cannot take very many people, only one or two. One person has to be the driver anyway. The driver is still paid. If you are the passenger and I drive incorrectly, then you will kill me. So they are scared even to take the job. It is a heavy situation, and you do not get much money for it.”

Coming Through Cambodia

As mentioned, Hmong coming via Cambodia increasingly take taxis. According to interviewees, pickup trucks are not as useful because they fit only a few people in the shelter of the cab and must be driven by someone who is trusted and willing to make the entire journey. Taxis offer a good alternative. Taking multiple linked taxi cab trips makes the passengers less exposed. Similarly, though a taxi cab is not required to provide the names of its passengers to government authorities, traveling by taxi seems a more formal method. Still, the taxi modality is harder to trace than bus or train travel, where one is required to show ID even to board most trains and some buses. Furthermore, an entire family can stuff inside a taxi. Lastly, due to the prohibitive cost of everyday taxi travel, most people, including apparently Cambodian authorities, would not expect someone to use a taxi for international travel. The cost is not cheap, and families use large amounts of money to make the journey. Furthermore, the journey is not without fear and physical stress. Some periods of the journey involve walking. A recent arrival to Pa Kluai in 2017 described his recent journey with his family as involving several periods of walking when they ran from Cambodian authorities. He recalls his small son telling him that he was very afraid.

However, traveling in taxis brings up an important topic. Preparation for travel in taxis requires the arranging of these trips. A single leg on a taxi trip will only drive so far, so when one taxi is done with its journey, passengers must continue in a connecting taxi. Someone has to arrange this journey. Endosocial Hmong people from highland areas are almost never well connected enough in Cambodia to arrange such a journey. Cambodia is not an area where Hmong people have settled. There are not kin connections (*nrhiav kwj tij*) before traveling, so they must depend on more well-connected individuals, usually ethnic Kinh who have connections in Cambodia, to arrange the trip. Upon learning this, I was surprised that the usually endosocial Hmong would trust an outsider in this case. I learned that this issue had been well dealt with through a strategic approach to the interaction that requires the help of kin and friend groups. In order to ensure that one makes the journey safely, one's kin and friends stay behind to put pressure on the arranger of the trip while one travels. If one does not arrive safely to make a call to the remaining kin and friends back home within the expected time of arrival in the other country, then the kin group at home threatens the life of the person who made travel arrangements.

Certainly, Hmong people are aware that there is a risk in trusting someone else to arrange one's travel arrangements for an illicit journey out of the country, whether the other party is Hmong or other ethnicities. Asking for such a favor immediately marks one as vulnerable. Certainly, Hmong people in Vietnam have disproportionate knowledge of such vulnerability, as they have often been targeted for and involved in human trafficking. Young Hmong women are often subject to kidnapping and sex trafficking in southern China (Duong 2018). Interviewees note this happens in the north in Son La, Lai Chau, Dien Bien, as well as the south in Đắk Lắk. Men are also taken and labor trafficked in China and elsewhere. Tou Ger was adamant about not

being taken to work on fishing boats. Interestingly, human trafficking “*ua luag tib neeg*” is often done by Hmong people. Indeed, Hmong people sometimes victimize other Hmong. Some interviewees shared how friends and family are even involved in the practice. Tou Ger shared that:

“In Lao Cai, trafficking happens to people the most. They give [a woman] medicine. Then about 30 minutes later, the woman wakes up and finds herself in a car. They select the woman, and then they hire a car. If they are not sold, then they might kill them. I have a relative whose son was in women trafficking (*ua luas poj niam*); he is in prison now for ten years.”

Young women are also sometimes involved in trafficking:

“ Women do trafficking too. The younger women will take you to the market to buy Pho. Then they bring some men back with them that have guns or knives. Then they take you away. Then they hold you for ransom. If you do not pay, they might kill you.”

However, trafficking men is usually done for labor rather than a ransom.

Coming Through Laos

As mentioned, travels across the country from Vietnam to Thailand can come in short bursts, as often characterized by travel across Cambodia, or more slow journeys, as I often heard from people who traveled across Laos. As mentioned earlier, those who have come to Thailand through Laos often begin their journey in northern Vietnam. These are often those who left Vietnam before 2011 and had never moved to southern Vietnam. Several of them living in Pa Kluai—including Cha Thao, Pao Her, Sia Sher Moua—and Chi Nou Chang from rural Thung Raab came to Thailand well before 2012. A few of them lived for several years in Laos before finally making their way to Thailand. One, Seng Vue, who arrived in Thailand in 2013, came on foot. This journey was as emotionally fraught as it was physically challenging. Traveling without documentation, walking through mountain and forest, Seng was terrified to meet people

though he desperately needed help. He recalled fondly the few people whom he stayed with and received assistance from and very likely saved his life.

Coming Through China and Burma

Aside from coming through Laos and Cambodia, there is another route shrouded in a level of secrecy and only mentioned to me as purportedly second-hand information, that is: the route through China and Burma. Those who travel this route go first through China and then pass into Burma. The secrecy surrounding the route stems from its association with the ethnonationalist activities taking place there, which I will discuss in a moment.

It is claimed by many asylum seekers in Thailand that after the repression of the event at Mường Nhé, Hmong people began leaving Vietnam in significant numbers. They scattered from north Vietnam to the Central Highlands and northern Laos, but some claim that the majority went to China and eventually to the Wa territory on the edge of China and Burma between the Salween and Mekong rivers. Admittedly, I have met very few who actually admit to coming through China. However, this assertion has its logic. Many Hmong Viet have more than just passing knowledge of the area even if they do not admit having lived there. Furthermore, Hmong living along the China-Vietnam border already frequently visit China. Also, many speak some Chinese. I was surprised also to learn that many of my interviewees considered China's space as relatively easy to inhabit and pass through. Though the strength of the Chinese state is touted widely, and I found my own living in China to be quite restrictive, complete with minders, Hmong Viet claimed they could go and come as they pleased in China with little government interference. Hmong living in China are usually occupying a much different place from my formal employment as an English language teacher in 2006. They fill informal occupations or work in loosely regulated industries. Hmong Viet in China are overseen by the same companies

that use their labor and are granted a place in the country through these arrangements. However, those who have come to Thailand do not appear to have spent much time in China before going to Burma's Wa area, the ease of travel allowed them to go directly to the Burma-China border area between Yunnan and the Wa State portion of the Shan State occupied by the fiercely independent Wa ethnicity, whose western territory was not integrated into Burma until the 1960s or western territory integrated into China until the 1950s (Fiskesjo 2010: 254). Referring to Burma's Wa State as of 2010, Fiskesjo summarizes:

“Its area was once the western part of Wa territory; today it is ruled by the United Wa State Party and its Army (UWSA), which maintains a tenuous ceasefire with Burma's military government but also acknowledges that its lands are part of Burma (Myanmar), which calls it ‘Special Region II.’” (Fiskesjo 2010: 245).

The Hmong have slipped into this de facto political autonomy of the Wa.

There are reports that Hmong people had begun gathering there in the tens of thousands by 2011 by some credible sources. While in the United States, I heard talk about the establishment of a Hmong country in ‘the golden triangle’ area around late 2010. A group of Hmong American ethnonationalists headed by a Merced California restaurant owner with a Ph.D.,⁴⁶ Dr. Soua Her and another man known as Va Yee had taken up residence in the autonomous Wa territory (*Teb Chaws Vab*) of Burma near the border between China and Burma seeking to cultivate an ethnonationalist movement among the many Hmong Viet who had

⁴⁶ According to Ian Baird who interviewed Soua Her in 2009, Soua had owned a few businesses in Merced California including an Asian Market and a Mongolian restaurant. “He was born in a village outside of Phonsavanh, and he studied Lycee highschool and technical college in Vientiane in the early 1970s. He left Laos in 1975. He came to Seattle in 1976 and later moved to Whitten, Illinois. His wife didn't like the cold, so they moved to Merced after some years. He spent 10 years to doing a PhD in business by [correspondence courses]. He got involved in politics in around 1986 in Merced, with the Chao Fa. Phou Then Lao Chue Cha was the US leader then. Later, Pa Kao came to the US in 1992, and he spent time with him. Soua became the US representative of the Chao Fa Democratic Party around then. Lao Chue Cha had left the group. Soua organized Pa Kao Her's funeral in Fresno after he was killed. He told me that he was replacing Pa Kao after he died, but that most Chao Fa were in Thailand. A few years later he went to Thailand and closed his business. Rumor was the he left some unpaid taxes in the US when he left (personal correspondence Oct. 2019)

gathered there. One Hmong Lao told me he heard rumors that each male member of a family was supplied with a gun. However, it appears that this ethnonationalist movement may have more recently come to naught as Dr. Soua Her and Va Yee are no longer there.

Though I had made contact with a Wa who offered to take me to the Wa territory, I ultimately decided against going there, both because my fellowship stipulations restricted me from leaving my main country of research, Thailand, and because it might have been dangerous. The relatively autonomous Wa in this part of the territory formally claimed by Burma allowed for Hmong to settle, and for a time, Dr. Soua Her attempted to gather and build something of a reserve Chao Fa army. Pa Kluai residents familiar with Teb Chaws Vab told me the area would be particularly dangerous for a western observer. One compared the Hmong settlement at “Teb Chaws Maj” to a swollen pimple on the verge of explosion. It is unclear to me whether this tension is due to the nature of the gathering as a large group of Vietnamese Hmong or whether there remains an ethnonationalist political project based in the area. According to Ian Baird (personal communication), there had been three major groups in the area, one led by Soua Her, another by Yang Teng. These two sought to take control of the Chao Fa in that area. A third former group was headed by Moua Nhia Long, who left the area and returned to Thailand, He has since died. Speaking specifically of Soua Her’s group, they had gathered quite a few people to the area. Whether the settlement stays depends on its struggle against its incipience and fragility. The settlement is left open to summary crushing by established state powers. On the advice of individuals in Pa Kluai, I did not visit because a “*neeg tawv dlawb le koj*” (a white person like me) is an assumed threat those in Teb Chaws Maj because I could credibly pass my observances on to those established powers and spoil the chances of quietly settling down, much less in expanding a Chao Fa ethnonationalist movement. However, as it appears, Dr. Soua Her

has lost some respect and has left the area. This figure became a subject of suspicion after rumors circulated that he had purchased spy gear that allows you to hear what other people are saying from 100 meters away.

Furthermore, interviewees were terse on the subject. The risk of being directly associated with Hmong ethnonationalist insurgents is particularly problematic for Hmong people seeking asylum. Pa Kluai Hmong believe that an association with an ethnonationalist or those who “*ua teb chaws*” or “*tham kanmuang*” means rejection of their asylum request. As a result, members of the community seemed to have some difficulty keeping their stories straight in regard to having been in Burma, letting it slip on a couple of occasions. Though some might admit having visited this area of Burma or China, they would deny having lived there categorically. On a few occasions, folks in Pa Kluai might mention offhandedly that so and so lived there or visited there, but that person makes absolutely no mention of it in discussions even when asked. On one occasion, the grandparent of a small child teasingly called the child Burmese, claiming she was born in Burma. The elderly individual maintained this fact through our short discussion that followed, but when I questioned the elder later about some of his family being in Burma, the elder denied any knowledge of any of family members having lived in Burma. One interviewee shared quite directly,

“Some are like this... they are in Vietnam, and they go to Burma. Then they are there for a little while. Then they look, and they say that their life is not as good as it was before, so they leave Burma and come [to Thailand]. Though they leave Burma and come when they come, they do not say that they had come from Burma. They just say that they had only come directly from Vietnam.”

Life in the Wa State

In the opinion of Pa Kluai residents, life in *Maj teb* (Burma) is comfortable in some ways. One shared that “livelihoods there are not impoverished (*txom nyem*).” Despite a general picture of Burma as an impoverished country, one can make a fairly good living amongst the Wa people. This historical fact has long been noted by Burmese, Chinese, and British historians alike and owes largely to mining activities of “silver, gold, iron, and tin” in the area (Fiskesjo 2010: 246). Especially since the Hmong have integrated well. Because many of the Hmong who came to Burma had lived previously along the Vietnam-China border, they can converse with the Wa in Chinese. Furthermore, as the interviewee claimed, the Hmong may possibly even have a favorable, somewhat legendary place with the Wa even beyond just sharing a similar positionality as ethnic minorities.⁴⁷

“They say that in *Maj* the people are yellow like us, and they respect the Hmong [...] The Hmong have history leftover in Burma. They have old houses. So the monks there built a worship house with those things inside, and they will not open the house. Inside it has a skirt and a *Qeej* [Hmong wind instrument]. Also, there is a table for drinking inside. My *txiv ntxawm*'s (uncle)⁴⁸ son went and talked to the monks and asked them. They said they believe that there are spirits in the house, so they built a temple near the house.”

Despite this possibly favored place for the Hmong, it is not always an ideal place to live. According to a few interviewees, the Hmong in the area are overall unorganized, having lost the leaders they once had. Furthermore, Hmong in the Wa state are without access to education and isolated from international relatives. An interviewee who recalled detailed facts about everyday life in Burma at will but did not admit to having lived in Burma claimed his relative compared the Hmong in “Teb Chaws Vab” to a group of fledgling chicks. Although Chao Fa leaders like Soua Her had until recently organized in the area, the current state of communities there seems

⁴⁷ The Chinese have previously supported the Wa and the Chao Fa militarily in former times.

⁴⁸ *Txiv Ntxawm* is specifically ones mother or Father's younger brother.

less certain. The interviewee claims the Hmong are divided by family without an overarching leadership. This seems to fit into the context of the fiercely egalitarian Wa who have resisted state formation (Fiskesjo 2010: 244)⁴⁹

“There are just two leaders leftover who came from Vietnam, but these two are not in agreement. There is no one who can teach this group to become smart. Over there, they have very narrow rules, not wide like us [in Pa Kluai]. You go there, and if you are smart, you emerge in the group only to help your relatives.”

In his opinion, the Hmong of the area became stupid and scattered due to their lack of cooperated social upliftment. Furthermore, there are few educational opportunities for the young in Burma. He recounted, “*Maj teb* (Burma) is a place that is only good for yourself [as an adult] but not good for your children. They do not have knowledge or education, so after being there, the children cannot do anything. So they realized this and decided to leave and come [to Thailand]. This sense of an educational deficit is likely compounded by the difficulty of communicating with relatives. For transnational Hmong people, especially those who have lived along borders like those in northern Vietnam, borderless communication via Facebook is increasingly important for facilitating networking, including “nrhiav kwv tij” (the seeking of relatives) and making new friends. The Hmong in *Teb Chaws Vab*, although technically within Burma’s borders, use cellular signals from China. So although Facebook is commonly used in Burma—a fact broadly recognized since Facebook faced criticism for not intervening when the platform was used during a flare in the Rohingya refugee crisis to proliferate anti-Rohingya

49. Fiskesjo discusses how the Wa as a peripheral people surprisingly had little tendency to form a secondary state structures which reflect core state apparatuses in the way that other peripheral peoples often do. He notes “Jonathan Friedman’s *System, structure and contradiction*, originally offered as a structuralist-Marxist remedy for the poverty of explanations of change in Edmund Leach’s much more widely read *Political systems of highland Burma*” explains how Wa “armed autonomy and population density developed in the absence of social hierarchy and state institutions” (Fiskesjo 244)

propaganda—Facebook is blocked in China, so Hmong at *Teb Chaws Vab* cannot communicate with relatives and friends via the popular platform.

This movement has not escaped the notice of the Vietnamese government. Tam

Ngo:

“was told by several officials that a number of key congregational leaders had escaped to the Central Highlands and crossed the border into Cambodia and were later given refugee status in America. This information could not be verified, but what is important is that it created a rumor which was soon taken to be fact by some officials and, more importantly, also by some Hmong. That is, by going to the Central Highlands, one could cross the border into Cambodia and, from there, look for the Lord in the Philippines or America, in the language of the Christian Hmong — or become foreign reactionaries, in the language of government officials.” (Ngo 2015: 283).

Hmong Viet Come to Bangkok

The earliest story of a Hmong Viet person in Bangkok came from one nearly middle-aged named Cha Thao, though he looks quite young. After enduring religious persecution in Son la Province, he moved from Vietnam in 2003 to Laos with his family, before finally coming to Thailand in 2008 to ask for UN help. Cha completed his UN papers in 2009, but his case was rejected (due to lack of evidence) in 2011. It was in 2009 that Cha became involved with a church that ministers to prisoners in Bangkok. Cha claims to be the very first to join with this church that has now become the most important center for Vietnamese Hmong Christian Life in Bangkok, providing money (taxi fare to and from church) and food for its members. Because of his five years spent in Laos, Cha spoke Lao well before coming to Thailand and was able to pick up Thai fast enough that he became the translator for this Thai pastor, who was fast gaining Vietnamese Hmong congregants who had only limited ability to speak Thai. Cha recalls that when he first came to Bangkok, he had no worship community or help, and this ministry was

welcoming. Soon Cha became a leader in the ministry of this pastor who had been ministering to inmates in area prisons. Cha was responsible for visiting Hmong Viet Christians detained in the IDC (international detention center at Suan Phlu in Bangkok). Visiting one still prominent member of the central Thailand Hmong Viet community now released from the IDC was one of Cha's early duties. Still, more importantly, Cha was responsible for seeing to it that Hmong immigrant members of the church were given a regular portion of rice and other foodstuffs. He maintained this duty for a little more than two years, during which time he also oversaw the integration of Hmong Viet into the church community. He made lists of the families, delivered food, and reported to the head pastor of the prison ministry (the ministry maintains extensive lists of the immigrant Hmong community central Thailand). He also enjoyed living inside of the church, where he studied the bible and interacted with ministers and missionaries and decided which other Hmong families might be permitted to stay in the church. In 2012, through the machinations of another family, Cha was displaced from his privileged position by a member of that family. In this unfortunate turn of events, he left Bangkok and went to live in rural central Thailand.

Several families now living in Pa Kluai came to Bangkok in 2012. By their and Cha's recounting, those families initially lived in a neighborhood near the Bangkok Refugee Center, before moving to Pa Kluai around 2013. Cha remained in Bangkok but had lived in Lopburi for a while. He has since moved to stay in Kong Meng's Pa Kluai community whose members do not attend church at the prison ministry (though some at Pa Kluai attend the prison ministry). Cha recalls that before living in Pa Kluai, most members of the current Pa Kluai community were crowded in a more central and expensive area of Bangkok

Although the Hmong at Pa Kluai are not Catholic, Pa Kluai became a destination for Hmong Viet. It seems in some part because of the Catholic church in the area. This church is part of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), which specializes in ministering to the poor and less fortunate. This particular mission made the church particularly concerned with serving communities of Burmese and other immigrants who call the area home. One such community of Viet Montagnards lived in Pa Kluai, which Kong Meng and other members of the current Hmong community at Pa Kluai recalls being familiar with. That connection helped the core members of the current Pa Kluai group become aware of the possibility of moving to Pa Kluai.

Furthermore, rent in Pa Kluai was cheaper than the neighborhood near the Bangkok Refugee Center (BRC). Especially the row houses in Pa Kluai were good for Hmong Viet families. According to Chee Nou, rather than renting individual rooms in an apartment block like the ones near the BRC, Pa Kluai's row houses could fit three or four families and the rent shared across them. Though quite narrow, these row houses are usually three to four stories tall with a family on each floor. These families would eat, sleep, play, etc. in this same space; however, members of families above and below would pass through another family's area, frequently severely limiting privacy and increasing community connections.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter does a few things for the overall argument of the dissertation. First, it shows why many Hmong people left Vietnam. By outlining Vietnamese policy regarding protestant Christianity, the backdrop is set for discussing what is at stake for the Hmong who have come to Thailand. This chapter's interviewee testimonies claim to have been generally persecuted and discriminated against for their ethnicity and religion in Vietnam. Several make

credible claims that returning to Vietnam would threaten them with a life of persecution, surveillance, and bodily harm. As such, their subjectivities formed in Vietnam are transferred to Thailand when they migrate to Thailand. The specters of violence, incarceration, and surveillance stay with these Vietnamese Hmong, as they make do in a new space of power. I will show in Chapter Four that life in Thailand is also difficult. The specter of a return to Vietnam must be egregious to keep them there. These decisions are not historically determined; the wider possibilities presented by Thailand's new environment allows for these Hmong to fashion new experiences and subjectivities. Leaving behind the power relations in their homeland, they will now explore a new landscape of people and things. They will articulate with new arrangements of materiality and sociality which these newcomers can either fashion into burgeoning positive and secure affects or scatter. In the case of Pa Kluai, it appears that they have done this well enough to establish a territorialization. In the next chapter, I will explain an important aspect of how New Hmong immigrants were able to establish affective connections with people in new landscapes.

Third, this chapter tells a broader story of the category of Hmong Christians in the eyes of the Vietnamese government. Upon their discovery, Hmong Christians began as a problematic category which needed to be reduced or reformed. Vietnam's ongoing territorialization of the Vietnamese state needs the constitutive outside to justify its boundary making (Steinberg 2008: 472, Mouffe 1995: 263). The Hmong had now become even more associated with an important figure in Vietnam's constitutive exterior, The USA. This association was created in two ways. Christians were associated with the "peaceful evolution of American Empire." Furthermore, the Hmong had a famed association with the less peaceful anti-communist General Vang Pao.

Furthermore, though the suspicion of the Viet government against the Hmong though at times misplaced, as appears the case in the repression of the Muong Nhe movement. This chapter shows that the Hmong Lao are not the only group to have some possible form of ethnonationalist ties, albeit in Burma. Some Hmong Viet likely passed through Burma on their way to Thailand Though I cannot be sure exactly who was involved because of the shroud which surrounds the topic. Those who probably did pass through Burma had some contact with Soua Her and Va Yee's groups. This may have involved association as well. Though I do not believe this should mark the Vietnamese Hmong as ethnonationalists. From the standpoint of Governments, IGOs like the UNHCR and the other Hmong people who deal Hmong Viet immigrants in Thailand, this is what has happened precisely. Thus, the New Hmong Lao are not the only group suspected of ethnonationalism. Kong Meng's group in Pa Kluai is particularly suspect of such connections.

Chapter 4

Feeling Pheej Hmoo: Hmong Migrant Subliminal Performance in New Geographies of Power

In this Chapter, I utilize a version of Louise Holt's (2008) embodied social capital to understand how Hmong people Hmong immigrants in central Thailand negotiate the political and social relations of the new spaces they occupy in Thailand. The concept of embodied social capital combines of Pierre Bourdieu's social capital and Judith Butler's understanding of performativity. The contribution I make to the development this theory is that I add an element of affect to embodied social capital to show how precognitive intersubjectivities inculcate this social capital and challenge Thailand's state effect. This chapter discusses the practices of immigrants living in urban Pa Kluai and rural Thung Raab, Thailand, but I focus on one individual, Her Chee Moua, to show how the intensity depending on fate rather than predetermined social forms of intersubjective have helped him to gain social capital.

Pheej Hmoo: Desperate Yet Indeterminate

To begin, I will explain the concept of pheej hmoo (transliterated in English as *pheng hmong*),⁵⁰ which means to depend on one's fate to make decisions. This pheej hmoo concept is a Hmong term which is characterized by actions and emotions less constricted by Hmong cultural and social norms and fashioned to random contexts. Though Hmong people are known to practice a number of forms of augury, the leader in my research community of immigrant

⁵⁰ Although there are a few different explanations as to how Hmong people first began calling themselves Hmong, Prominent scholar of the Hmong Gary Yia Lee explains one of the origins of the "Hmong (Hmoob) ethnonym is believed to come from from the story of three brothers. Each of these three brothers all had differing fates (peb hmoov). The word for fate is hmoov and shares aspects of hmoo in pheej hmoo, which is just a tone change from hmoob.

Hmong Viet people named Kong Meng explained that as an asylum seeker he often bypassed augury in his daily life and decided to "depend on fate" or "*pheej hmoo* ." His close associate Dao Hang gave me an illuminating explanation of what it means to *pheej hmoo* .

"Let me explain the word *pheej hmoo* for you to understand. You can compare it to when you're in a state of deprivation, and every day, you feel anxiety. You do not know about your life's future, whether it will be good or miserable, and so you say [to yourself] I will live my life according to my fate."

Continuing this understanding, Kong Meng further explained the term.

"A person who cannot help themselves or their family. They cannot find a way or idea that will solve (their problem). In their abjection, anxiety, sadness, tears, there is no person that will help them. This person has given up and lives only by default from hour to hour, day to day, month to month. If they live, they stay if they die they stop. In order to call it *pheej hmoo* ."

Such a mood can be considered resignation to one's fate towards gradual decline or even death; however, it could also be considered a radical realization of randomness, anomie, and existentialism in which the tried and true channels have failed—family and clan connections, augury and prayer—and one is now forced to be open to considering new options for connection and social formation, and seen in the uncharacteristic reaching out to people outside of these usually endosocial groups. This emotion/affect is saturated in possibility and freshness. And so, the key aspects one should consider in pondering "*Pheej hmoo* " is not only its radical resignation but the intensity of this emotion which allows those experiencing it to forego, to some degree, 'normal' interactions learned habitually, and also consider new openings of performance and habitus necessary or allowable in new spaces of power.

Although, as I will show in this chapter, these Hmong people are keen to stay concealed, at times, prospects become bleak and tried options so limited that newer, perhaps those which cut against previous habitus, logic, common social practices, and manners emerge. These very conditions seem to push members of this community to interact with (even reach out to) others

they might have previously neglected. Long enough in such a situation, this reaching becomes a habitual practice. Furthermore, in many cases, the reaching produces fruit and increases social capital. However, in the process, the state of pheej hmoo , with its attached affects, moods, and emotions seem to become frozen in time and intersubjectivity and the inter-ethnicity of this story. This show of emotion and affect becomes the means for maintaining social capital and even expected by those they interact with. What were initially comings-out become habitualized actions which give Hmong bodies opportunities for future practice with group outsiders.

And although they expose themselves in certain moments and actively reach out to those around them, they are keen to package themselves in a way that does not challenge the sensibilities of those who view them, what I call this subliminality. Undocumented Hmong immigrants living in Thailand are easily understood to occupy a liminal position. Inability to go to third countries combined with fear of returning to their home countries keeps them in Thailand. However, Thailand's reluctance to recognize these vulnerable bodies as protected has led them to a parallel pursuit of a semi-invisible subliminality, exposed yet unnoticed. Illegitimate occupation of Thailand's territory often pushes them below the surface of legitimate public visibility and its entailing protections. In certain contexts, their bodily comportment, appearance, affect, and style become suspect. Here in subliminal invisibility, they have accepted both protection and harm for the sake of staying in Thailand. In such a state, their intersubjective meetings and everyday public exposures have been changed to maintain subliminality in a number of ways. Many experience intense moods of anxiety, anger, indignation, which underlie bodies contorted to exude placid normality, politeness, and deference. Though the desperation and the exhaustion of negotiating one's subliminality or invisibility is real, some have made gradual revelation of oneself to networks of individuals that allow for momentary emergences

from the surface of illegitimacy. Hmong perception of pheej hmoo in intersubjectivity makes this political subliminality a space of intense affects. Desperation drives attention to opportunity to interact with others. However, this interaction also happens in everyday unplanned intersubjectivities between Hmong and Thai in their neighborhoods. As has been the case with landlords, several who now prefer only Hmong tenants based on favorable conceptions of Hmong interpersonal relations, Hmong affects of meek straight-forwardness, and responsibility have elicited both care and manipulation from both Thai and Hmong actors. In several cases, these actors have come to view Hmong affect as a feature of Hmongness, in-turn reinforcing Hmong tendencies toward what could be perceived as meek bravery.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I knew that many Hmong people move often. This prompted me to take an itinerant ethnography approach, which stressed embodiment and space. Although I had already touched on geographies of emotion and ethnic identity in previous research, the poignancy of experiences in two places rural Thung Raab and urban Pa Kluai have revealed to me the permeability of boundaries between affect and place and the utility of geographies of affect and embodiment for flagging deeper, political, social and cultural stories. Several emotion-filled meetings at Thung Raab early in my fieldwork gave the impression that this permeability was unidirectional. It was as though the soil in this semi-rural place in Thailand's central region was saddened by the history and positionality of the Hmong immigrants from Laos and Vietnam who lived there. Their stiff-lipped stoicism plastered cracks in the area's cement walls, their oscillating suspicions dusted across smooth tile floors, and their wet-eyed anxieties infiltrated the drizzling rain. I explained this feeling with this community's ostensible resemblance to 'bare life' as immigrants from neighboring countries living in Thailand (mostly undocumented or unrecognized). This tendency reduced the communities' anxieties to be

inevitably coextensive with their social marginalization and political persecution, which might occur regardless of a specific place in Thailand. However, I now realize that stressing these Hmong immigrants' positionality of illegitimacy vis-a-vis constructions of territorial sovereignty of the Thai state put me in something of a territorial trap. In this trap, I neglected to see Hmong these Hmong immigrants' ability to negotiate particular place-based networks of power to challenge state effects. They made this challenge the state at the level of embodied intersubjectivity in ways that challenge their position of illegitimacy in Thai state space and cover what previously appeared exposed bare life. It was only after observing an affective change in a long-time research subject (and friend) that I came to see the implications of state-space constructedness in the affective experiences of the immigrant subject community

Introducing Her Chee

In this chapter, I draw examples from two Hmong immigrant communities in Pa Kluai and Thung Raab, Thailand. Although I have observed more frequently successful negotiations of power and the affects of meek bravery, I will describe, in Pa Kluai, using Her Chee Moua from Thung Raab as my primary example. I do this for two reasons. First, my long-term interactions with him allow me to see how the trajectory of his life history may have influenced his affective and performative doings. Secondly, because I've observed the progression of his bravery to negotiate a broader scope of relations in Thung Raab's 'new spaces of power' than some other Hmong at Thung Raab. Overall, my understanding of the depth and breadth of his story is helpful for understanding the process and drawing out helpful examples of his negotiation in varied circumstances and geographies of power.

On a muggy, overcast day in 2012, I approached Her Chee Moua on foot. He was waiting at the fork of a rural road in Thung Raab with one of his small children standing next to

his late 1990s model motor-scooter. The middle-aged Hmong man from Laos gave me two handsome rings as keepsakes for my wife and me. His demeanor seemed to shift intermittently from anxiety to stoic clenches and then forced smiles. Almost at once, his brows would furrow and then brighten. Looking back, I can imagine a billiard table of emotions bouncing off of one another before coming to the surface of his face. He was really trying. I could feel it, and I remember reacting to it. I now realize the significance of this moment. There was a meaningful affective interaction that I was suddenly conscious of. Though I still do not quite know what Her Chee was thinking, I know how he made me feel, and this was largely a function of affect⁵¹and, more specifically, affective mimesis. The theorist of affect Anna Gibbs said in her essay *After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony and Mimetic communication*

“Mimetic communication or mimesis, I mean, in the first instance, the corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary (and on which literary representation ultimately depends). At their most primitive, these involve the visceral level of affect contagion, the “synchrony of facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person,” producing a tendency for those involved “to converge emotionally” (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994, 5)[sited in original]; (Gibbs 2011: 186)

Furthermore, these affects are often indeterminate and involuntary. The indeterminacy of these actions lies in the inability of their doer to to make sovereign decisions to control affect. The affect of our bodies is often beyond our control and simply produces itself outside of sovereign decision. Still affects have effects on the other subjects we come in contact with. Patricia Clough said of affects indeterminacy

⁵¹ Patricia Clough quotes Brian Massumi’s definition of affect in his (2002) book *Parables for the Virtual*, “In what has become a canonical text about affect that links it to the philosophical conceptualization of the virtual, Brian Massumi defines affect in terms of bodily responses, autonomic responses, which are in excess of conscious states of perception and point instead to a “visceral perception” preceding perception. (Clough 2011: 208).

“So for Massumi the turn to affect is about opening the body to its indeterminacy, the indeterminacy of autonomic responses. It is therefore necessary for Massumi to define affect in terms of its autonomy from conscious perception and language, as well as emotion. He proposes that if conscious perception is to be understood as the narration of affect—as it is in the case of emotion, for example—there nonetheless always is a never-to-be conscious” (Clough 2011: 209).

This idea is key to understanding the importance of my interaction with Her Chee. Though Her Chee obviously took some conscious control of his affect, many aspects of his affective show were beyond his ability to control. Furthermore, my own affective response became sympathetic to his labored, though genuine affects. This was beyond my own cognition and I only realized it in hindsight. This is where affect becomes important to a theory of embodied social capital. Similarly, though many Thai people who deal with these ‘illegal’ Hmong immigrants realize the Hmong are ‘illegal,’ the Thai people’s sympathetic response to these intersubjective events was not a sovereign or voluntary decision. As such, I assume some go against their better judgment based on rationalities of pushed by the logic of “state effect” because other parts of them identify with the Hmong and sympathize with them.

Though Her Chee’s demeanor and comportment was nothing near joyous, he did crack a few labored smiles that seemed genuine as I attempted to reassure him. And though forced, his show of effort comforted me and gave me an endearing admiration for him. He was, overall, attentive, and respectfully thoughtful throughout the entire interaction. I knew his intense situation, and yet he ostensibly meant to spare my social discomfort with a show of meek bravery despite those circumstances. Meetings I had with him and several others during the past few weeks, were usually emotionally fraught and draining for both the interviewees and me. In most cases, my interviewees made passionate pleas for consideration of their difficult circumstances as undocumented immigrants, which I was unable to address. Initially, 'normal'

interviews (in several cases) morphed into tear-filled exclamations of fear, anxiety, and loneliness. My interviewees were, at times, downcast and, at others, wild-eyed. Men and women alike set aside the usual placid pleasantness of social interaction I had grown to expect in polite Hmong company. However, on this last meeting in 2012, Her Chee seemed to hold things together, returning to what I would expect from a 'normal' interaction.

Returning to Thung Raab three years later, I initially dreaded the emotional drain which might come with meeting Her Chee and others. I was relieved to find that the fledgling confidence of our last meeting had developed to a more consistent humble bravery that I was comfortable with. Admittedly, I made an effort to reassure him, but Her Chee's overall affect seemed to have become more confident around me despite negotiating what I assumed was the same set of challenges facing him as during my initial fieldwork. Though possibly naive at times, he surely remained aware of his precarious legal positionality, his movement in the community at large evinced a sort of unexpected confidence and trust of non-Hmong community members that pushed away some of his anxiety in the face of challenges, though these elements certainly existed.

Contrasting the aforementioned anxiety in Thung Raab with Her Chee's fledgling bravery exposes the inadequacies of assuming affects and emotions unfold solely from the dictates of national-level political narratives regarding undocumented immigrants and sovereign spaces. I had previously assumed that personal histories influence on affect in place. However, I have come to see that the difference between the affects I experienced in Thung Raab versus Pa Kluai come from members of the community's respective negotiations of the social field. So the specter of history is important, but people are still influenced by their rooting in place (Rocheleau 2007). Furthermore, the response of these more rooted individuals has helped foster

a resoluteness even in the face of hauntings and threatening of absent forces and past events. Furthermore, it has been a sensitivity to those negotiations that has influenced newly hybridizing performances of refugee identity in Thung Raab and Pa Klui. And while this story is often told, it was in this telling that I realized that this group's entanglement in this subliminal space was possibly responsible for ruptures in the iterative doings of bodily comportment and subjectivity.

Regarding these two aforementioned reference points in the trajectory of Her Chee's affective development, the issue of bodily visibility and vulnerability warrants highlighting and expansion. Her Chee, like so many others in Thung Raab, showed a keen attention to controlling the visibility of his body. Harkening to Secor's (2004) description of Kurdish urbanites concealing their Kurdish identities in Istanbul's urban spaces, Her Chee and many others in the Bangkok subject communities were concerned with the vulnerability of their exposed bodies. Their concern with revealing their undocumented Hmong immigrant identity has contributed to their efforts at concealment, invisibility, subliminality, segregation, and in some cases, isolation. These various concealments are both voluntary and involuntary and enacted and performed in a number of ways. However, concealment is not the full story. Just as Her Chee and a few other members of Thung Raab initially reached out to me—an assumed stranger—in moments of self-revelation, these same moments of bodily intersubjectivity offered opportunities for the acquisition of performative social capital.(Sitisiainen 2000)⁵². Social capital as Bourdieu understood it to be a symbolic key to unlock the benefits of relations with

⁵² “Bourdieu’s concept of social capital puts the emphasis on conflicts and the power function (social relations that increase the ability of an actor to advance her/his interests). Social positions and the division of economic, cultural and social resources in general are legitimized with the help of symbolic capital. From the Bourdieuan perspective, social capital becomes a resource in the social struggles that are carried out in different social arenas or fields. For example, the problem of trust (which Bourdieu does not discuss much explicitly) can now be dealt with as a part of the symbolic struggle (or the absence of struggles) in society.” (Sitisiainen 2000: 1)

new social fields. Bourdieu often saw division based on class, here we can view the difference in class between the citizen and non-citizen.

In this chapter, I recount some experiences of Hmong immigrants in rural Thung Raab and urban Pa Kluai, to discuss how the performance of difficult political positionalities are materialized and sedimented in Hmong bodies. These Hmong bodies, in the circumstances described here, can appear victimized, fearful, abject, or marginalized. However, these Hmong—as they trust their fate (Pheej hmoo)—reveal themselves to others (vulnerabilities and all) in a fashion that appears simultaneously meek, inured, and brave rather than always abject. With ever-present threats in mind, they build social capital through agile maneuvering of bodily comportment expressed in those intersubjective moments. This inuring involves the negotiation of topologies of power in local areas while experiencing the freedom of dislocation.

Structure of the Chapter

After giving a few notes on theory and situating my subject communities with relevant background, the chapter is broken into three empirical sections. In the first section, I ask the reader to consider how members of my research community could be considered bare life. The second empirical section answers this question. It shows how members of my research community engage in intersubjective performances of subliminality to cover themselves from bareness, despite living outside the juridical order in Thailand. And lastly, I engage the idea of new geographies of power, to show the nature of my subject community's intersubjective negotiations with others.

Notes on Theory and Methodology

As mentioned, this chapter takes aspects of Louise Holt's (2008) idea of "embodied social capital" (Holt 2008) to argue that the Hmong in Pa Kluai and Thung Raab have shifted performances of identity in a position of restriction. I should note that although Holt's understanding of performance reflects Butlerian performativity, several empirical examples shown in this chapter tend toward Erving Goffman's (1959) idea of performance in the more voluntary dramaturgical sense. Anticipating the critique of performative voluntarism by a sovereign subject, I follow Lise Nelson's (2012) engagement with Butler, which calls for understanding performativity more on a sliding continuum from involuntary performatives to voluntarist performance with various actors, in various, times and places.

Furthermore, I note that possibly owing to development geographers' early exposure to Robert Putnam's version of 'social capital' in development studies more generally. Geographers have hesitated to use the term. Some have suggested social capital's moribund status as a useful analytical tool. Healthy skepticism has developed surrounding Putnam's version of social capital based for its economizing tendency. view social relations as exchangeable stocks, or its signaling anti-state neoliberalism, which privileged civil associations and casts of development in an apolitical light, (Radcliffe 2004). However, some geographers have signaled an engagement with Pierre Bourdieu's 'social capital' as a tool of analysis. Coupling Bourdieusian ideas of 'habitus' with Judith Butler's 'performativity' has led a few geographers to investigate how social capital can be embodied (Holt 2008).

This combination of Bourdieusian social capital theory and Performativity theory has been used to address the issue of social capital to explain broader shifts in culture among elite classes because of their relative mobility and ease in attaining social capital. Bourdieu himself has delineated an example of how privileged Algerian Dandies of the elite class appropriate

western norms of performance as a result of their wealth and social capital. Furthermore, Jefferey (2008 et al.) discussed a similar cultural change based on education without employment among Indian youth who make adjustments to gendered expressions of culture through cultural capital provided by education even as unemployed individuals. Manderson and Turner (2006) show another example of assumedly upwardly mobile individuals at McGill University's Law School changing performativity through the acquisition of social capital at university coffee parties. This chapter, on the other hand, pushes the limits of performativity and social capital theory a step further by presenting an example where a group of individuals--Hmong immigrants in Thailand--has made changes to their cultural expression. This change is based on a lack of resources and constricted options for gaining social capital rather than inhabiting spaces of privilege. Telling this story exposes a limit to performativity theory's ability to explain moments of rupture based on the multiplicity of new paths for cultural expression, but on the restriction of those passages. This group's immobility and lack of connections have led to an affective sensitivity and negotiation of affective relations to access possible sources of social capital.

Relatedly, observing the experiences of Her Chee, the main character of this chapter, shows that his intersubjective negotiation in struggling to gain social capital catalyzes the sedimentation of new bodily 'dispositions' 'affects' and 'performances.' In negotiating for social capital, Her Chee engineers the visibility and concealment of his own Hmongness in the presence of the others in his network. This engineering involves deliberately restraining emotional intensity and shedding endosocial tendencies to fit exigencies of intersubjective meetings. And since this is a worrisome effort, due to his precarious undocumented condition and the possibility of capricious actors in his network, his interactions are intense and likely memorable to himself and those in his network. Although his precarity restricts his options for

proliferation, social capital connections as a poor/marginalized immigrants thus leads to changes often associated with those connected to those with access to broader selection of links in a network of social capital (possibly giving the impression that privilege or ease of access to social capital aids in the shifting of habits) Rather this "change despite restriction" flags up 'intensity of interacting affects as important to change in habits or performance."

Vietnamese Hmong

The Hmong in Thung Raab are a mixture of people from Laos and Vietnam. Though most of my examples in this chapter come from Hmong Lao, the backgrounds of Lao and Vietnamese Hmong will be helpful in understanding this chapter. Vietnamese Hmong of significant numbers began coming to Thailand in 2011 and 2012 following a violent crackdown on a Hmong movement believed by the Vietnamese government to be a millenarian revolt in Dien Bien Province (Ngo 2016). Prior to their arrival in Thailand, some Hmong Viet members of the Thung Raab community lived in Vietnam's northern highlands. Their families had converted to Christianity mostly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Shortly thereafter, many report religious persecution coupled with land dispossession and conflict with local authorities, aligned closely with the passing of Viet Nam's National Land Law in 1993, which expedited the formal titling of land. This wave of formalization often came at the expense of claimants who had been using the land for years based on traditional or locally recognized tenure. These people were often less connected with legal knowledge and resources, like the Hmong and Austronesian language-speaking groups like the Jarai and Ede. Many living in Thung Raab eventually moved from northern Vietnam to the country's Central Highlands. They have recalled to me how they often lived comfortably for a while before being evicted from their land, and many of their houses and churches were reportedly seized and dismantled. Several Hmong in Thung Raab and

nearby communities hold on to grainy photographs and videos taken on cellphones of houses being bulldozed as proof of collusion between local government officials and land-hungry corporations.

Hmong Lao

Hmong from Laos come with rather complex historical baggage. Many of those from Laos claim a connection with a decades-old insurgency against the Lao government, either allied with the millenarian Chao Fa or the royalist Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat, led by General Vang Pao. With the gradual decline of the insurgency during the mid to late 2000s, large groups of Hmong made their way to Thailand from the forests of Laos, some settling in the Thung Raab area. The death of a few key leaders, who supported of the cause of insurgency, and the political rapprochement between Thailand and Laos based on an effort to “Battlefields were turned to marketplaces,” severed support and sanctuary from Thai military leaders and left much fewer fighters and their families in the forest subsisting on wild potatoes and cassava, compared to the thousands who had fought for the insurgency in the 1980s. Weakened and frequently subject to government attacks, many chose to leave Laos and search for refuge in Thailand. During my first period of research in Thung Raab, some of the families that had fled had just come to the area and were hoping to go to third countries as political refugees. With ties linked to their involvement with the anti-Lao government insurgency, some of the older males were granted a degree of protection from the Thai military in the surrounding area, as I will explain later. Thung Raab community of the families enjoyed former connections to the Thai military, as the Thai military had assisted Insurgents in Laos.

Though not applicable in all cases, this narrative is commonly cited by Hmong at Thung Raab, although not all Hmong Lao there are former insurgents or even associated with the

conflict. My closest informants, Her Chee Moua, despite his father's fighting against the communist Pathet Lao during the Second Indochina War, claims he personally had no involvement in rightist insurgent activities, which began after the falling of Laos in 1975 to the Pathet Lao. Her Chee lived in Laos as a normal citizen until the mid-late 2000s, when, he recounts, his close work with an American development worker earned him suspicion from local Lao authorities. After being labeled a secret insurgent by those authorities, Her Chee began to fear for his safety. Thus, he fled to Thailand rather than honoring a police summons. He eventually made his way to the Ban Huai Nam Khao refugee/repatriation camp, where he waited with thousands of other Hmong from Laos until, in 2009, Her Chee was sent forcibly back to Laos and involuntarily settled in a camp-like town for repatriated Hmong under close government surveillance. The suspected murder of Hmong leaders at the turn of the decade in this village incited the exit of more families from the area at the turn of the 2010s. Some of them have come to Thung Raab, where their connection to the military in Lopburi has partially drawn them. Her Chee is one of these immigrants. I will discuss his story since coming to Thung Raab later in the chapter.

Bare Life?

Beyond common prejudices toward Hmong in Thailand, Thung Raab and Pa Kluai are not upland spaces where Hmong have been discursively assigned. As such, the very revelation of Lao and Hmong Viet immigrants' bodies in Thung Raab space marks them as immediately illicit in the eyes of those who understand the likelihood of their undocumented political positionality in Thailand's territory. As such, the Hmong in Thung Raab and Pa Kluai might be considered exposed and vulnerable. Below I explain this vulnerability as a juridical construction and follow this with an explanation of everyday intersubjectivities that re-enforce an

understanding of this vulnerability. This vulnerability, if unaddressed, could leave the Hmong exposed bare life. However, as I will explain in the next section, they have made efforts to cover themselves by moving below the line of visible legibility. In this section, I describe their state of legal subliminality.

As mentioned, most Thung Raab and Pa Kluai Hmong left their countries of origin and entered Thailand illegally in order to seek political asylum, turning prospects of a return to Vietnam or Laos into a guarantee of jail time or worse. Many assume they have given up citizenship to their home country. However, Hmong from Vietnam and Laos respectively are not in the same legal position. Upon initial entry to Thailand, Hmong from Laos and Vietnam occupied similar undocumented positions vis-a-vis access to Thailand's sovereign soil or legitimacy to be in Thailand. But Hmong Viet migrants may have a legitimate hope of access to UN protection while it appears Hmong Lao do not. Because Thailand has not signed the 1951 convention on refugees, migrants cannot seek asylum directly from Thailand. Instead, since the end of the Vietnam War, Thailand has shown a somewhat arbitrary semi-openness toward refugees and migrants, which allows candidates to apply for refugee status with the UNHCR but does not seem to give them guaranteed legal protection under Thai Law. Ironically, Bangkok is home to one of mainland Southeast Asia's primary UNHCR offices, drawing asylum seekers from around Asia. Hmong migrants steer clear of the region's other UN office in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, because Cambodia has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Vietnam in which the Cambodian government has agreed to send any asylum-seeking immigrants from Vietnam back to their country of origin.

As such, Vietnamese Hmong seeking asylum come to Thailand. Once in Thailand, Vietnamese Hmong immigrants have some promise of gaining UN refugee status, but Thailand

apparently does not promise to honor the UN refugee status in every case via protection from Thai authorities. This is reminiscent of the arrest of immigrants in sanctuary cities made by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Hmong in Thung Raab, Pa Kluai, and other communities shared their horror with me at seeing the news of the deportation of two Chinese asylum seekers who had already been accepted to Canada as refugees. Despite their recognition from the UN and the possession of their UN protection letters at the time of their detainment, the Thai government sent them back to China to face an uncertain future. Hmong Lao, on the other hand, do not even share the tenuous hope of the Hmong Viet at Thung Raab and Pa Kluai of UN protection. A few Hmong Lao I met actively continue, though unsuccessfully, to seek UN protection. The situation for Hmong Lao immigrants is, in some ways, is even more difficult. Current Thai policy dictates that anyone from countries sharing borders with Thailand claiming refugee status can only be processed in refugee/repatriation camps along the border. Because Laos borders Thailand, Hmong asylum seekers from Laos are unable to obtain NI numbers for processing in the UN system and are only eligible for processing in a repatriation camp recognized by the Thai government. However, there is no such camp for Lao immigrants. It appears that this policy is a deterrent by the Thai government. If Hmong Lao were allowed to go to third countries, there would be an influx of new Hmong Lao immigrants to Thailand. Ending their hope of going to a third country stops this flow.

This political positionality puts the Hmong in a dubious, liminal space ranging from UN protection to complete illegitimacy. The Hmong Lao do have some advantages. Because of its similarity with the national language of Laos, they generally speak Thai better than Hmong Viet. Some of them even have connections in the Thai military. Nevertheless, the Hmong Lao and Hmong Viet are situated between some form of contested legitimacy in the juridical order and

outright exception. Those in the latter position are forced to acknowledge their disadvantaged positionality and the uncertainty of their future. Without formal recourse to local authorities and, in some cases, even the confidence to report problems to the UN (especially in the case of Hmong Lao), they are sometimes taken advantage of by Thai citizens and other immigrants alike. In communities around Thung Raab, for example, Hmong men and women tell stories of being raped or sexually harassed by perpetrators aware of their immigrant status. One notorious rapist in the Thung Raab area, when confronted by the husband of a woman he had exposed himself to, taunted that—lacking citizenship—they could do nothing to him. Furthermore, employers frequently take advantage of Hmong workers, sometimes refusing to pay them for days or even weeks of work.

To be sure, the absence of protection from other citizens is compounded by the ever-present fear of the police themselves. For Hmong Lao in Thung Raab, even being seen by police, in most cases, would be asking for trouble, especially since the sight of upland Hmong people in an area like Thung Raab, which is dominated by ethnic Thais, is an immediate red flag to local authorities and community members. Although they would not be wearing traditional Hmong clothes, observers already familiar with Hmong appearances might identify them as Hmong in a lowland space.⁵³ As mentioned in the earlier vignette, Thung Raab Hmong are careful to manage their visibility in open spaces (not drawing undue attention from passers-by). In a state of vulnerability, Hmong immigrants are easily extorted to pay bribes to police for tens of thousands of baht at a time. One meeting with police can prove disastrous financially if not harmful to life. Furthermore, many Hmong Lao people assume contact with the police is connected to the more distant threat of deportation to Laos. Stories of clandestine, deportations

⁵³ Hmong people are often identified for their fair complexion. Short stature, and adoption of particular clothing styles—though these are not their traditional dress.

through purportedly informal Thai Police contact with Lao police. In one case, a Thung Raab resident's husband was taken with a few other Hmong men by Thai police and allegedly sent to Lao police across the border. As of our last meeting, he had been missing for several years, his wife in Thung Raab is unsure whether he is alive or dead. This story and others are circulated across Thung Raab and other communities, reminding Hmong immigrants that a deportation could come unexpectedly and with potentially lethal results.

This fear of deportation and uncertainty seems to stay fresh in the minds of Thung Raab resident's minds when unfamiliar visitors come to visit. This suspicion is directed at Hmong and non-Hmong alike but falls particularly heavy on Hmong visiting from Laos. This fear seems rooted in the specter of spies working for the Lao and Vietnamese government (see, also, Baird 2014). During my research in 2012, rumors ran through the community that a Hmong man visiting from Laos might be a spy. He was avoided carefully by those at Thung Raab during his two or three-day visit to a popular tourist destination near a few of the settlements. It is well known, in Thailand's Hmong Lao community, that two Hmong Lao leaders were killed in Thailand in the 2000s under rather suspicious circumstances—including Pa Kao Her and Yang Kou—speculations place blame on a few possible motivations and perpetrators. One salient narrative implicates actors from the Lao PDR in both murders.

In any case, even the members of the community who are not assumed to be spies can be viewed with suspicion. This leads to conflict and victimization. New Hmong Viet or New Hmong Lao immigrants' only channel to appeal to legal legitimacy in Thai space depends on a positive relationship with the UN and the attainment of asylum seeker status and refugee status, as such what one member of the community says to the UN about another is a leveraging tool in intra-community relations. Regarding the nature of the Hmong relationship with the UNHCR,

several Hmong at Pa Kluai have been through or are waiting to complete the interview process, which could grant them movement on the path toward asylum or refugee status (though this hope appears quite limited). The processing has proven to be quite long, and the process is fraught with uncertainty. Hmong immigrants seeking protection from the UNHCR are often unsure not only whether they will pass their interviews and be granted refugee status, but whether they will be asked to interview again or whether those that failed the process will be given another chance. Several at Pa Kluai have given the opinion that the UN knows virtually "everything about you" and can "tell when someone is lying." Several Hmong have reported to me that false reports about themselves or other Hmong acquaintances have been made and might affect the status of their or those acquaintances asylum/refugee applications (usually in a negative way). Describing to me a conflict with a kinsmen-turned-enemy, a resident of Pa Kluai explained that he made a report of the threats he received from this enemy to the UN and knew the UN would take those things into account. He attributed the delay in the processing of his documents to reports to the UN made by others about him and those he had made. Any delay comes with an emotional price.

Subliminality: Covering Bare life

In this state of vulnerability and exposure, Hmong in Pa Kluai and Thung Raab seek to cover themselves. They conceal themselves, though, because they depend on connections in the local community to survive, this concealment cannot usually be a complete removal from the vision of those around them. Rather, the Hmong at Pa Kluai and Thung Raab negotiate subliminality. They are subliminal in that they fall below the line of legal legitimacy in Thailand. They are subliminal in another, more relevant sense. The subliminality of subliminal advertising actively

works to persuade its unknowing audience, by passing before the eyes of its viewers but not registering in their conscious memory. Similarly, The bodies of Thung Raab and Pa Kluai Hmong actively move in open spaces of random and controlled intersubjectivity but are careful not to allow for the markings of their illegitimate political positionality to emerge to the surface of their body in the wrong context. This involves contextualized negotiations of particular spaces—e.g., their homes and neighborhoods, paths of travel like buses and sidewalks, frequented points like markets and IGO office—and actors—neighbors, people in the market, patrons, people on the bus, and so forth. Hmong in Pa Kluai and Thung Raab become subliminal in a number of ways. As mentioned, dispersed and inconspicuous housing helps to mask the location of their bodies. However, beyond masking the location, they have used several ways of moving, adorning, comporting, and ultimately concealing their bodies.

I came to understand a few principles regarding Hmong concealment and subliminality on one particular occasion. I had been invited to meet with a charismatic Hmong man from Vietnam to discuss his life history. I found him absent from our assigned meeting place (his dormitory, which was tucked back in a small rural neighborhood surrounded by trees) and was redirected to another Hmong settlement where mostly Hmong Lao lived. That day, the Thai pastor of an urban-based non-denominational church had gathered the Hmong of the area --from both Laos and Vietnam--together to distribute rice and other supplies. Reaching this other settlement, I walked my bike one hundred feet off of the main road down a gravel paved alley, which was a clear shot bisecting a cleared and leveled lot (about an acre in size). There I saw thirty or so Hmong people crowdedly ducking the rain on the limited porch-space of the short row of one-room cinderblock dormitories and a couple of wooden houses (usually occupied by a dozen or so Hmong immigrants). Though I had visited the settlement several times before, most

present on this occasion did not live in this space, and they gave no sign of usual Hmong pleasantries. My greetings were met with awkward affects and aversions of eye contact, even from those I knew. Initially Assuming this awkwardness might have to do with the group's preoccupation with the pastor passing out food, I began my interview. Sitting next to my interviewee on a low bamboo platform, I was suddenly interrupted. A somewhat familiar acquaintance had emerged from the group and had approached me with what I now noticed was a distressed look. She asked me pointedly to leave. With an awkward expression vacillating between anxiety and deference, she explained that with so many Hmong people gathered together in one place outside (in the view from the busy main road) it was not good for me (an obvious outsider who would draw attention) to be there with the group. I assumed she had worried that passers-by and police might take notice of the uncommon presence of a white man in rural Thailand and start asking unhelpful questions of the large group of undocumented immigrants.

Geographic Emplacement and Subliminality

Reflection on the experience described in the vignette presented above revealed a number of things about how Hmong subliminality was accomplished through tactical geographic emplacement of Hmong bodies to control their concealment. Subliminal geographic emplacement in Thung Raab and Pa Kluai is a matter of using several tools. In several cases in Thung Raab, Hmong new to the area have used forested and mountainous spaces to facilitate invisibility. Also, housing arrangements in Thung Raab, where not many families can gather together, limit the size of their settlements to roughly 3-5 families per settlement, unlike Pa Kluai, where families can gather in larger numbers. Settlements are dispersed widely and sparsely, keeping settlements from gaining the critical mass to make them conspicuously Hmong

inhabited places recognizable to outsiders and authorities. Also, these settlements tend to be away from main roads and in rural areas, tucked away from prying eyes that frequently pass on busy roads and central districts. Somewhat similarly, Hmong in Pa Kluai have found a place that is not only heavily populated and easy to blend in with. Their homes are found in alleys off from the main road--often as far away as possible. Because the buildings in Pa Kluai are contiguous cement row houses, there are very few breaks (except the three alley-way entrances to the area) between the three to five-story buildings. Thus, keeping an eye on these few points of entrance makes managing problematic visitors like police fairly easy, reducing surprise, and facilitating the safety of the Hmong who call this rectangular area home.

Hmong at Pa Kluai and Thung Raab Hmong pay close attention to concealing themselves while traveling. Everyday travel around the neighborhood to and from the market or shopping center is done as inconspicuously as possible, along back ally walkways. However, making a living depends on more distant daily travel to and from work, via bus or on foot. Some common jobs for Hmong workers include factory work, tending market stalls, and car washing. However, the most common jobs are construction and attaching signs to buildings. However, asylum seekers and refugees, despite UN protection, are not legally permitted to work in Thailand, immigrant arrests are commonly reported at job sites. Financial assistance and UN food guarantees are only given to those granted refugee status, so most in the community are forced to find work. Some of these jobs, such as car washing, can be done only slightly beyond immediate environs requiring public bus travel and are thus usually traveled to alone to avoid attention. Though many remain in areas surrounding Pa Kluai and Thung Raab, it is not uncommon for husbands to travel as a group to relatively remote provinces to work on construction. Thus safe travel to and from work often depends on employers cognizant of the

importance of the Hmong's concealment. In most cases, Hmong men in Thung Raab and Pa Klui do day-construction work (working the day and being paid at night). In Thung Raab, most regularly work with familiar contractors. A pick-up truck, driven by the contractor (or Thao Kae in Thai), arrives in the early morning and drops them at home in the evening. This period of travel can be the most dangerous part of the workday, in terms of risking their arrest. Because police are likely to stop trucks hauling construction workers (commonly suspected to be Burmese migrant workers), employers transporting Hmong workers need to avoid police and checkpoints. Thai contractors are known to purposefully take the long out-of-the-way routes, down back roads, to avoid meeting police. However, some contractors, I was informed, with friends in the police department, are able to learn of police routes by the day to avoid interference. I've been told employers go to the trouble because Hmong workers are believed to be comparatively skilled and willing to work for low wages.

Bodily Compartment

In discussing the spatiality of Hmong, Maren Tomforde touches briefly on aspects of performing Hmongness in Thai Space through bodily compartment. She mentions:

“Hmong people have a special way of walking, which is typical for the group and clearly differentiates it from others. Since I had not noticed this phenomenon myself before I was informed about it, I asked people to describe typical Hmong movements in greater detail. The answer given (and physically demonstrated) was that the Hmong walk in a very upright, deliberate, but self-conscious manner that apparently distinguishes them instantly from the members of any other group. For example, when Hmong people walk through the city of Chiang Mai, my informants say that they take the phenotype and way of walking as a reliable indicator for distinctive "Hmongness.” (Tomforde 2008:241)

For the time being, I will save my analysis of why Hmong walk differently for the next chapter,

but I will say that I agree with the main points of Tomforde's appraisal. Hmong people do have a distinct way of walking. The Hmong at Pa Kluai recognize this, and they alter their comportment so as not to stand out. In an interview with Dao Hang, he explained to me his understanding of these differences between the Hmong and other ethnic and national groups. He Said:

“DH: The Viet in the lowland walk without swinging their arms. They walk just like this, and the Thais walk like this too.

DC: So now have you changed, do you walk like that too?

DH: Yes, you should...because...we Hmong say, if you cross the water you take off your shoes, if you cross into another land, you must take off your head [in other words, you must lose parts of your assumed identity or leadership or pride]

Hmong people in both urban and rural milieu at Thung Raab and Pa Kluai attempt to stay invisible through blending in with other people. This involves several aspects, especially bodily adornment. I should note that Hmong people are often racialized in Thailand for their use of mountain space (Vandergeest 2003), and because of a tendency for some Hmong people to have lighter hair color and complexion than Thai and Lao people. As such, some Hmong people in Thung Raab and Pa Kluai are keen to mask this difference wherever possible. Whether it's the dying of hair and eyebrows, as I notice one light complexion Hmong man in Thung Raab began doing. Others cut and style their hair more like Thais (bleaching and dying it). Hmong people at Thung Raab and Pa Kluai are attempting to appear more like the Thai citizens around them.

I've noticed several Hmong men in Pa Kluai and Thung Raab dressing like Thais. Though such a tendency might seem unremarkable, as simply a result of living in Thailand with access to Thai style clothes, several Hmong admitted to making small alterations of familiar practices in order to resemble Thais. Hmong men commonly tuck in their shirts. A few at Pa Kluai admitted that although they prefer the sleek and familiar aesthetics more common with

Vietnamese and other Hmong Vietnamese—such as tucking a tight-fitting shirt into a smartly belted waist—they opt not to tuck in their shirts. This alteration of style is often a deliberate effort to resemble the untucked style of the Thais surrounding them. Dao Hang explained to me:

“You should comport like a Thai (*coj li Thaib*). When I lived in Vietnam. I liked to tuck in my shirt (*nyiam siav duav khov khov*) just like you, tightly. I came here, and the Thais wear their clothes loosely. And the Thais do not tuck in their shirt. In Thailand, I would get to the road and notice that they are not wearing a belt, so I would untuck my shirt. [...] If you tuck your shirt in like this then you are different and strange from them [he says speaking Hmong at first], so you should change [now using the Thai word “*plian pleng*” for alter] “*ces yus yuav tsum 'plian plaeng'* switches to Thai” oh now we're speaking Thai! And in this way, you can be with them and join them, and the police are not interested in you.

If someone sees you tucking in your shirt firmly, the police know something is wrong, but when people go out playing, and they are wearing short pants and are not tidy then, the police think “Oh, this person could be from around here, and they are not interested in you.”

One Hmong woman at Pa Kluai frequently wears a Thai college student uniform. Because she works nearby, she frequently walks in public. A student uniform allows her the appearance of both an upstanding individual (seeking an education), but because uniformed college students are common sights in markets, bus stops, and stores in the area, the uniform seems to facilitate her an ostensible legitimacy in her frequent areas of movement. Also, because college students are known to come to Thailand from neighboring countries—Burma, Laos, Cambodia—signs of her foreignness might be passed off the foreign student identity (one who has come to study through formal channels and is attached to a University), one no less legitimate than a Thai student.

This attention to mimicry in adornment is not a static thing, however. The Hmong at Pa Kluai especially take care to wear different styles associated with particular identities according to the appropriateness of activities and movements. Because the life of an asylum seeker requires one to travel to various embassies, NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations (IGO)

offices, these Hmong are periodically out in densely occupied urban spaces churning with movement and activity. In such instances, several admit playing the part of a tourist. For one tall Hmong Viet man with a fair complexion, dressing nicely and wearing a backpack gives him the confidence to take long bus and train rides to approach areas near embassies and NGO offices in central districts of the city. He assumes people take him for a tourist from another Asian country.

Vietnamese Hmong in Pa Kluai have become aware of negative discourses surrounding Hmong people in Thailand (Vandergeest 2003; Forsyth and Walker 2008). They thus emphasize their Vietnamese national identity in dealing with neighbors and show an attitude of meekness in those close interactions. As such, this attitude of meekness bypasses some strong narratives about Hmong people in Thailand, further distancing them from an illegitimate identity. Contrary to the rightist affiliation Hmong Lao insurgents against the government of Lao PDR, a sizable portion of the Hmong population in Thailand joined the Communist Party of Thailand led insurgency against Thailand's government between the late 1960s and early 1980s (Baird 2020). An assumption of disloyalty regarding Thailand's Hmong people has followed and added to a tendency to view upland 'hill tribes' (especially the Hmong) as selfish forest destroyers practicing shifting cultivation (Forsyth and Walker 2008; Vandergeest 2003).

The Hmong Viet do not even want their Thai neighbors to know they are Hmong; rather, they call themselves Vietnamese. Not just Hmong Thai are aware of the discourses; Hmong Viet seem aware of these discourses too. They try to stop people in the neighborhood from knowing that they are Hmong. They refer to themselves only as Vietnamese. I once sat in a meeting with a group of Pa Kluai's Hmong Viet and a group of Thai business management students during which the Hmong instructed me not to let the students know that they were Hmong. However,

the students were curious to know their ethnicity, and after a session of rather pointed questions about the ethnicity of the Hmong in the room by the Thammasat students, I managed to keep the secret. However, when the American friend and benefactor to the Pa Kluai Hmong arrived, he was unaware we were trying to keep a secret. Having invited the students to meet him there, he explained the reason for the meeting, mentioning that they were Vietnamese Hmong in the process. A chorus of knowing "ahs" from the students and the Hmong knew their cover was blown and prejudices attached.

New Spaces of Power

In this section, I engage an idea of new geographies of power to describe how my subject community of undocumented Hmong negotiated intersubjective contact with several actors in Pa Kluai and Thung Raab to maintain subliminality and earn embodied social capital. Evoking for the moment, John Allen's (2004) topological account of power relations, we might try to imagine possible articulations Hmong immigrants made in the landscapes of power among various actors in Thung Raab and Pa Kluai upon the arrival of the Lao and Hmong Viet pioneers during their 2011-12 forays into the area and their subsequent negotiations of that newness. Upon arrival, they were unused to these spaces in several ways, however through negotiations, some gradual some abrupt, they came to fit themselves into performative positions within these new spaces. To describe briefly, new geographies of power are three things. They are first a topology of multilateral relations between people and things that work on the bodies of actors to influence subjectivity. Secondly, they are contingent on the newness of social and material constellations of people and things in that topology to the recently arrived actors that experience them. And thirdly, new geographies of power open up indeterminacy and possibility to form new subjectivities.

Those sitting safely within legitimized positions in sovereign territory may have seen the rough contours of the sort of new geographies of power I reference here in experiences like job changes and residential relocations. Such instances are often coupled with the social/political destabilizations (with accompanying moods and emotions) that come with the negotiation of new geographies of power. In the case of the Hmong of Pa Kluai and Thung Raab, their positions outside the juridical order placed them in new types of power geographies than they had been habituated to previously. Before leaving their countries of origin, many members of my subject community (especially those from Vietnam) became accustomed to appealing to formal state channels for help and redress, negotiating with village, district, and provincial authorities with legitimated claims, however tenuously honored by authorities. These authorities embodied valid points of articulation in the network that made up their old geographies of power. Deciding to leave Viet Nam or Laos and arriving in Thailand, several members of my subject community became aware of the ramifications of their condition of illegality—relative bareness of their lives--when they came in contact with Thai state officials or heard stories of those who had. This was a somewhat violent realization that spaces in Thailand contained a new geography of power with a different set of actors and relations than these Hmong had been habituated to. This portion of the chapter charts some actors in that geography, which should be understood as a topology of relations that expressed not only power over the Hmong there. In several cases, the actors in this topology gave the Hmong power to create spaces of subliminal occupation through positively perceived intersubjective occurrences.

Based on the contingencies of their positionality as somewhat exposed subjects in Thailand, the Hmong at Thung Raab and Pa Kluai sought to uncover and occupy new geographies of power successfully. Noting prior legitimacy of appeals to the Vietnamese or Lao

state versus the illegitimacy of appeals to the Thai state as an example, this new geography of power is not only new places but new habitual relations where the constellation of affects and methods formed in previous spaces is less useful for making do. To use Bourdieusian language, the obsolescence of previously formed habitus opens up a gap of indeterminacy as new connections form on a new social field. But in a legally subliminal position, the Hmong in Thung Raab and Pa Kluai experience pheej hmoo and begin to trust fate rather than previously useful connections of determinacy.

This indeterminacy was brought on by some harsh realizations initiated by intersubjectivities characterized by domination, violence, and the threat of incarceration. Members of both Hmong Lao and Hmong Viet community in Thung Raab and Pa Kluai share stories of families in the early years of migration to Thailand in 2011-2012 unfamiliar or unprepared to deal with the geographies of power in Thung Raab, who suffered harsh consequences as a result. Initial meetings with police in areas surrounding Thung Raab and Pa Kluai resulted in both arrests, detainment, and extortion in fairly high numbers during 2011 and 2012. Some note even being arrested getting out of the taxi on the way to the UNHCR office. It was during this period that the previously mentioned woman's husband was deported to Laos after being caught coming home from a worksite. Still, others were sent to Thailand's International Detention Center (IDC) at Suan Phlu, living there in some cases as long as five years. Police roundups at factories employing undocumented Hmong, in some cases making arrests or deportations, taught the Hmong in 2012 some things about this new topology of power.

The landscapes of power in Thung Raab and Pa Kluai consist of several different types of actors associated with empowerment of the Hmong there. Unlike their former homes, this group is not now surrounded by Hmong people, as is the case in their countries of origin. In Pa Kluai,

the Hmong are surrounded primarily by Thais, but also migrant workers from northeastern Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia. Except for Montagnards and lowland Kinh asylum seekers living in the area, the Hmong seem to have fairly limited interaction with non-Hmong and non-Thai people close by. Some of the most important relationships the Hmong of Pa Kluai and Thung Raab have with those outside of the Hmong community are with Thai employers, landlords, shopkeepers, religious authorities, and neighbors. At times, it is difficult to separate these actors into distinct categories. Some of them are both landlord and patron or religious leader and patron, respectively. However, considering the disparity of power between the Hmong and these actors, all share a position of some respect or sympathy for the Hmong community, as the Hmong depend on negotiating relations with them to maintain a foothold in Thailand's sovereign space despite illegitimacy.

Likely one of the most vital connections Hmong have made in the new geography of power have been interactions with religious authorities and patrons. In their vulnerable position, patrons and religious authorities have manipulated Hmong communities for their own ends. Hmong have been used for labor by patrons, and in one case, as mascots for encouraging donations from wealthy members of ministry congregations. Similarly, they have been used as leverage against other powerful individuals. Furthermore, one minister is rumored to control his Hmong refugee congregants to the point of monitoring and controlling their everyday movements and actions. However, such relationships do not consist solely of powerful parties dominating weaker ones in what Allen (2003:51-52) calls a “*power-over*” relationship. Hmong immigrants' relationship with others have manifested in moments of “*power to*” or otherwise collaborative expressions of power⁵⁴ between Hmong immigrants and their Thai neighbors. The

⁵⁴ John Allen explains there is difference between ‘power to’ and ‘power over’. The term *power over* implies domination whereas *power to* signifies a collaborated relationship of power. On the subject Allen said “The

Thai leader of one ministry has taken to help, through food and resources, the Hmong populations near Pa Kluai and, to a lesser extent Thung Raab. Because immigrants, whether protected by the UN or not, are not allowed to work in Thailand, this minister has devised a system of food distribution that provides a fair amount of rice to both these communities. Elsewhere, a Thai patron has offered options for pseudo-legal protection and schemes for movement to third countries or legitimacy in Thailand (through some admittedly dubious channels). In many cases, these patrons have interacted with Hmong over the years and have built strong respect and sympathy for Hmong immigrants. Patrons also promise Hmong the chance to challenge the constrictions of subliminality, as I will show that Her Chee leveraged his relations to a schoolmaster, to emerge from legal subliminality and ask for legal redress from an employer.

It is in descriptions of everyday intersubjectivity, which we see a stronger example of the establishment of embodied social capital. Though day-to-day interactions are usually negotiated with employers and landlords, both offer means of sustenance and shelter on an everyday basis. Some Thai dormitory owners in Thung Raab are particularly committed to renting rooms only to Hmong. Some have gone out of their way to tell me that the Hmong (contrary to popular stereotypes of Hmong polygamists in Thailand) are faithful and family-oriented, making them more likely to pay rent. Though this tendency to always pay rent likely has more to do with the goal of not attracting attention to their vulnerable undocumented positionality. Furthermore, they are respectful and quiet. They note that Hmong are not given to excessive drinking and troublemaking. One dormitory owner explained at length that she never rented to Burmese or

difference between them is perhaps best understood by contrasting the ‘power to’ side of things with that of the ‘power over’ dimension. Whereas the former rests upon enablement and tends to stress the possibility of collective, integrative action, the latter term refers to an instrumental ability to gain at the expense of another. Where one sees the possibility of collaboration, the other sees the potential for domination.” (Allen 2003: 51-52)

Cambodian because of their tendency to drink and carry on. Interestingly, Thai neighbors and landlords in Thung Raab—where they know the Hmong are Hmong—have come to associate this general politeness with Hmong ethnicity. Dao Hang of Pa Kluai explained to me,

“Thais like the word “Khor Thoth” (meaning “sorry”). If you are wrong, you need to ask for forgiveness. If you show that you lessen your power or (*txu fwj chim* or *txo hwj chim*) then they love you. If you have someone sick at your house and you call for your friends and family to come and say prayers for you, then you tell them (the Thai neighbors) before and explain to them "we will be singing and speaking loudly, please have patience for us," and they will say "mai *pen rai*." But if you do not tell them, then your church family comes and speaks and sings together loudly, and [the Thai neighbors] do not know what we are doing, and they will not like it.”

There is a more localized narrative in Thung Raab about Hmong people, which stands in contradiction to more broadly circulated discourses in Thailand, sometimes labeling Hmong people as selfish, slovenly, forest destroyers. However, because of a long interaction between Thais in this area with undocumented Hmong, they have come to associate them with politeness, attentiveness, and circumspect behavior, likely due to the Hmong position of power disparity.

In Pa Kluai, where neighbors are more likely to assume the Hmong are Vietnamese asylum seekers rather than Hmong, good relations with neighbors and landlords, however, are key for ensuring the Hmong concealment and continued subliminality. The people living near the Hmong are those most likely to know their story and suspect their illegitimacy or vulnerability. Indeed, unfriendly neighbors have been a source of grief and anxiety, as they have threatened physical harm or to call the police on Hmong people on several occasions. As such, the Hmong have become quite careful to apologize for making noise or disturbance and to include neighbors and landlords when planning events—inviting them to eat and warning them before conducting religious observances such as prayer meetings and devotionals (which both include loud singing). Despite some annoyance, Thai neighbors have often responded gracefully

to this show of deference and consideration, thus reinforcing a positive view of a group of people the Thai neighbors assume are Vietnamese refugees (especially persuasive when considering the pride Thais take in showing just how hospitable and merciful they can be to outsiders), their coming from Vietnam, an enemy nation at some points in history, reminds these neighbors of Thai superiority and magnanimousness to receive this unfortunate population thrust out by an adversarial neighbor country.

Negotiating New Geographies of Power: Her Chee's Example

I now draw on the example of Her Chee as he uncovered a new geography of power. Her Chee's migrations through Thung Raab in the past four years exemplify the negotiation of a new geography of power and the gradual movement from invisibility to momentary rising to just above the surface of legitimacy. Arriving with almost no personal connections in the area, he depended on invisibility, to protect his family. After arriving from Laos, Her Chee and his family stayed temporarily in a rocky cliff area. Though they were forced to endure rain and centipede bites, this initial residence gave them cover from the threat of state intervention by police. Venturing out, Her Chee met a Hmong woman (one of the few long-term residents in the area) who had married a local Thai. Out of concern for his family, she encouraged him to move to a nearby town to work and live in a factory. This arrangement proved short-lived and worrisome, so Her Chee moved with his family to a forested area off of the main road near his previous cliffside settlement, this time on flat ground amongst fields of agriculture. There, he and his family shifted sporadically from bamboo clumps to crop and forest clearings. Paying close attention to their surroundings, they hid like this for several months. An elderly Thai couple fed them meals daily. Her Chee recounted to me that the couple loved his children and wanted to feed them. Passing through this particularly difficult period, Her Chee reached out for

help from a local patron. First, the patron allowed Her Chee to rent a small house in a rural area. However, when police began showing up in the area, Her Chee shifted his family to a rural migrant worker dormitory semi occupied by another Hmong family.

At each spot along the way, Her Chee revealed a bit more of himself to those around him. First living hidden in the forest, he initially attempted to stay undetected by Thais in the area. However, he was treated kindly by an elderly Thai couple who would bring food to him in the forest. This elderly couple developed an affective relation of pity toward his children. Later on, his family moved into their first house in the area. It was in close proximity to a school. Her Chee's connections to a powerful Thai patron helped him to put his children in school. In Thailand, all children are allowed to attend public schools, even immigrant children until Highschool from then they are required to pay their own way.⁵⁵ Moving once since, Her Chee's most recent place of residency in Thung Raab necessitated that he pass the homes of several Thai families living at the entrance of the small street that connects the way to his house with the main road. In passing this lump of houses, one becomes acquainted with its owners as a pack of small yapping dogs emerges from the front gates converging to menace each passerby. Because of the area's relative rurality, it seems unlikely that many people pass the area on foot as Her Chee does, allowing for the homeowners to recognize and become acquainted with him, and make judgments on his character. It was at this spot that Her Chee experienced a momentary emergence from subliminality.

On this occasion, Her Chee stepped beyond depending on fate and momentarily leveraged a network of relationships in his new geography of power partly based on the

⁵⁵ A Lawyer in Saraburi known by the Hmong community at WTK as Thanai Porm explained with pride that he had fought the legal battle to allow Hmong children living at WTK the right to attend school. He displayed the newspaper article charting this story which featured his photograph.

embodied social capital he established through affects of meekness. The story begins when after Her Chee did nearly two weeks of construction work and was not paid. In this case, it appeared his Thai employer would not pay. Because employers know Hmong immigrants are unable to seek police assistance, circumstances like this can result in crime with impunity. In another case, Her Chee went unpaid after ten days of building cement Buddha images. In this case, Her Chee's Thai contractor even lost some teeth after being attacked by the monk who had hired them for the job. Of late, Her Chee's wife had been increasingly impatient with their dire situations and had threatened to leave him. This further drove his determination to be paid by his Thai employer. Facing dire straits, Her Chee turned to others for help getting paid for his work. The headmaster of his son's school had developed a fondness for Her Chee's eldest son. Besides the boy's kind demeanor, Her Chee's son was a consistently a high-test scorer (a trait the headmaster valued highly). Unable to call the police himself, Her Chee mobilized this connection to a citizen of influence when he asked the Headmaster to call the police station to vouch for him. This allowed him confidence when he made a call to the police station, reporting the contractor's failure to pay wages. In the end, the police pushed the angry contractor to meet with Her Chee and another Hmong worker to pay wages. The meeting took place on the shoulder of the busy two-lane highway where the small road from Her Chee's home intersects. Bringing his white pick-up truck to the shoulder, the contractor presented half of the payment to his employees, but when asked where the other half was the contractor became angry. Cursing, he attempted to run Her Chee and his companion over with his truck. However, instead of hitting his Hmong targets, he hit a cement post holding up electrical power lines, leaving a sizable swatch of white paint on the pole. The Thai residents of houses near the mouth of the street mentioned earlier heard the ruckus. Seeing the attack made on their Hmong neighbors, they allied with Her Chee against the

Thai Contractor and scolded him to leave the good Hmong guests alone. At that point, the Contractor retreated.

Conclusion

Her Chee was adrift in *space* when he came to Thailand in 2011. However, considering the foregoing story of Her Chee's marshaling of a topology of social connections, he has established *place*. But this was built on stepping outside his comfort zone and depending on his fate (*Pheej hmoo*). In light of the chapter's opening explanation of *Pheej hmoo* (dependency on luck) we see Her Chee's example of making place and gaining social capital was similarly birthed in the desperation of social isolation that many Hmong immigrants have likely often felt throughout their history—even throughout the ages—of migration and dislocation. The continual necessity to interpret and divine power relations, which underly a new landscape would have pushed for the incorporation of cultural institutions like *looj mem* geomancy and augury—such as reading chicken feet. However, these instrumentalities are do not fit the contexts of Christian Hmong in Lowland Bangkok. So we see Hmong people here turn to the root causes of the institutions themselves—the need to fit in with the current space's social and political realities.

The framework of embodied social capital provides a window into this somewhat radical understanding of Hmong social interactions. To Louise Holt's performative emphasis in embodied social capital, I added aspects of affect theorist Anna Gibb's (2011) understanding of mimetic affects to understand how Hmong people sometimes have made-do since coming to Thailand. Mimesis and precognitive communication are important to intersubjectivities between the New Hmong immigrants and the people surrounding them. In moments like my meeting with Her Chee at the fork of the country road Her Chee's bodily affect communicated to me

before I had processed that affect in my thoughts. I had already built a sympathetic response. I realized later that I was likely not the only person Her Chee had interacted with in that way, looking back, I can see that his affects have continued to be effective. He has communicated with me since and evidenced that his small everyday moments of mitigated 'coming out' and sympathetic intersubjective connections with others allowed him to emerge momentarily from the constraints of illegality and claim some protections of a legal citizen—as when the elderly couple fed his children when he appealed to the headmaster for help, or when his neighbors defended him from his disgruntled employer. These were instances in which the relations of power between Her Chee and his neighbors were characterized by collaborative empowerment, what John Allen calls “power to” rather than “power over” (Allen 2003: 51-52). Her Chee was not the only New Hmong person to act this way. Actually, it seems that many of the Hmong in Thailand approach strangers with similar affects. This generates varying degrees of success.

Although the primary example I've used in this chapter was a New Hmong Lao in Thung Raab, The tendencies to successfully seek out relationships and build connections seem more characteristic of the Hmong in Pa Kluai than the New Hmong in other places. I will continue the rest of my dissertation using Pa Kluai as my primary example. This partly has to do with the snowballing effectiveness of the Pa Kluai's territorial arrangement. For the New Hmong Viet at Pa Kluai, it appears this affect has produced results as they negotiate within and without their community to create a territorialization based on the gathering of social relations around a place. This territorialization acts like the center trellis pole, which was newly staked in Pa Kluai after its dislodging from Vietnam's territory.

This chapter also shows through the example of Her Chee Moua that using embodied social capital to gain some of the benefits of legal citizenship appear as a challenge to the Thai

state's effect. The prosaics of stateness, as described by Painter (2006), can be reversed as actors commit countervailing acts that undermine the defined purposes of the state. Her Chee is an 'illegal' immigrant. According to the state he should not be in Thailand. However, his intersubjective relations with some Thai citizens and the precognitive affects of sympathy established between them have challenged the state effect. This is evident because these Thai citizens support and accept him even though most of them know he is not a legal immigrant. By allowing him to function in Thai state space and not engaging the sociotechnical practices of the state, these interactions also challenge the Thai State's "territorial effect." So although Her Chee might not see himself as a radical, this example points to the radical nature of his actions. His temporary emergence shows a challenge to the *state effect* (Mitchell 1999) in his local area. His occupation of the space he is in by virtue of the positive nature of interactions with those that see him and his subliminality in the view of those less inclined to allow him passage allows Her Chee to remain in a space somewhat hospitable to him, where he can relax a bit and depend on others a little more and depend on fate (*Pheej hmoo*) a little less.

This chapter also begins to discuss how those—like the Hmong, including Her Chee—entering a somewhat hostile landscape of power must manage their visibility. Although some have documentation and can, with some confidence, show themselves to authorities. Hmong, like Her Chee, have no documentation. These undocumented individuals conceal portions of their identity and political positionality. Only a few Hmong Viet actually have gained UN refugee status, the rest wait tediously, and many of them have had their refugee claims denied. This leaves them in basically the same boat as Lao Hmong, without papers. So they must remain subliminal. Their bodies can be seen by outsiders, but their identities are concealed to some degree. Thus they are visible but not fully legible. This hints at an overall strategy of counter-

legibility. I elaborate on counter-legibility in part two of the dissertation. The Hmong at Pa Kluai accomplishes subliminality through altering their bodily comportment and adornment to be less conspicuously Hmong. This illuminates the underlying function of Hmong people's general tendency toward endosociality. Subordinated people like the Hmong need security in their social connections. As the condition of endosociality (see Chapter seven) shows that Hmong have long sought to manage their security by limiting the quantity of their social relations to group insiders. It was only in situations where they must depend on fate (*Pheej hmoo*) that they tend to go beyond their endosocialities to seek embodied social capital with outgroup individuals and bring those individuals into their ingroup (Herrod 1999). However, one of the ways they are able to become subliminal is by living in a refugized place. Although they may not have been given refugee status when they live in close proximity with many Hmong who have been given said status, they are mistaken for legitimately documented refugees. This is a profoundly important form of subliminality which many in Pa Kluai benefit from.

Review of Part I

This Chapter completes part one of my dissertation. Part one, in review, contextualized the lives of the New Hmong, who have arrived in Thailand recently by discussing several moments of Thai history and policy which have affected the lives of Hmong immigrants in preceding decades. This contextualization set up the readers' understanding of major political positionalities and cleavages among Hmong people in Thailand. Furthermore, part one explored aspects of Hmong territoriality. Chapter two explored the forms of Hmong territorialities associated with that political cleavage. And although the Hmong have been associated with some ethnonationalist territorialities, I, following Lee Zai, make the argument that there is another, less suspect, form of territoriality which is not based on complete domination of

bounded state space, but interested in social development. I argue that the Hmong of Vietnam attempted to establish such a territorialization in Muong Nhe before but were violently repressed. Many Hmong Viet then made their journey to Thailand. In chapter three, I explain how this journey has also made the Hmong Viet suspected of involvement in ethnonationalist insurgency and human trafficking and setting them against the Hmong Thai in the preexisting political cleavage between New Lao Hmong and Thailand's preexisting Hmong inhabitants.

Now, after having explained the tendency for Hmong in Thailand to make a place in Thailand through building embodied social capital, I turn to build on the theme of making place and, more specifically, making territory. In so doing, I should remind readers that my definition of territory does not follow traditional Anglophonic understandings of the term. Rather I see territory as a power and control in a weaving of social relations. Rather than a bounded space, territory is a topology, a network of power and control articulated in space. In chapters five through eight, I show how the People at Pa Kluai in Bangkok establish a network of social relations that give them control over their place. This control is accomplished through establishing an affect of trust, which militates against the tendency for the Hmong in Thailand to scatter, disperse, and distrust one another due to the threat of surveillance and legibility from the Thai government, UN, and outside agents. By establishing trust, the community becomes cohesive enough to control the flow of information about themselves to keep themselves only semi-legible to outside observers. In the end, this semi-legibility ensures the safety of vulnerable members of their group. This internal organizing allows them to contact more outgroup individuals to make donations to the community. These donations drive the community to become more legible to themselves through efforts to make donation distribution a transparent

rationalized process aided by digital technology—such as photographs of food donations. This sociotechnical practice creates the territorialization that is Pa Kluai.

Part III
Ethnography

Chapter 5

Gathering Around the Trellis Pole: Pa Kluai's Network of Material Propinquity

I continue the dissertation with a deep dive into the material landscape of Pa Kluai, which has helped the group to become a community. According to my first back of an envelope appraisal of the affective difference between Pa Kluai and Thung Raab, the happy affect found in Pa Kluai came as a result of these Hmong being able to live physically close to one another. Up to that point, I had only been exposed to the rural scattering of families in sleepy, isolated communities that was characteristic of the Hmong Lao living in Thung Raab. So, if dispersion leads to isolation, then a gathering, inversely, should lead to more convivial relations. To some degree, this is true but incomplete. I came to find that the Hmong at Pa Kluai were gathered in one place, but so were other groups of Hmong gathered in other parts of Bangkok. However, these groups did not show a similar social cohesiveness and happy attitude; they reminded me a lot of the isolated sleepiness of Thung Raab despite several families living in the same apartment block. This led me to analyze my original question regarding the different affects of these communities from the other side of the socio-spatial dialectic, realizing that it must be something about the social relations at Pa Kluai which have allowed them to come closer together in the same material space, and closer in terms of social relations. Examining from the perspective of a socio-spatial dialectic, rather than simple causation, has allowed me to utilize elements of a relational materialist perspective commonly employed in more-than-representational theory. This perspective opens the way to see how the interaction of things and people has influenced the production of social situations, just as the interaction of people and people does. In this chapter, I delineate how a network of material propinquity has helped Hmong at Pa Kluai form a cohesive

settlement, often expressing an affect of happiness and conviviality. This conviviality sets the stage for building group cooperation for the execution of logistical organization and activism.

Situating My Subject Communities

Before exploring how Hmong illegitimacy is concealed, understanding some background about Pa Kluai and Thung Raab's settlements is useful to help understand the context of each community, something crucial for this chapter. Thung Raab is located in a rural area a few hours away from Pa Kluai, which is in the city. Though Thung Raab's Hmong population is dominated by Hmong Lao, a fair number of Vietnamese Hmong occupy the area, probably a two-fifths of the Hmong in the area. The Thung Raab settlements of three to five Hmong families are dispersed across the countryside with kilometers between each, whereas Pa Kluai is a concentrated settlement containing first seventeen, then nearly forty families peppering a densely populated urban area at the time of my latest visit in 2016. The-In and Khlong Bua are two other Urban Hmong settlements. However, these areas seem less cohesive than Pa Kluai. Together there are around eighty New Hmong Viet families living in Bangkok. This is a total of about 680 to 700 people. There seems to have been a small influx in 2017 with an increase of about ten families coming to Pa Kluai.

Pa Kluai

The Hmong first began coming to Pa Kluai in 2013 and 2014. The core group of Hmong who live there now had lived as a larger group in the Khlong Bua area. According to Dao Hang, many of the Pa Kluai residents were paying high rents in Khlong Bua. While still living in Khlong Bua, a few in what would eventually become the Pa Kluai group became acquainted with

a few Montagnards who were living in the Pa Kluai area. These Montagnards were getting assistance from the Catholic Church near Pa Kluai. After speaking with the Montagnards and finding that rents were cheaper in Pa Kluai, many Hmong began moving from from Khlong Bua to Pa Kluai.

Pa Kluai sits in an urban area. In Pa Kluai, though, Hmong certainly are not a majority in the area, is mixed in what could be described as a virtually contiguous settlement. It is sandwiched between a quiet, smelly canal (the old thoroughfares of this urban area) and a noisy—and still smelly—road (one of the new thoroughfares). This large road running North/South is a two-lane causeway running in either direction and divided by a center median. During daylight hour's constant flow of traffic, this road can only be traversed via a skywalk. This main road is lined by a succession of three or four-storied row houses with shopfronts on the first floor. The Pa Kluai Area is a series of six narrow easterly alleyways running from the road and touching the canal to the west. Though this type of settlement is quite tangled up in urbanity, the settlement really resembles an overgrown street village extended some 300 yards from the road. Vietnamese Hmong people are sprinkled into the population of Pa Kluai among other ethnic groups (mostly central Thai, and Isaan Thai, and Burmese Karen). The section of Pa Kluai where most of the Hmong Viet live is more or less a rectangular-shaped alleyway. What had been two parallel alleys running east-west from the road was connected laterally at the bottom end (furthest from the road) by a large open cement lot once used as parking for the open-air market that once filled in the top half of this large rectangle of streets. Also, at the west end of the rectangle (farthest from the street) sits a large Chinese shrine dedicated to the spirit of the place, maintained by prominent Sino-Thai landlords of the area. Inside the top half of the rectangle within the U grows an adolescent forest which has quickly reclaimed the ruins of the

not-so-ancient market, sending sugar cane and banana trunks up to obscure the view between three or four-story row houses that face inward at one another from the two east-west running streets and the north-south running street parallel to the main road and the north-south running parking lot (which is about three times as wide as one of the small streets) outside edges of the alley streets. Rather than having an open space on either side of these houses, they form one continuous wall of houses running all the way from the spot where the southern alley, running east-west, meets with the row houses running north-south. The northern alley running east-west has only two open spots, one small alley which connects this alley to an adjacent set of row houses and ramshackle apartment blocks which are crumbling in some places and stair railings are missing. And an even smaller walkway which opens from the rectangle into the tangle of walkways through now permanent slums of the area along a canal to a market further to the north. Aside from the obvious presence of Thai people in the area, Hmong people can be seen outside walking to neighbors' homes. The few older Hmong women who live at Pa Kluai are often out watching children playing in the street, especially near the Chinese shrine, where there is a large cement pad perfect for running around and playing children's games.

The Hmong at Khlong Bua live primarily in two types of dwellings, row houses, and flats. A large portion lives in three-storied row houses, with each floor about ten by thirty feet in size. Although the design is not completely uniform, most of these row houses have three stories with large landings between the first and second floor and the second and third. Most such houses hold three families, but it is not uncommon to house four. The first floor of some of these houses is not particularly suitable for sleeping on, cement or tile floor remains damp, especially during rain, and the marks from flood water about a foot up the wall remind those sleeping on the floor there to sleep with one eye open during heavy rainstorms. Most families in

Khlong Bua, however, live in flats. A large group is crammed into one particularly dilapidated building. Cracked and chipped cement stairs covered in peeling paint with crumbling railing lead up to three levels of hallways connecting with ten by twenty-foot rooms filled with Thai nationals (many from the northeast), Burmese immigrant and workers (mostly ethnic Karen) and a healthy portion of Vietnamese Hmong. In this place, families rent their own flats, splitting only the cost of internet connection. Hmong in Khlong Bua live, quarters are cramped. Each family shares one large room where all of their sleeping, eating, cooking, studying, playing, TV watching, computer use, resting, etc. takes place. In some cases, there are upwards of 10 people sleeping in one of these 10'x 25' rooms.

Clan and lineage in Pa Kluai

Although clan and lineage are not major themes in this dissertation, it is appropriate here to mention that clan and lineage play some role in grouping the Hmong in Pa Kluai together; However, the importance of clan is significantly reduced in Pa Kluai as compared to traditional villages. Traditional Hmong villages are often grouped together as a *lub zos*, which share both clan and lineage affinities. This affinity is necessary for the practice of funeral proceedings, which are specific to each subclan or lineage specificity. If one dies in a village where there is no one to perform the proper funeral rites, there is fear that that person will not make it safely to the afterlife. The Hmong in Pa Kluai are all Christian and do participate in traditional funerary practices. Thus, they have little need to group together. Clan identities and linkages have suffered in Christian communities (Prasit 2001: 4)

That said, it would seem that the Christian Hmong in Pa Kluai are following a similar trend. But the Hmong who have come to the Pa Kluai group in networks made of immediate family. Members of families can be seen to form chains of migration to Thailand, in which one

family member precedes the others. The one who goes ahead is helped financially by those who remained in Vietnam and is tasked with preparing for the others to come later. This system is problematic in that it can be taken for human trafficking. In some cases, one lonely family member convinces another to come to Thailand, telling them how great things are. However, when the new family member arrives and finds his relative living in poverty, conflicts can ensue.

Although they do not group on the basis of clan or lineage, the Hmong in Pa Kluai and elsewhere make connections with other Hmong people through social media and otherwise through clan networks. This practice of *nrhiav kwv tij* (or searching for kin), is common especially in Pa Kluai, because most here have computers to access Facebook. Searching for kin can sometimes result in influencing others to come to Thailand. I watched a meeting of two men of the same clan who had chatted online. One of them had newly arrived in Thailand. The newcomer accused the other one of telling him that he would help him once he arrived in Thailand (see Chapter seven for details). In another instance, two members of the same clan got into a major conflict after one accused the other of human trafficking. Despite their shared clan affiliation, they have become some of the most bitter enemies of any Hmong people in Bangkok.

Thung Raab

On the other hand, the half dozen Hmong settlements in Thung Raab's rural agricultural landscape are found on back roads that branch off of the main road at different intervals. Each group of three to five families is closely packed in single-level dormitories, apartments, or homes tucked away as far from the main road as possible, though within reasonable walking distance. Though Thai people live surrounding most of these settlements, Hmong make up the majority of tenants in each of these small dormitories, except one dormitory where ethnicities are fairly

mixed. Each settlement is beyond walking distance from the others, keeping visits between their members fairly restricted. However, a system of truck-taxis running the main road which each of these settlements branch from as well as a few Hmong motorbike owners allow for some travel and contact between Hmong settlements and elsewhere, though far less frequent than interactions between those at Pa Kluai. The Hmong here do not attend church, though most are Christian. Some Hmong Lao in Thung Raab told me they were influenced to become Christian because they are cut off from clan relations and cannot participate in traditional Hmong rituals, especially funerals. Another influence on their conversion is the Hmong Lao proximity to the Christian Hmong Viet, who are linked with other Christian Churches and charities in Bangkok. Unfortunately, the local Thai church does not allow Hmong immigrants to meet with them. They were apparently unsettled by the Hmong immigrant status. Fortunately, a former leader in the prison ministry in Bangkok—which is attended mostly by Hmong Viet Christians in Bangkok—has started a new church in Bangkok which has set up a program to bring rice and other donations to the Hmong in Thung Raab. Christian organizations have been central to providing food for Hmong immigrants in Thailand. Hmong Viet Christians were prominent recipients for food relief from Christian organizations, but Lao Hmong are not as obvious since many of them had only become Christian since moving to Thailand. It is possible that they were influenced to convert to gain access to food aid.

I began my research intending to do most of my research in Thung Raab. However, I received a complicated reception from the community at large, so I cut short research in that community and transferred my efforts to Pa Kluai. As a result, although I didn't spend as much time in Thung Raab and my knowledge of the area is not as deep as my knowledge of Pa Kluai, much of my observations of Pa Kluai are made in comparison to Thung Raab.

Tha-In

I also spent time in Tha-In, where several Hmong families live. This area's quiet and sun-soaked two to three-story block apartments where most Hmong families live is on a road that intersects the same main road that passes Pa Kluai further north. Tha-In's arrangement is more porous and exposed than Pa Kluai's, where there are walls of row houses on four sides and only a few entrances. Quite a few Hmong families live here. Unlike Pa Kluai, the material propinquity of those living in this settlement does not appear to have brought the people here to closer endosocial connections. As a result, this community is comparatively fractured. Only a few of the families interact with one another. The patriarch of one of the few White Hmong families I met in Bangkok, admitted that he had once lived in Pa Kluai but found it too exposed. Here he shuts the door and speaks quietly. He was often worried about spies and made sure to keep his distance from me while we traveled together in public. And while I knew there were several other Hmong families in the area, we only visited the one family living upstairs even during the usually busy Hmong new year period when it is common for many Hmong to come together and to visit one another's homes. The Hmong here are affiliated mostly with the prison ministry.

Khlong Bua and Ban Phloi

Of all the Hmong settlements, Khlong Bua and Ban Phloi are closest to the center of the city. These settlements likely formed for their relative proximity to refugee services. They sit near the Bangkok Refugee Center, and the Asylum Action Thailand (AAT) office. The area's buildings are densely packed but are not usually as tall as the apartment blocks of Pa Kluai. The

few apartments I visited here were old enough to have rickety wooden staircases and small apartments. These Hmong seemed very tightly grouped, a couple of families very close to one another living a very quiet existence. Although this settlement is made up of primarily Hmong Viet, there has been a Hmong Lao presence, those who were part of an earlier wave of a few Hmong Lao families who have since made it to a third country. In stark contrast to Pa Kluai, the last two of the three areas described is where Hmong people seem the quietest. Few communal activities take place in the open air, and doors are kept closed. So not only do Hmong people here not organize themselves in groups this, cuts them off from articulating with many organizations and individuals outside their church community at the prison ministry and the few commonly used aid agencies. Lacking, for example, the groupings of women embroidering together in the good outdoor light common in Pa Kluai, they are less likely to meet with NGOs from outside the community that might sell that embroidery, as is the case at Pa Kluai.

Traditions of Propinquity

The Hmong at Pa Kluai's apparent tradition of communality and propinquity is likely partly rooted in their previous agrarian setting in Vietnam. Tam Ngo notes in her book (2016) an encounter she had with a Hmong America missionary in which the missionary characterizes the Hmong of Vietnam as, "by far 'the most traditional Hmong in Asia.'" She continues that the missionary,

"Went into detail about how the Hmong in Vietnam still wear Hmong traditional clothes (with elaborate embroidery on handmade indigo cloth daily, and not just during festive occasions like the American Hmong. He described Hmong markets and the way Hmong youngsters still sing passionately to each other during courting and how warm and kind people are to one another" (Ngo 2016: 77-78).

In relation to Bangkok's modernized urban setting, Hmong in Pa Kluai followed agrarian livelihoods coupled with some gathering of non-timber forest products such as cardamom (Turner, Bonnin and Michaud 2015: 110). However, market relations certainly existed in those settings with burgeoning cattle markets, locally distilled alcohol, crop farming, and textile production (Turner et al. 2015), Hmong people in Vietnam appear to have maintained aspects of a moral economy based on reciprocal exchanges of labor and goods. Thus, they depended on and endosocial exchanges of one another's labor and help (*kev sib pab*). The context of upland Vietnam requires that the Hmong there continue to use water buffaloes as a primary means of tilling mountain terraced rice paddies, somewhat limiting the development of mechanized agriculture on their steep valley terraces. Ties of reciprocity also drove their congregational workings. As such, the Hmong in Pa Kluai already have a predisposition to organize themselves based on livelihood contexts, culturing a practice of relative egalitarian cooperation, and fairly democratic communication. Every resident I asked at Pa Kluai touted this as a fact, often comparing Hmong Lao with Hmong Viet. Pao Her, who lived several years in Laos, explained that Hmong in Vietnam get together to build a house or church, and they work together quickly. Hmong in Laos, in his experience, were less inclined to help one another, making the process of building a house much longer. Speaking of Hmong Thai, a Hmong worker at an important NGO working with the ethnic minorities of northern Thailand, admitted to me that she felt like Hmong people in Thailand are less inclined to trust one another. This might reflect the market integration of Hmong people in Thailand.

“For example, if you're going to do an activity with the organization and you get everything and gather it all together, Hmong people do not like that. Hmong like it if I have my stuff at my house, and you have your stuff at your house. But if you put it all together, Hmong do not like this.”

This reservation regarding the sharing of resources also exists among the Hmong at Pa Kluai, but methods of internal group organization has allowed them to build an atmosphere of trust and security here.

Close to the Necessities

Though Hmong at Pa Kluai, as a group, depend on food given in aid donations, this food supply is somewhat patchy and must be supplemented from other sources. While some receive this aid and donations because they fit into the right category of someone either seeking or granted asylum, there are some without UN protection, especially those who have been denied refugee status and have little claim on services and donations. That means that some have food, and some do not. Less formal channels provide food for the Hmong, including church donations from the prison ministry. This is now an important source, though Hmong at Pa Kluai have only recently begun receiving this aid. Be that as it may, food often comes to the community in a top-down branching form rather than the usual model of consumers who buy food on their own by going to a store or market. Bags of rice, packs of noodles, or bags of fruits and vegetables are brought to the community and distributed to its members. There needs to be a place to store and distribute the food that arrives. In communities made up of individuals living in several small individual one-room apartments like Tha-In or Khlong Bua, storing large bags of rice or individually packaged bags of fruit like pineapples or guavas requiring delicate handling would take up the whole one-room apartment. As such, there needs to be a good place in Pa Kluai to store and divide up this food. The lowest level of Xf. Kong Meng's home acts as such a storage and distribution space, important for distributing this food that comes from aid agencies, Churches, and donors. Because his house is big enough and is central to all the community members, it fits an important niche in the network of material propinquity for Pa Kluai's Hmong.

It is close enough to all the people in the community that each family can walk to and pick up their food at their soonest convenience.

But a lot of food is bought with money earned at various jobs Pa Kluai's Hmong have. As refugees in Thailand, Hmong at Pa Kluai are not allowed to work legally in Thailand. Those given asylum are able to access food aid through multiple agencies. However, aside from the gaps and deficiencies in this aid when one is registered as an asylum seeker, some at Pa Kluai are waiting on their documentation or have been denied their claims and receive no aid. This is a major concern for many at Pa Kluai since many have been denied asylum, and their aid has been cut. Hoping for a second or third chance, they stay in Thailand, now forced to work and seek sustenance through informal channels. Also, even if they wanted to go back to Vietnam, none have anything to return to. Those who have been apprehended and released from the IDC are forced to stay in the area because they are required to report to the IDC often. Others, without that restriction, often go to other provinces to find work. Most go to Thung Raab. This is a concern because if one is caught working with or without UN protection papers, they are likely to face a penalty. To bypass this issue, a few of them have gotten guest worker cards. One evening a new Hmong Viet acquaintance who lived just on the outskirts of the Pa Kluai area and was not a part of the community phoned me. His relatives had been selling sausages for a Thai vendor and had been caught by police. Of particular concern was that one of them, although they were seeking asylum, had registered and received a guest worker card, which was found on his person. Now having been arrested with a guest-worker card, this was a cause for concern. In our brainstorming on this issue, some of the more expert opinions at Pa Kluai were sure this would cause problems for the success of his UNHCR asylum claims in the long run. Be that as it may, Hmong at Pa Kluai are well-positioned to find work in the informal sector. Living on a

main road near markets, department stores, and busy bus stops presents them options for travel in quite conspicuous ways.

Probably the most important place for finding a living is Pa Kluai's nearby market. Of course, there are hundreds of markets in Bangkok that a Thai citizen has easy access to; however, Hmong at Pa Kluai are able to use this market frequently because it is close, and they can travel there in relative secrecy. Pa Kluai is connected to the market through a tangle of back walkways running through a now permanent slum settlement along the canal that runs behind Pa Kluai. These walkways are too narrow for police a motorcycle to ride easily through. Of course, the police are not always on the lookout to catch them, but the cover that their back passage through the slums allows them makes it feel like and is, in fact, a safer bet that they will not have problems with the police. When I first began to visit Pa Kluai, my unfamiliarity with this back passage led me to take the sidewalk along the main road to get to the market from Pa Kluai. However, I have noticed since then that Hmong people, if given a choice, will almost always take this back route to the market.

Beyond the obvious fact that the market is a place to buy food, it is a good place to work. Several Pa Kluai Hmong work in different stalls and businesses in the market area. They sell meat, clothing, and work in bakeries. Similarly, several Pa Kluai women work nights chopping meat in a nearby abattoir that supplies the market with meat. These jobs benefit from the need for fairly informal labor in settings where informal labor is the norm. Although these Hmong Viet make up some of the labor force, they are likely dwarfed by the number of Burmese immigrants supplying labor in the market.

Beyond the market as a supply of goods and employment opportunities, the agglomeration of similar businesses, and the attraction of customers to the market area encourage

several other businesses to group there as well. So most of Pa Kluai Hmong's daily necessities are met by these shops—anything from haircuts to watch repair, phone cards, or food. As I mentioned, there is a computer shop as well as office branches of banks and telephone and internet service providers close by. Besides not having to expose oneself to the perceived threat of traveling far from home, having these businesses close also saves money on travel and allows for frequent visits when unforeseen problems occur, such as internet outages.

An important factor in the network of material propinquity is the closeness of a big box store and a major bus stop where buses going in several different directions stop. Any everyday shopping need for Pa Kluai Hmong which is not met by the market by the small shops in the area is likely covered at this big box store that sits just across the main road that passes Pa Kluai and is a very short walk across a floating footbridge (Saphan Loi), from the alleys of Pa Kluai. Furthermore, the bus stop in front of this store is a major stop, so there are a number of riders always waiting for the bus at almost all times. As such, the Hmong people often waiting for the bus do not stand out as lone passengers open to examination. Furthermore, the market stalls surrounding the stop attract the customers from the big box store, further complicating the milieu near the bus stop. These stalls provide cover and a convenient place to hide. Furthermore, the store doors just behind the stop allow for a convenient place to duck away if the police approach. Pa Kluai Hmong take busses to a few frequent destinations like school—which include several in the area, including a missionary school—the Bangkok Refugee Center, Asylum Access Thailand's office, and UNHCR offices. They also sometimes travel to a church that teaches English. Buses are an important option for travel because taxis are too expensive on a tight budget, but other bus stops where there is little cover or other people around make undocumented immigrants feel like sitting ducks while they wait to catch them.

The closeness of homes together in Pa Kluai allows the men to meet early in the morning to travel to work. Several of them work at the same jobs. On many mornings I would wake up early to walk around the rectangle forest. As I walked, I would see Hmong men come out of their houses and wait outside the homes of friends. After a quick call on the cellphone, their friend would descend their row house, and two or three of them would walk out together to the bus stop to catch a bus to their job or share a taxi. Traveling together is important because there is always a chance of being apprehended by the police. Going to or from work is of particular concern since they are not permitted to work. Going with two or more allows them to warn one another if they see police. This way also gives more chances that at least one will make it home to give news if anything goes wrong.

Though their work in Vietnam would have usually been agricultural, men's common jobs in Bangkok include low-wage informal sector jobs such as construction work, washing cars, and attaching signs to buildings. The latter comes as no surprise to anyone who has been to Thailand and observed that the face of almost every urban building on a major road in the country is covered in a sign advertising anything from toothpaste, or energy drinks to plastic surgery or veterinary services. As one might imagine these jobs are dangerous, as anywhere construction ranks among the world's most dangerous job, and precarious heights required for sign attaching cannot be without major injuries, though to date no one I know in Pa Kluai who often does this job—for example Sia Hang—has been seriously injured. Aside from this, some work at a variety of jobs. Seng Vue has long worked at a bakery, and Thao Tou Kue is by now a rather expert cake decorator. However, many of the Hmong men in Pa Kluai do not often work in Bangkok. Sia Sher Moua and a few others travel back and forth between Bangkok and Lopburi. Hmong people have filled Lopburi/Saraburi labor pools and fed the area's economy. Hmong workers have a

good reputation there. Quite often, New Hmong immigrants leave Bangkok for a week or two at a time to do a specific job found ahead of time by the few Hmong Viet who live in Thung Raab, such as Sia Sher's younger brother Mong and Cha Fong Vue. In Lopburi, work in construction is most common, but also in cement factories, chicken processing factories, and corn agriculture. They may also travel to places like Singburi, or Prachinburi. I have even heard of a few going all the way to Kanchanaburi. When I have questioned the Hmong who live in Bangkok about why they do not live in these other provinces, they note that education is better for their children in Bangkok, but work opportunities are better in these other provinces. However, the few that have lived in the International Detention Center (IDC) at Suan Phlu in Bangkok and now live at Pa Kluai were caught while working in the Lopburi/Saraburi border area probably on the Saraburi side of the border. Lopburi is usually thought of as safer than Saraburi, where police have made several arrests. Accordingly, all of the Hmong settlements in Thung Raab lie on the Lopburi Side of the border except for one. Those from Pa Kluai who were arrested in Thung Raab and taken to the IDC can no longer work in those areas. They are forced to report to the IDC twice each month and could be randomly called so they must stay close.

This work is sometimes difficult. Sia Hang remembers that when many in the group first moved to Pa Kluai, every single man worked outside of the home on a building near Pa Kluai. They worked 6:30 AM to 7:30 PM, sometimes until 10:00 at night. They plastered the walls of an entire building every day before they could come home. Although they were not working hourly wages, they made an average of 220 THB a day. Sia Hang said that:

“They were going to pay us at the end. A room, for example, would earn our group 3000 THB when we finished. Then they said ‘we’ll give you the money. No matter how long it takes you we give you the same amount of money, whatever day you finish well pay you then.’”

Contrary to ‘traditional’ roles held by women in Vietnam, the Hmong Viet at Pa Kluai have adjusted gender roles somewhat from their purely home-centered duties often found in their previous settings. Men are more visible in the public sphere and its official, customary, and ritual institutions, while women are strongly tied to obligations of social reproduction within the home.” Whereas women in Vietnam are “generally responsible for all household activities, including food preparation and cooking, childcare, healthcare, cleaning, feeding animals, and collecting firewood” (Turner et al. 2015: 41), in Pa Kluai and other communities of Vietnamese Hmong in Thailand, Hmong women often work outside the home in places surrounding Pa Kluai. These jobs often include tending market stalls, domestic work, and processing chicken in a nearby factory. Each one of these jobs is available because the market is close enough for these women to walk to and from work in the early and late hours in fairly safe conditions. I did not meet or hear of any Hmong women who leave Pa Kluai and work away from their families in other provinces like several men do. With women often working nights in abattoirs or factories, some Hmong men take a decidedly more active role in domestic tasks. They are given the duty of day-time child care while their exhausted wives sleep on the floor of their apartments shielded from the Bangkok sun by blanket partitions. This shift is reminiscent of men beginning to do Paj Ntaub embroidery handicrafts while living at WTK (Chambers 2013), though this embroidery is usually done by women.

One legal means of earning income for women involves producing Paj Ntaub embroidered pillowcases and pockets for t-shirts. This embroidery is bought from the women through a program established by the NGO BPSOS, for sale overseas. The Mexican representative of this NGO comes to meet periodically with the women to advise them on the types of products they are interested in buying, he takes orders, collects their embroidery work,

and make payments. He is able to do this because the meeting is an efficient meeting well attended by the women in the community. Sometimes communication between the Mexican NGO worker is difficult, so it is inconvenient for him to be skipping across several settlements to tell the women the same information through a translator. Rather it is better if they have just one big meeting. Questions about pocket-size, material type, popular colors, etc. are answered in a single meeting rather than several. He has chosen to work with Pa Kluai on this project because these women live close together, and the others are scattered. He acknowledges that this is the only community of Hmong that is gathered together, and he must have a critical mass of Hmong women to embroider pillowcases and t-shirt pockets to sell through the NGO network. He attributes this to their leadership. They not only meet with him more easily, but they can help one another in several ways on the projects, including explaining the styles demanded by the NGO to one another, helping execute the technique, handing off finished products for women unable to attend the meeting and handing overpayments to those unable to attend. There are enough women living close together, so it makes sense for him to work with the women in Pa Kluai on this project rather than elsewhere. Hmong wand girls can be seen often, especially in the Hmong wing of the dilapidated apartment block building, embroidering cloth to be sewn onto the pockets of stylish T-shirts or pillowcases for sale in the west for 600 THB each.

Noj Khaya: Food from Rubbish Bins

Members of the Pa Kluai community, as well as other Hmong Viet, have adapted to their precarious employment situation in ways they would not have expected, especially in eating garbage or *noj khaya* (*noj* the Hmong word for eat and *khaya* the Thai word for trash). They often run short of cash to buy vegetables for daily consumption, or they are trying to save money in preparation for some future event. Although several are granted some level of legal protection

through UNHCR papers, if caught on the streets, they will not be penalized if they have their protection papers handy. However, when someone is caught working, these promises are less sure. Arrests and detainment in the IDC usually start with being caught by Thai police in workplaces. Hmong at Pa Kluai under UNHCR protection are not allowed by Thai authorities to find formal employment. Those that honor this employment restriction are forced to depend on food donations to survive. Although Pa Kluai group leadership makes a concerted effort to distribute food to the community through donations and sharing, individual families often run short of food. And the donations are often dry foods stuffs like rice and noodles rather than vegetables, fruits,, and meat. In recent years, rice donations from the prison ministry have made their way to the Pa Kluai Hmong, although the Hmong at Pa Kluai do not attend church at the prison ministry. This has helped. Similarly, an American benefactor named Dwight helps with food donations, especially fruits. Dwight, who has lived in Bangkok for several years and has assisted several refugee communities there beginning with a young Chinese refugee. He has organized a group of donors who help provide food and pay rental costs for housing. Kong Meng's rent is paid by Dwight so that a school can be run out of Kong Meng's house. Dwight also teaches cooking classes to the young people on Saturdays and provides a large meal on Saturdays. Still, Pa Kluai families fill the gap in food supplies by gathering discarded vegetables and (sometimes meat) at the market.

The market is an important part of the network of material propinquity, which the Hmong at Pa Kluai fit into as opposed to those at Thung Raab, who do not live near markets. Because the market is close, Food is obtained by digging for discarded food in dumpsters at the market through the efforts of women and preteens from ages 9-14. Younger children sometimes go in the group with older 10-14-year-old girls watching over the group. Women and children go at

night or after school time when vegetables are getting old, but not often totally rotten. The children often gather and go together to watch out for one another. But this method of finding sustenance is akin to dumpster divers in the US. The trash attendants allow the children and women to gather food, which is lucky because the older teenagers are too embarrassed to go collect vegetables even though they might be best at it. Trash attendants are kinder to them, but the men they kick out. Then when they have gathered some food, they split it up and take it quickly back home for the houses involved to eat. Again, the proximity of the market to Pa Kluai allows for children to go without adult supervision, and for women to go at night, without too much worry. The most common vegetables obtained are cabbages, cucumbers, long beans, ginger, and a few other items. When the cabbage or beans come home, sometimes they are good and fairly fresh, but often they require some preparation to make them safe to eat. Fairly often, the bad parts of the cabbage are cut out, and other rotten portions are carefully removed. Since Hmong people usually boil their food, there is little concern with sickness. Of more concern is the feelings of embarrassment and shame of those that prepared, ate, and presented the meal. I shared many meals with Pa Kluai members in which they apologized for preparing “Khaya” for me to eat, though I had no idea that the source of the food was from the garbage. There were no signs of spoilage, and the food was delicious. Admittedly, I was once put off by a slightly old pig face.

For the Hmong, the feelings about this food are more complicated. In the short term, the Hmong are embarrassed to be digging in the trash and eating those contents as there is certainly a stigma in Thailand as there is in the US. I felt their tinge of shame as they serve me the food and often tried to make some jokes and gave some forced chuckles. They often reflected to me about their shame in eating trash "*noj khaya*." Though in the long term, the families are somewhat

proud of this scrappy effort at self-sustaining. A few Hmong from Suthisan showed me photos of themselves picking trash, which they hold as proof of their commitment to Jesus since they would go from a life more or less free of material want in Vietnam to eating trash from the garbage in Thailand. They took the pictures to show to their Hmong friends in a third country. One of the community's benefactors, Dwight, found out that Hmong Viet were eating trash, and he strongly discouraged it. This was part of the reason for his Saturday cooking class, which provides the community with a large nutritious meal each Saturday and the meals for children on a few other days during the week at the school held at Xf. Kong Meng's house. However, this one Saturday meal and a few other meals, though delicious, are not enough to feed the community for the rest of the week. Food from the market rubbish bin acts as a food security safety net for the Hmong at Pa Kluai, giving them some peace of mind and allowing them to save money for rent and other expenses. Because other settlements like Khlong Bua and Thung Raab are far from markets, this is not an option for them. For a few Hmong in Thung Raab who live there long term, a few grandmothers, tend gardens while their children work providing some supplemental food.

Interestingly, Pa Kluai Hmong do not seem worried about walking around in public in their neighborhood. This is not the case for all Hmong Viet. Other settlements of Hmong Viet in Bangkok lack a cohesive grouping. The Hmong in Tha-In seem to be there as a general scattering of families with little tendency to meet together. Although possibly thirty families lived in the Tha-In area, they did not have the tendency to gather similar to Pa Kluai. Their meeting place is at church on Sundays at the prison ministry. During the time I spent sleeping and interviewing in these communities, I noticed the distinct concern by household heads to limit their family's physical visibility and not meet together in large groups in their homes or outside their

apartments. Likely the most prominent of the household heads in the Tha-In area because of his involvement in the prison ministry and his son's work as a translator for UNHCR, mentioned to me that he knew there were spies watching out for immigrants like him. While traveling with him, I would sit away from him on the bus. He had moved away from near Pa Kluai; in his judgment, there were Vietnamese spies in the area. He shared similar concerns about Thai police.

Physical Proximity of Community Ties

However, if most every Vietnamese Hmong person I met in Thailand came from rural agrarian livelihood contexts, why then is Pa Kluai characterized by trust and cooperative relationships while the other groups in Thailand seem more prone to mistrust and concern. Part of the reason that Hmong at Pa Kluai have been able to build trust and organize themselves is due to their physical closeness to one another. As already mentioned, the Hmong at Pa Kluai are all within a short walking distance (two or three minutes) from one another. This propinquity allows for frequent interactions, meetings, and integration of life patterns and matters in fundamental ways. Meetings—including church meetings—and discussions are easy to arrange. After moving from Thung Raab to Pa Kluai, Her Chee Moua's wife explained that she really enjoyed living in a place where the families are close together (*ti ti*) rather than isolated as in Thung Raab. At the end of a hard day, it is easy to find a friend to commiserate with or for children to find a friend to play with. More vitally, food is distributed through the community easily by bringing food donations to Pa Kluai's central meeting place. Computers and internet are also important to the community, as most Hmong here have a laptop computer, but the cost of internet service is expensive. However, since Pa Kluai Hmong are close to one another, they pool the cost and share Wi-Fi signals. Computers are used for entertainment and work, Xf. Kong

Meng has a printer/scanner and digital camera, which are important tools that everyone in Pa Kluai is given access to for the preparation of UN documents and applications to aid agencies. It is to the point that the people at Pa Kluai are a village. Furthermore, having close neighbors and associates makes it easy for groups of men or women to meet and go to work together or for children to meet and go to school together or practice singing for church and community events together after school is over, play soccer together. Similarly, children who have the special job of gathering vegetables from the market rubbish area can meet and go together to do their duty together. Other settlements are not as clearly organized into villages, rather they are a few pockets of families right next to one another, but not across the entire apartment block.

Not only does propinquity allow for ease in building community through easy travel and communication, but it helps heal up conflicts that inevitably happen in such a close community. Propinquity itself is important for keeping a community cohesive. Those that live near one another and depend on the same social institutions (i.e., Hmong church, house school, etc.) and interact with the people they are close to are less likely to cause problems for each other and forgive when there are conflicts. The overall decisions Pa Kluai community members must make are influenced by the fact that they must interact with the Hmong People in Pa Kluai often. They meet together to apportion and collect food donations at Xf. Kong Meng's home. They gather at the same church. They play soccer on the same field and so forth. In such a small, close-knit community, there have been few, if any, other ways for those with conflicts to escape their enemies other than to remove themselves from participating in social activities. They often remain physically close to the community and try to maintain some of the benefits; however, this is difficult.

A conflict between Dao Hang and Thai Hang illustrates, though not simply, how proximity encourages actors in the same social group to forgive one another or completely separate from the social community. Dao and Thai had been close. Dao had helped Thai in his immigration process through helping arrange his immigration from the Thailand side. After Thai arrived, they lived in the same apartment. However, relations soured after Thai reported on Dao to the UN regarding some fault having to do with immigration networking. Dao vehemently denies the charge and, in fact, accused Thai of the offense. Since this time, Dao and Thai have been in bitter conflict, with talk of fighting and even casual references to fearing being killed by one another "*tua pov tseg*" (killed and thrown away). Thai moved out of the home with Dao into an apartment in a large set of apartment block just a few small streets or alleys down the road. In the conflict, Dao's brother-in-law Long Xiong has taken Thai's side, moving his family to the same apartment block as Thai and effectively separating Dao's sister (Long's wife) and her children from the rest of the family, which includes Sia and their elderly mother who lives with Sia. Thai and Long both stopped attending church with the Pa Kluai group, switching to the prison ministry, which requires a lengthy cab ride every Sunday. Though I cannot recall seeing Dao and Thai ever speaking to one another or even being in the same room, Long and his wife came to the Hmong new year celebration held in Dao's wide lower room in 2016, where such community events often take place. Their attendance was a show of some reconciliation between Long and Dao and was facilitated partly by the close proximity of their homes. Dao and Thai, however, remain at odds, and Thai has become a leader in the Hmong group of the prison ministry. Though he continues to live in the Pa Kluai area, his connections with Hmong people living in Tha-In and Khlong Bua are much stronger.

However, in the discussion regarding Pa Kluai's propinquity versus the scattering in other settlements, it seems conspicuous that even one who is not interested in maintaining endosocial communality with the Hmong at Pa Kluai like Thai, he remains in the same physical proximity. This is partly due to the fact that living in this area identifies him with the community of 'Vietnamese refugees' who have legitimate claims to occupying Thai space. This space is associated with legitimate refugees. As such, Thai people in the area, including police, are habituated to their intersubjectivity, which includes an understanding that they are protected by the UN and should not be unduly harassed unless they have gone beyond expected limits. Moreover, shakedowns of these individuals would likely come up fruitless due to their UN protection.

Are there governmental factors leading to this arrangement? Xf. Kong Meng and others assure me that the UN prefers and encourages asylum seekers to group together behind leaders. As one of these leaders, Xf. Kong Meng knows that this is the way the UN can council with group leaders and make plans or distribute information and resources to the groups. Establishing complete and current networks of communication are key duties of a leader in this effort. This is, in some ways, a model that empowers the Hmong, who follow the UN's prescription to have a leader. However, as in colonial models, it also makes them more legible and gives the UN more access to the individuals in the community, making them potentially more vulnerable if the UN policies shifted, as has been the case with Dreamers who were made legible to US state authorities under the deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA). They initially made themselves legible to the government under Obama era assumptions, but this legibility was later used to victimize and manipulate DACA recipients under the Trump-era policy.

There might be similar motives or plans to gather Hmong people together. The Thai government has used sedentarization programs for decades to gather Hmong people (Geddes 1976). This was certainly the case at the refugee camps of the 1980s and Wat Tham Krabok in the 1990s (Chambers 2013: 106). However, gathering and sedentarization can become an unwieldy situation when groups like Hmong Lao immigrants gather in large numbers and become too visible. Public visibility and the disapproval of the Lao government likely contributed to the closure of WTK. However, refugee Hmong have been theoretically cleared from Thai space, losing the instrumentality of gathering Hmong immigrants. It makes more sense to scatter such groupings and make them disappear, lest they become a pull factor for new Hmong Lao immigrants. With that said, military representatives were known to meet with the Hmong Lao living in Thung Raab when a higher number of former insurgents lived there. However, such meetings were not as frequent during my field research. If they did occur, the Hmong and Thai there were not very open about sharing that information. Although several Hmong in Thung Raab told me that one of the owners of the apartments where a large number of Hmong live in Thung Raab is a former Thai military man with ties to the Hmong during the cold war, he would not admit this information to me. The Thais were dealing with the Hmong in secret and were not excited for them to form a large group like they had at Wat Tham Krabok previously or Huai Nam Khao most recently. An older gentleman in Thung Raab bitterly complained that he believed the Thai government purposefully created the situation he was in to torture the Hmong, so they do not come. He was referring to his daily worry about interdiction from Thai police, with no hope of going to a third country, but unable to go safely back to Laos. In this way, the Hmong Lao need to keep themselves secretly; they do not seek international attention because doing so would out their location and situation. International attention might

draw the eye of other Hmong Lao who might flood across the border as they had during the Wat Tham Krabok and Ban Huai Nam Khao periods.

Sometimes propinquity follows an economic logic. Pa Kluai Hmong Viet live closely packed, as they share row houses with several families. This helps to save money on rent. Rather than renting several individual block apartments, one rowhouse with four floors can house one family to each floor and sometimes more. The core families of Pa Kluai live in row houses, including Xf. Kong Meng, Dao Hang, Ger Ta Fang, Sia Hang, and many others. These are not family groupings. Siblings like Sia and Dao Hang both live in row houses but not the same houses. Similarly, these are no clan-based living arrangements; most of the Hmong living in the row houses are from different clans. Again, clan and lineage are not primary organizing factors in Pa Kluai. In fact, Kong Meng has told me in no uncertain terms he tries hard not to allow anyone to play favorites with clan affiliation since he knows how strong historically constructing clan conflict can be. Furthermore, these did not even necessarily start out as groupings based on friendship as most did not know one another before coming to Pa Kluai. However, the physicality of these spaces has made the Hmong here into close friends, and close proximity has also occasionally stoked conflict. The buildings are designed for one household; there are no separate hallways that allow for one to travel to an individual “apartment” without seeing others. Furthermore, each level of the house usually has only one room, with one family occupying that room. Since there is no other way to get up or down the stairs other than through each floor, the whole house is something of a semi-common space. Whenever you ascend or descend the stairs to or from your own space, you see the other families as you go through. Proper precautions and courtesies are taken to limit intrusions. For example, walking through another’s home late at night is usually avoided, but this is not always possible. In this way,

inhabitants know one another's business and look after one another. They know what is happening in their neighbors' lives to a greater degree than apartment block dwellers who go and come without necessarily seeing one another. As such, they are aware of the tiny details of everyday occurrences one another might need help with. For example, they know whether someone is sick, doing housework, sleeping, cooking, and so forth.

This propinquity has a profound effect on the relationships of those at Pa Kluai. As I mentioned, friendships akin to family form in these situations, but dire enemies can form here as well as we will see with Dao Hang and Thai Hang. Speaking of friendships, Ger Ta Fang—who lives on the third floor of a four-storied row house—admits he did not really know the people he lives around before he came to Pa Kluai. But now that they all live together and now they are very good friends. He does not know where they will go, but He doesn't know what they will do if they are not together. Dao Hang and Chu Vang's families share a similar bond. They live on the same floor of a two-storied row house. This is especially the case for children. Since most families have children, living in row houses provides you with ever-present playmates. Children can be found on other floors while their parents work busily elsewhere. Furthermore, teenagers relax on the floor and help one another with school assignments. Or gather around the same computer or television to consume the latest Hmong music video or Thai Lakorn drama series.

Living close to one another in the row houses or similarly in apartment blocks allows the Hmong at Pa Kluai to pool their access to the internet. They pay one bill and link into the same Wi-Fi account with their smartphones and laptop computers. If they lived in scattered settlements like those in Thung Raab or Tha-In, this would not be possible. As I will discuss, computer and internet use are practices that distinguish Hmong at Pa Kluai from several other Hmong groups in Bangkok that allow them to organize their community. Almost every adult

male in Pa Kluai carries a smartphone with him, a few of the women also carry one, especially those who work far from home or are often away. Only one or two families I met in Pa Kluai were without a laptop computer in the immediate household, though people older than 50 or 60 living with their children might go without a computer while their children have one. This is not the case in other communities. For example, I met very few Hmong in Thung Raab, who owned laptop computers. Most of them owned television sets and VCD players, but few I met owned laptop computers. In fact, Her Chee Moua, who I originally met while he lived in Thung Raab, did not own a laptop until he moved to Pa Kluai. Not only do most Hmong people in Pa Kluai own a laptop computer, but they are displayed prominently in the homes on a desk with a chair. This is often the only furniture in the room, as many families do not have beds, dressers, or tables. They sleep and eat on the floor under mosquito nets, and most of their clothes are on hangers suspended from ropes or rods. Most of these computers are purchased by their owners though there has been some aid through Dwight, the American benefactor, in helping to get more computers circulating through this community. Repairs and other computer goods are available at the nearby market's computer repair shop. I have accompanied Ger Ta to pick up his old computer from repair. Since he had bought a better one, he intended to sell this one to someone else in the community.

Speaking of children, the Hmong living in row houses tend to have more of them than those living in block apartments. This has to do with key differences in these two built environments. And block apartment, row houses facilitate propinquity of Hmong bodies and closeness of social interactions, whereas block apartments tend to create distance between Hmong families and put them in contact with members of other groups. Rearing children in these differing spaces produces diverging qualities of social interaction.

The Hmong people at Pa Kluai often have more than three children. Even couples approaching thirty can have upwards of four or five children, as is the case with Xf. Kong Meng, Dao Hang, Chu Vang, Houa Her, and Pao Her, to name a few. Some say this is too many to live in block apartments because Hmong children can make noise possibly more than other neighborhood children. This being precisely why they live in these row houses.

This is partly related to the fact that Hmong people in general (as well as many indigenous societal groups) value childhood autonomy more than modern western cultures, and possibly more than urbanized Thais (Rogoff 2014). I have had Hmong people tell me that by the time a Hmong person is sixteen years old, they know how to do everything that an adult Hmong person knows how to do. Children are rarely assisted in tasks, thus helping them gain impressive levels of self-motivation and problem-solving skills. This style of parenting allows for the freedom of Hmong children to run and play in ways that make the western helicopter parents cringe. During interviews, I often noticed that it was not uncommon for a Hmong parent to hand their 18-month-old child a shirt without even a word of instruction. When the young child's torso makes it through upside down the neck of the shirt after five minutes of effort and might by now be covered in mucus or thrown to the cement floor, which is often damp from mopping, there is very rarely a scolding word from his or her parents. Furthermore, young children often play freely, climbing on stairs, running in streets, shouting, crying, and chasing a ball or one another in large groups. Their childhood play is not so different from the Thai's except for the large numbers and the absence of scolding voices that come from the overseers of Thai children. However, the Hmong Viet have grown aware of this difference. It is certainly not lost on them that their neighbors have no more than two children (if that). Furthermore, the clatter and chatter of children's play and noise is sometimes frowned upon. This is not always some stuffy

Bangkok pretension as much as it is a confirmation of an existing bias (for those who know they are Hmong, often judged by Thais as slovenly and having too many children),⁵⁶ and the exigencies of modern work schedules, which include overnight shifts.

Footsteps on Cement

As I mentioned in the last chapter, those who do live in block apartments are painfully aware of the consequences of loud children. The physical closeness of their and their children's bodies and voices to other people can create problems. The Hmong at Pa Kluai, who live in the ramshackle apartment block opposite the main Pa Kluai rectangle where it mostly is row houses, must deal with this issue head-on. The small-block apartments they live in, with windows often darkened by sheets, do not house long-time residents like the row houses of the rectangle. Instead, they usually are home to transient Burmese Karen, an occasional Cambodian or Viet, and northeast Thais. They have come to Bangkok for work as laborers and guest workers. Either way, they are tired when they come home from work. When they are working a night shift, they need rest during the day when children are awake and making noise. So the Hmong living in this area have tried to take over hallways or wings of the apartment blocks where only Hmong live to avoid the conflicts from noisy children. I once received a telephone call for help from Thao Tou Kue while I was in Chiang Mai. Thao Tou and his family did not live in the Hmong wing of the ramshackle building. The harried schedule of his wife working nights in an abattoir and he working elsewhere, left their children momentarily tended to by an older sibling. When one of the younger ones began crying, a next-door neighbor arrived with a stick and threatened to beat

56. It should be noted again that most of the Thai neighbors think that the Hmong are simply Vietnamese. This is an identity intentionally cultivated by Hmong at Pa Kluai to forego any prejudice Thai's have against Hmong people, or *Meo* as they are sometimes derogatorily known in Thailand.

whoever was in the apartment. The door was locked, and he did not get in, but this was a scare. He could have also called the police to get them in trouble.

Experiences like this and the stories of others have caused Hmong people in Bangkok to consider the level of noise they make and their relationship to the built environment in ways they had not considered before. Some of them believe they cannot live in apartments. Dao Hang said, “Because my kids do not know how to be scared, we cannot be in a room (apartment). We have to be in houses (*ban pen lang* บ้านเป็นหลัง).⁵⁷” When he lived in an apartment, “My oldest son was sick and was crying a lot, and the Thais yelled at us twice while we lived at Alley 2. The Thai went and told the owner of the apartments.”

Coming from a rural context where they lived in single-storied homes, sometimes with dirt floors, they did not worry about the way that they walked. However, the new built environment and the intensity of social interactions, like angry stick bearing neighbors, has even caused a particular type of change to how they walk. Marin Tomforde notes that Hmong people have a certain way of walking. Again in Maren Tomforde’s brief discussion of Hmong people’s way of walking includes quotes of a Hmong woman she interviewed from Mae Sa Mai Chiang Mai:

"The Hmong have a very special way of moving, that is a Hmong habit. I always know when a person is Hmong or not Hmong. Even with people from America I know who is Hmong and who is not Hmong. Hmong people can wear any clothes, they are always Hmong. Nowadays, Hmong women prefer to wear trousers because the Hmong skirts are too cold to wear and it also takes too long to make them. It is easier to buy clothes in the towns but we are still Hmong even when we wear Thai clothes. We have our own blood and our own way of walking. (Source: field interview, H-SNI-MSM 8) “
Tomforde continues with an analysis:

⁵⁷ Although he was speaking Hmong he switched to Thai to say this particular phrase.

Hmong people say that important Hmong characteristics such as their "pride," love of freedom and independence from other peoples is expressed in the typical way of Hmong movement." (Tomforde 2008: 241)

Tomforde and her interviewee seem to assume a culturalist basis for this performance and a sovereign decision to walk "in a very upright, deliberate but self-conscious manner" because of their 'love of freedom'. But her interviewee mentions an aspect that Tomforde's brief analysis does not address. She says that "We have our own blood and our own way of walking," attributing some almost biological characteristic to the Hmong way of walking. Or rather something that is deep in the bodies of Hmong people specifically, I would argue that this, rather than a sovereign decision, is something more affective than cognitive. A materialist approach that considers environmental contexts explains how precognitive, autonomic reactions like those habits of muscle memory are often influenced *in situ* in one environment and then performed *ex-situ* in another. In this way, the affect of material propinquity, this time facilitated by the built environment, plays another role. Dao Hang explained to me that Hmong people, in his opinion, have a different way of walking, which causes problems with neighbors in the particular built environment of the apartment block, causing him to want to live in a rowhouse.

"Most Hmong people have had this problem because they lived up in the mountains. There is no one else, and you can have lots of kids. There is no one above you and no one below you. Out in the mountains, your kids could cry all day, but no one hears them. There is no one on top of you and no one below or next to you. So then we cannot really be in the city. When we [...]first moved here, whenever we walked [in our apartment], it was like this...thump thump thump. After staying longer, we have begun to walk without being loud.

In these early days in Bangkok, he had received complaints about his loud footfalls and loud children, which caused problems with downstairs neighbors. Regarding why he walked this way, he said:

"[...] It's not just Hmong people, all people that live in the mountains, mostly they walk like that. I was born in the mountains, so I walk heavily (*khiav taum taum*).[...]" The

reason for this is since you are a young child, you always have done this...ever since you've been around. No one has taught you. you just know that you have always done things this way (*coj li no*).”

So we can see that the absent presence of the mountain in Dao Hang’s muscle memory has helped to shape his current social reality. Furthermore, the non-human cement is an important actor in the network of relations (Callon 1999; Latour 2005) between Dao Hang and his neighbors downstairs neighbors who will hear his footfalls. Furthermore, Vietnamese mountain contexts required him to swing his arms in addition to stomping his feet in order to move quickly enough to accomplish tasks like hunting in mountain terrain. I have similarly seen several Hmong friends in Thailand stomp up and down mountains at a running pace with little to no trouble. At the same time, I slipped and slid slowly behind, trying to maintain my best traction. Once in Khek Noi, I was particularly amazed at how one husky fellow, a Chang clan member, walked back and forth across a ravine carpeted in slippery new banana leaves while I could scarcely even stand up. According to Dao, although he learned to walk more quietly, this tendency in combination with his loud children led him to seek row houses instead of block apartments.

Learning Docility in Prison

Dao Hang’s concern about his loud children and stomping feet led him to believe he could not live in an apartment. However, Houa Her, a more recent arrival to Pa Kluai, did not mind the prospect of living in an apartment. Although he had lived for a time in the damp lowest level of Dao Hang’s brother Sia’s row house, he moved them out to an apartment. He was able to do this because his children knew how to behave quietly. Though he had several children, they were noticeably quieter. He attributed this to their time spent in the International Detention Center (IDC) at Suan Phlu. Houa Her had spent over a year in the IDC, where he lived separated

from the women and girls in his family and lived with his sons. His time there was unpleasant, especially when he almost lost his son to disease, which he received little help to treat. He recalled to me that sleeping in a large room with several other families made his children learn not to overstep boundaries. Houa explained that he understood the attitudes about territoriality of the groups in the IDC based on their nationality. Cambodians were messier than some, Hmong children were loud, etc. Conspicuously, he posited that Turkish people viciously guarded their space from anyone's encroachment. Houa's son learned the hard way after he once fell over the line marking of the Turkish people's sleeping spot. He was loudly scolded by the Turkish man he had offended. Learning lessons like this apparently habituated his children to learning boundaries even from a young age.

After Houa explained this difference to me, I met with a few other families who had lived in the IDC. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that there is something to Houa's claim that children who lived in the IDC are more docile. This assumption evokes Foucauldian references to the materiality of prison as a carcerality that disciplines in order to create more docile subjects. As opposed to the majority of Pa Kluai's Hmong children who are rambunctious, the children of Pa Kluai families who have lived at the IDC are possibly the most involved television watchers in the community. They live comfortably in block apartments in the dilapidated apartment block opposite Pa Kluai's rectangle of row houses. Similarly, the two families of Hmong I met at Khlong Bua, who spent time in the IDC, sat quietly all-day playing games and watching videos on smartphones in their tiny walkup apartment without going outside once during my visits. Similarly, the young parents of these children said that their children stayed in the apartment during the day while both parents often worked. I will continue this discussion of carcerality in the next chapter.

Meeting in the Catholic Church

Pa Kluai's Hmong do not only meet in these row houses, but they also meet for church at a nearby catholic church, which is close enough to walk to. This meeting place is singular in Bangkok Hmong's refugee communities because it is close, reliable, and allow Pa Kluai Hmong autonomy. The catholic church just south of Pa Kluai's main rectangle can be seen from the back windows of one row of houses. Living close to the church allows Xf. Kong Meng and other leaders to communicate and correlate with Father Tong regarding church services, events, and work opportunities. Also, since the church is close, it makes attendance reliable. Pa Kluai members can easily and frequently walk their families to the church with small children and musical instruments in tow. Considering the alternatively stressful journey of taking a long windowless bus ride through stop and go smog-filled Bangkok traffic with five children, or a taxi ride with a guitar or drum, this proximity removes any excuse and allows whole families to come to church every Sunday rather than leave children and wives at home as is the case in some other churches such as the prison ministry, which is far from most of the Hmong communities. The church, which follows the Oblates Of Mary Immaculate (OMI), specializing in ministry to the socially disadvantaged, has worked with refugees, primarily Burmese, for years. One of the two head priests, Father Tong, an ethnic minority from northern Thailand himself, has developed a close relationship with the Pa Kluai Hmong. The church allows them to use the funeral building for its church services while catholic services are held in the main sanctuary. Although these Hmong are not Catholic, meeting in a Catholic church helps them to have religious and community autonomy. They run their own church rather than falling under the leadership of some outsider to the community. In other congregations where Hmong immigrants meet such as the prison ministry, The Hmong share religious denomination with the majority Thai

congregation and leadership. These groups that they are led by Thai pastors—e.g. Sunthorn at the prison ministry. Thus the purposes of the Hmong congregation can be muted by the goal of pastoral leaders of Thai, Singaporean, or other backgrounds. Because Xf. Kong Meng's Hmong protestants and Father Tong's Thai Catholics have very little in common, they meet separately and the Catholic fathers play only a supplementary role by providing a free space equipped with chairs and sound equipment. Xf. Kong Meng and his congregation, thus, have a safe, reliable place to worship and have unfettered control of how their church is organized and run.

On top of this, the church also allowed Pa Kluai Hmong, for a time, to access the church's large backfield to play soccer on. Young men and teenage boys can walk quickly to and from the field in the evenings after school and work. After a bout of exercise and socializing, they usually come home smiling and sweaty, if there are no injuries. The soccer field is in a protected area unlikely to be approached by police. Also, this large gathering area is bounded by buildings and walls concealing their presence. The soccer field is positioned just across the wall of row houses from the main rectangle of Pa Kluai. So parents or others can also watch the soccer field from the window of their row house. The games continued with only a few injuries for several months until some of the teenagers got in a fight with Thai youth. Another explanation for the evening soccer games ending is that Burmese migrant workers who attended the church began to complain that they, as documented immigrants, had priority over the Hmong in using the field.⁵⁸

Other Meeting Places

⁵⁸ This instance seems to show a hierarchy of immigrants. Documented immigrants like laborers seem to have the upper hand in conflicts like this over the group of Viet Hmong because some of them are undocumented and in danger of having the police called on them.

Aside from the nearby Catholic church's funeral parlor, Hmong at Pa Kluai use a few other meeting places. The wide lower room of Dao Hang and Chu Vang's row house acts as a perfect place to hold large gatherings like church meetings. Xf. Kong Meng's lowest floor is very clean and is often used a place to prepare and eat food for large groups, the second floor of his house is used as a classroom for English courses taught by outside volunteers and Ger Ta Fang, who speaks English. Orchestrating meetings as large and frequent as the ones held in Pa Kluai is unrealistic in Thung Raab, Tha-In, and Khlong Bua. The Hmong there do not live in or have access to these types of buildings or live close enough to one another to gather with frequency and ease. As opposed to the church space, all of these spaces are controlled by the Hmong people who live there. This makes them open for usage quickly and without the arrangement necessary to meet as it would be in the Catholic church space. Dao Hang's lower floor which appears to have previously served as some sort of factory floor is as wide as two row houses, making it ideal for impromptu church meetings like baby blessings, and prayer meetings. Furthermore, it is tucked conveniently back in the corner of Pa Kluai inconspicuously without any clear views from the street of what is going on inside the building. Also, loud singing and speaking is muffled by the backs and sides of surrounding buildings. The community owns a set of small plastic chairs they use for such gatherings, which they supplement with chairs owned by the families at Pa Kluai. They set the chairs up in rows from the front of the floor to the back, giving everyone a mostly clear view of anyone speaking in the front of the building except the few sitting behind the two or three support pillars running mid-way through the space. Since they live close to one another, it is easy to transport these chairs to and from the space. Similarly, the space allows for them to hold events unrelated to religious observance, which are not appropriate to hold in the Catholic church, such as New Year's feasts. In 2016, I attended the

Hmong New Year's feast in Dao Hang's lower floor. Tables and chairs were packed into the space, and representatives for all the families at Pa Kluai attended. The conviviality of the event added to the significance of the day to bring back memories of the hustle and bustle of New Year's events in Vietnam, as several Pa Kluai residents gave bittersweet, tear-filled speeches reflecting on people and places they missed in Vietnam.

Of the row houses, Xf. Kong Meng's house acts as a center to the community. With Xf. Kong Meng living on the uppermost floor of the home and no one in the rest of the space, unlike most of the other row houses where a family lives on each single-roomed floor. It is large enough and empty enough that his family can live above while a host of other activities take place below in the rest of the house. The summary of a cursory Lefebvrian rhythm analysis of Xf. Kong Meng's row house would reveal the lower floors rhythmically filling and emptying bodies daily. With those portions of the house filling different social functions, the first just below Xf. Kong Meng's floor acts as the community clerical center and headquarters. In the main room of this floor Kong Meng can usually be seen from the morning until about 4 o'clock on the computer reading human rights information, as he has been studying human rights law with the UN. He might also be conversing with community members who have lined up on chairs, something like a dentist's office. They have come to meet with him regarding various problems—family medical emergencies, help paying bills, etc.—or seeking help typing various documents, from personal histories to be sent to the UNHCR. He may also sit alone, transcribing or translating a video sent to him by persecuted Hmong in Vietnam. After around five on most days, he leaves the room, and his oldest son takes over the computer to watch Hmong music videos and practice singing. Unlike several other row houses, this floor has three rooms on it. Rooms off to the side of Xf. Kong Meng's office act as a storage room and sometimes an interview space. Because the

Hmong people at Pa Kluai hold their personal stories very private, Kong Meng might take them into one of these rooms and close the door while they dictate their story for him to write.

However, on Mondays and Wednesdays this room is occupied by the youngest children and an expatriate volunteer teacher of Pa Kluai's impromptu school arranged by Dwight. Dwight is a significant benefactor of the Pa Kluai Hmong. Although his aid is modest in comparison to the food aid given by other organizations, his support in paying rent for Xf. Kong Meng's row house is vital for allowing there to be a community center in Pa Kluai, where a school like this can happen, rather than attempting to gather at some distant church, like those who attend the prison ministry. This school lasts from the morning when the teachers arrive until noon. This was the room where I often slept while living there.

Below this on the second floor where there is a whiteboard, English classes for the older children were held on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday, taught by a few alternating ex-pat teachers. Unlike the Monday and Wednesday sessions, the special Saturday session of English school involved the teenagers and young adults who are now out of school for the weekend. The teacher was often a handsome young American college student from New Jersey whose rather frequent teasing bordered on flirting with the teenaged girls in the class, if their sheepish giggles and occasional swoons were any indicator, the Saturday sessions were a welcome distraction. Ger Ta or I taught the same group English lessons on Tuesday evenings. This same floor was used, though less frequently, to receive guests. I can recall receiving visiting NGO representatives from the UNHCR, Hmong Thai religious leaders, an American Hmong activist, and local clergy from the Catholic church. In a few of these cases, two or three long tables with plastic Doraemon table cloths were moved into the room and chairs set around for a *pho* noodle soup dinner. The same arrangement, minus the table cloths and *pho* set once a month for a

church leadership planning meeting, during the few I attended, male leadership in Pa Kluai's church met together each holding a laptop and planned for the upcoming Christmas party that Pa Kluai members looked forward to for most of the year.

Below on the first floor of the building, the teachers and students would descend on these eventful Saturdays and begin to cook a meal after the English class let out at noon. The meal would be eaten at noon by everyone involved, including most of the children in the community. The food is provided by Dwight's organization. After the meal was over and most of the students had cleared out, several piles of food would materialize on the floor of the room. This was usually seventeen individual bags of pineapples, guavas, lychees, or rambutan and sometimes more exotic foods like potatoes or apples. After the piles were arranged, the awaiting household representatives from the communities seventeen families would take a photograph together next to the food before taking their bag home to be consumed later consumed by respective families.

Conclusion

So in this chapter, I have argued that Pa Kluai's network of material propinquity has helped bring the people there together both physically and socially. It appears that the material arrangement of people and things in this area has had a positive effect on Pa Kluai's Hmong and allowed them to establish embodied social capital with members of their ingroup as well as their Thai neighbors. This is especially fortunate given that increased social proximity provides the opportunity for either great friends or dire enemies. I showed, however, that the network of material propinquity for Pa Kluai's citizens is important to establishing a positive affect in the community. Throughout my description of this community one can see the intricate connections

of aid and emotional care established between members of the community. Furthermore, in making this argument that Hmong people in Pa Kluai have positive affects. I have depended on a relational materialist approach. Rather than limiting an appraisal of social conditions to the human, I have followed Bruno Latour and other's tendency within Actor-Network Theory to decenter social relations from a human-centered analysis and show how social relations are produced by interactions with non-human actors and materials as well as humans. Stopping short of taking a vital materialist position, which gives materiality a pseudo-spiritual constitution (Bennet 2011), I find that in cases like the cement floors of apartments are key to shaping important social realities in Pa Kluai.

Considering the connection that spatiomaterial conditions have played in creating social cohesion it seems less surprising that Hmong people would have made reference to the spatio-material aspects of a landscape—such as mountain forms—throughout their history of frequent relocation and resettlement in the mountains of China and Vietnam to predict political and social outcomes in a way which intimates aspects of vital materialism. Though it is difficult to make direct reference to looj mem principles in Pa Kluai, since it lies in a mountainless lowland area, some aspects of Pa Kluai's urban topography are analogous to auspicious mountain formations. The Hmong word *Vaj Loog* references a settlement surrounded by a protective horseshoe-shaped ring of mountains with only one easy to guard opening. Topologically speaking, this would form a watershed area usually great for agriculture and access to water while protecting the settlement from easy invasion by enemies. It just so happens that from a birds-eye view, Pa Kluai design is a horseshoe-shaped (though square-ish) ring of buildings, which also protects its inhabitants from easy encroachment by motorcycle mounted policemen. With this pseudo-looj mem analysis

of Pa Kluai, I might be more apt to use the geomantic term *vaj loog* in the name of the village, as is the case in at Wat Tham Krabok (known in Hmong as Vaj Loog Tsua).

While spatio-material aspects are helpful for understanding how the community has successfully established some cooperative affects, there are other factors conditioning this situation that are beyond the spatio-materialities. Among those are the challenges to being close together. As I described in part one of the dissertation, a primary challenge is the possible susceptibility to legibility from states and other parties. Because the Hmong at Pa Kluai are gathered together and viewed by the Thai state and UNHCR, they are more legible. The legacy of legibility in their home countries, however, has conditioned them to form a type of counter-legibility.

In the next chapter I discuss, the technologies of legibility and introduce the idea of counter-legibility that have taught the Hmong at Pa Kluai that they are being watched and made legible by parties outside their community—namely the UN and Thai government—to whom these Hmong are subject. However, understanding these forms of surveillance and legibility are established the Hmong at Pa Kluai have devised their own technologies of counter-legibility. This idea of counter-legibility is an original term that is related in some ways to counter mapping. Just as *counter-mapping* coopts a technology traditionally used by elites and hegemonic power (Peluso 1995) for use by the subaltern, *counter-legibility* subverts power through a technology similar to the one that dominant classes usually employ to exert power over subordinating classes. Counter-legibility involves establishing transparency and democratic cooperation among subaltern community members. In the case of Pa Kluai, this intragroup transparency allows the community to have a positive endosocial affect, that helps keep order within the community. This order helps ensure good relations with those overseers and the

restriction of information the overseers usually depend on weak links in the subordinated group to self-report. In the end, it is precisely through these sociotechnical mechanisms, originally meant to ensure trust, that Pa Kluai's territorial effect is built, and the territorialization at Pa Kluai is reinforced. In other words, this place was good ground for the bean pole to be planted, and the vines begin to gather toward it.

Chapter 6

Through the Lens of Power: Hmong Legibility and Counter-Legibility

To this point, I have spoken about several aspects of the topology of power relations within which the Hmong immigrants at Pa Kluai fit. In chapter five, I spoke about Pa Kluai's network⁵⁹ of materialities. The relationship between people in Pa Kluai with other nodes of the topology of power are characterized by differing modalities. For example, Pa Kluai's relationship with the Thai government is one of discipline, and its relationship with The UN has some aspects of discipline and governmentality. This chapter discusses methods of surveillance, discipline, and pastoral governance used by the Vietnamese government, the Thai government, and the UN, respectively, for diverging purposes. These political modalities create an asymmetrical balance in which these subject-governing bodies gain increasing knowledge about their Hmong objects, making them increasingly legible. Furthermore, governing bodies seek to simplify subjects. As James Scott (1998:2) notes, they create:

“Processes as disparate as the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of weights and measures, the establishment of cadastral surveys and population registers, the invention of freehold tenure, the standardization of language and legal discourse, the design of cities, and the organization of transportation seemed comprehensible as attempts at legibility and simplification. In each case, officials took exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices, and, such as land tenure customs or naming customs, and created a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored.”

⁵⁹ This chapter discusses a network of materialities. I chose to use the term network to describe this formation because the Hmong of Pa Kluai draw on these materialities often in combination with one another to accomplish their goals. I have considered using the term ‘assemblage.’ This often-overused term according to Buchanan (2015) could be translated as ‘complex’ or ‘arrangement.’ The idea of arrangement indicates a more concentrated node of causality initiating the assemblage. I opt for network to reflect the actor network understanding of network with distributes the causality generally in the network Buchanan notes how ANT theorists misuse assemblage.

“One might say this is the nub of what ANT gets wrong with respect to the assemblage, but the problems run deeper than that because ANT uses the assemblage to name a complex form of causality which Jane Bennett (2010) usefully defines as distributive because of the way it rejects both direct and indirect causality in favour of a third option which attributes causality to the whole network of interacting elements.” (Buchanan 2015: 385)

This process of surveillance also involved the gathering of people into smaller areas for surveillance and possible social engineering. Speaking of agriculture as a form of simplification James Scott compares it to other forms of simplification for the purpose of surveillance and manipulation.

“The organization of the natural world was no exception Agriculture is, after all a radical reorganization and simplification of flora to suit man’s goals. Whatever their other purposes, the designs of scientific forestry and agriculture and the layouts of plantations, collective farms, ujamaa villages, and strategic hamlets all seemed calculated to make the terrain, its products, and its workforce more legible—and hence manipulable—from above and from the center.” (Scott 1998: 2)

This chapter uses Matthew Hannah’s systems of control based on the Foucauldian understanding of discipline to see how a possible gathering of Hmong people can be used to discipline Hmong people as a whole. For the Hmong, they realize that this discipline is easier to enforce when a group is gathered together.

In particular, this chapter shows that Viet and Hmong Lao immigrants have come to realize the importance of the words and categories used by governing bodies. They came to realize that the inscription of these categories on Hmong bodies have very real material effects, which include their own reactions to this realization—e.g., scattering and fleeing legibility (Scott 2009)—and the enforcement of policy upon their bodies. If they choose to scatter and flee the state’s watchful eye, they are often left divided and unable to organize themselves for any useful purpose. However, this chapter explains that Pa Kluai’s residents have discovered this imbalance and have built skills to create ‘counter-legibility’ which allows the people at Pa Kluai to gather together. Taking the technology of This counter-legibility allows the people at Pa Kluai to channel or restrict their legibility to the UN and Thai government enough to facilitate their own purposes and establish their territorial sense.

Even before there was a group of Hmong living at Pa Kluai in 2012, the history of Hmong at Ban Huai Nam Khao in the mid to late 2000s preemptively disciplined the Hmong, who would later arrive at Pa Kluai. The Lao and Hmong Viet were conditioned to live with the ghost of carcerality and surveillance. This resulted from their experience of imprisonment in Vietnam (see Chapter three), their knowledge of Ban Huai Nam Khao prior to coming to Thailand, their experience of incarceration and surveillance by the Thai government, and finally, through the reporting to the UN. Although the suspected surveillance from the Viet or Thai government threatens possible harm from some secret agent, or arrest and fining by the Thai government for many thousands of baht, the surveillance they truly fear is that from the UNHCR. This surveillance comes often through self-reporting (through asking them to share personal histories and give reports on their refugee communities) has the ability to decide whether they are granted asylum or refugee status. So, they try very hard to manage this surveillance as much as they can.

The fear exerted by the Viet, Lao, and Thai governments has a particular effect on most of the Hmong refugee groups I have come in contact with. That is to scatter, hide, and distrust others (Scott 2009). The idea of subliminality, or *Pheej hmoo*, helps them to get away from interdiction. However, the scattering necessary to maintain this subliminality stifles much of the conviviality and mutual aid that could contribute to improving the mental and emotional health of these individual groupings. It is only at Pa Kluai that they have overcome this tendency to scatter. Occupying a refugized place has allowed them to bring in the completely undocumented members of their community who would normally cower in the face of government and let them stand out in the open because they are able to blend in with friends and family nearby who have documentation. Refugized place shares some similarities with *spaces of sanctuary*.⁶⁰ Spaces of

⁶⁰ According to Carney et al (2017),

sanctuary is a more general term which describes a space which is provided for safe space from threat. However, refugized place is more specifically a place which has gained an identity associated with refugees. Rather than simply providing sanctuary, a refugized space provides sanctuary to people who are assumed to be refugees but have not been granted formal refugee status. This utilization of refugized place is an example of what Sara Koopman refers to as “alter-geopolitics” (2011:277), a concept I discussed in my earlier methodology chapter.

Experiencing Legibility Early in Life

Things that happened in these migrants’ home countries often instilled an early understanding of the importance of legibility to the government for managing the Hmong. Since the days they filled in the religion box in the household registration, they have become aware that their categorization as “Hmong” and “Christian” is something that the government pays very close attention to. It is a specter that shapes how they act in the present. They know it could happen again. As citizens of Vietnam, several members of the community have expressed to me that the Vietnamese government’s dogged pursuit of those in target categories, such as “murderer” or “enemy of the state.” Xf. Kong Meng shared a story with me that one man who had fled his home and made a new life living uprightly for several decades was finally apprehended for a murder he committed several decades ago. Though he had become important to his community, he likely died in jail. Here the government’s watch extended in time, but the

“The meanings of sanctuary can be conceptualized in a plurality of ways. It is by definition the provision of a safe space in the face of a threat—most generally for migrants, the threat of detention, deportation, or incarceration. But sanctuary is also a symbol, a set of practices, an ethics, a form of resistance, and a mode of governance. It involves relationships between people and between people and institutions. In cases of strong governmental opposition, it can be most effective as a practice when it is left deliberately unnamed. Through various forms of refuge and protection sanctuary is provided, but the givers and recipients remain underground and unidentified, defended through the act rather than the label.”

Hmong have every reason to believe that the government's watch also extends into space. As mentioned in chapter three, Hmong people were under surveillance in Vietnam, but the Hmong at Pa Kluai and several other groups are convinced that Vietnamese spies have come to their community. This fear seals most immigrant's opinion that it is unsafe to return to Vietnam since the government likely knows the identities of each asylum seeker who besmirches the Vietnamese government's reputation.

Also, I was told by some New Hmong Lao that they had no problems from the Lao government until authorities investigated their backgrounds at the time of their marriage. Lee Her⁶¹ claimed that many people having problems with the government if they were descendants of former members of Vang Pao's army or were associated with rightist insurgent forces in their early lives—often having left the forest at a young age. He says they would have no problems as children, But when they approached young adulthood and completed applications for wedding licenses and other government documents, they began having problems. At this point, they believe authorities were tipped off to investigate their pasts. The more recent discovery of their problematic connections, and only then, created problems for them. One reported to me that as a newlywed, he was sent to prison without charge and kept for several years. He attributes this to his application for a wedding license. Similarly, Her Chi Moua, who had been working with an American, employed by an agricultural NGO, became all of a sudden aware of his visibility to the Lao government when he began being accused by local authorities that he was involved in Chao Fa insurgent activities. This eventually drove him from the country.

⁶¹ Lee Her (mentioned at the beginning of Chapter One) was sent to prison after he was married. He credits his prison time to his father's association with the Royal Lao Army prior to 1975. When this was discovered he began to have problems with local government officials and was eventually sent to prison. He escaped from prison and came to Thailand. Since that time, he has moved several times because he believes he is being pursued by Lao government agents.

It appears the Hmong Viet in Pa Klui began understanding some aspects of creating counter-legibility even before coming to Thailand. As mentioned, the Hmong understood that they were legible in several different ways while living in Vietnam. Although the Hmong may not have received much attention from the government before their conversion to Christianity, the discovery by the Vietnam government of Christian Hmong created a new dangerous category. The beatings, harassment, surveillance, and forced renunciations associated with The Vietnamese governments' "order 184" marked the bodies of the Hmong and made them painfully aware that the government was aware of them. For the Hmong Lao whom I have met in Thailand, some of them claim to have been insurgents in the jungle before coming to Thailand and assume the government was well aware of their insurgent identity. However, a significant amount of others realized their legibility to the government in more imperceptible ways.

As this experience progressed, the Hmong in Vietnam became more and more cognizant of how legibility can be managed. This involves understanding how the formal bureaucracy of the Vietnamese government worked. Several Hmong interviewees recounted how they were unwilling to meet with the Vietnamese government unless the government issued proper documentation for the visit. This was meant to protect them from beatings. Later on, after the Hmong began applying for UNHCR protection in Thailand, they began to realize that this documentation would be necessary evidence. As such, police summons, warrants, household registrations, photographs, and anything that could be used as evidence in their UNHCR claims was saved. However, prior to this, the Hmong began using evidence in conversations with the government to fight land alienation. Xf. Kong Meng and Dao Hang were involved, respectively, after their fathers died, in using documentation to fight for their land in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Dao Hang shared an interesting story that shows just how skilled the Hmong have become in marshaling evidence to prove their cases. And their understanding that government constructions of legibility can be challenged on the same grounds with which they are usually constructed in the eyes of the Hmong, *Ntaub Ntawv*, or in English...documents!

After they first became aware that Dao Hang and his fellow villagers were being alienated from their land, they were given documents by the government. The documents purported to show when the documented sale of the land took place as proof that it was sold to the company before the villagers were given the land. Dao recalled that initially, they had no idea what they could say to the government on the issue. However, after looking at the documents, they realized that the documents showed an inconsistency. The documents showing that the company had bought the land was apparently signed and received its government stamp by the date prior to the land being given to villagers. However, they realized that the past village headman who had by that time had passed away had purportedly signed the document on a date three days before another document claimed he had become the village headman. They later met with government authorities and questioned them about these inconsistencies. Holding up the letter and pointing out the dates in our interview, Dao Hang recounted the story:

“They sent us this letter and which showed us that our village headman had sold the land. He had written his signature. So they first came and said ‘since some people are not home, in one week you come and we will come and have a meeting and speak so that everyone can understand that we did not steal your land. It was your village head that sold it to us.’ [...] now you take a look at this document [holding out the document for me to see] This day, the headman was not yet in leadership. The village headman was not yet the village headman. The date her is...[pointing to a separate document] they wrote it here...April 6, 2005. This was the day in 2005, they brought this document to the company, and they sold [the land] to the company. but the day over here [on this first document] shows that this day was...[reading in Vietnamese]. So here he became [village headman] three days earlier. Over on that document, it is the 6th, and here is the 3rd. So [on that document] the village headman who signed the company's document was still a

civilian when he signed it. [...] So we took this paper and showed it to them and said [now speaking in a playful, mischievous voice] why is it that this person was not the village headman has signed this other document for you? They said, ‘Ooooh, this document is fake. It isn’t true’. Then they gave this other document here and said this [new] one was real. This document is dated 30th March 2005, so it was one month earlier. [...] March 30, 2005, Zeb was still the Village headman. But why did they use the exact same stamp? They have four different stamps, why is it the same stamp on this day.”

Regardless of whether the authorities listened to Dao Hang’s argument, or whether it held water, we see in this story evidence that people like Dao were becoming empowered by the thought of wielding documents to defend themselves. The legible categories were something they were not totally alienated by. They could possibly manipulate them for their own purposes, in the way legal knowledge-empowered (Baird and Le Billon 2012).

Haunted by Past Legibilities

Aside from realizing their own legibility in the eyes of the Vietnamese government before coming to Thailand, the Hmong Viet, who eventually came, now deal with some issues that occurred in Thailand before their arrival. Pa Kluai’s Hmong community is well aware of the Thai government’s tendency to place immigrants in blanket categories. This has been apparent from the story of Ban Huai Nam Khao (BHNK) immigrant camp, which the Hmong call *Dej Dawb* (white water in English). This gathering of Hmong in Phetchabun Province near Khek Noi in the Khao Kho District between 2004 and 2009 was made up of primarily Hmong Lao. However, several Hmong Viet I have met were also in the camp. According to a Hmong Thai NGO worker from the BHNK area, the camp began around 2004 when people began settling along a main road. However, eventually, it became a camp controlled by the Thai military and was encircled in a barbed-wire fence. A few of them still live in the immigrant Hmong

communities of central Thailand. Be that as it may, the Hmong in Pa Kluai know this story well and have formed opinions about its ramifications. Their understanding of the story focuses on the shutting down of the camp. Though their understandings are sometimes fuzzy, they understand that a portion of the Hmong living in Ban Huai Nam Khao began to protest against their treatment in the camp by the Thai military. As I was told, the Thai government had enough of the Hmong at Ban Huai Nam Khao after a series of incidents in which leaders in the camp conspired to damage camp property through arsons and blame the damage on Thai soldiers. According to a Hmong Thai aid worker who had worked at Ban Huai Nam Khao Two Hmong, women leaders apparently admitted later that this was their strategy to whip up anger against the Thai army further watching over the camp if their personal demands were not met⁶². In the end, the Hmong in Pa Kluai I spoke with believe this and actions like it were responsible for the wholesale disbanding of the BHNK camp and the deportation of the people there to Laos. It seems more likely that Thailand suffered from a general loss of face as the Hmong at BHNK became legible and challenged Thai interests vis-à-vis Laos (see Chapter One). The shadow of something similar happening to the Hmong in Bangkok hangs over Bangkok's Hmong immigrants. Furthermore, the possibility seems confirmed by actual events. In 2012, the entire group of Vietnamese Hmong in Thailand were denied refugee status. Although the situation was

⁶² A possible likely explanation for these rumors is offered by something that happened with a group of Nong Khai Hmong

"On that day, some of the Hmong Lao, mostly women and children, boarded the bus willingly. However, some of the Hmong Lao locked themselves in the containment room. Many of them used the mosquito nets to tie the door of the containment room to block the Thai officials from getting inside the room. Some of them asked the security officials to light incense sticks to bid farewell to the "guardian spirit" which caused thick smoke to billow from inside to outside the area of the containment building. As a result, there were rumors spreading over mobile phones that the officials had used force against the Hmong Lao and used tear gas to subject and disperse them, which caused many of them to lose their lives. Many of the high-ranking Thai officials phoned me intermittently to ask about the situation. Eventually, the General who was at that time Secretary to the Prime Minister phoned him that the Prime Minister had ordered the termination of the operation" (Nipat 2011: 129)

sorted out later, the Hmong believe this case resulted from the UN's concern that intra and intergroup conflict and gossip to the UN contributed to this situation.

Some of the Hmong who were deported from BNHK to Laos are now back in Thailand, asking again for asylum. Although assuming that some of them were 'real' refugees who went unheard influences the Hmong in Bangkok to believe that the Thai government made an arbitrary decision to deport them. US deputy secretary of state at the time in 2009 had suggested categorizing the Hmong Lao currently in Thailand into three groups. He:

“suggested dividing the Hmong Lao into three groups, which were 1) a group which received POC status at Nong Khai province. 2) Ban Huay Nam Khao screened-out group of Hmong Lao illegal immigrants who entered Thailand illegally for economic reasons and 3) Ban Huay Nam Khao screened-in group of Hmong Lao who fled to Thailand for political reasons.”

Through an agreement between the Lao government, the Thais, the 158 Hmong people in Nong Khai who were designated “people of concern” were quietly (with no public announcement) allowed to go to a third country (Nipat 2011:148). In the eyes of the current group of immigrants in Pa Kluai and elsewhere, the Nong Khai group must have been seen by the powers that be as the 'real' refugees. All others were not placed in that category and were sent back to their country of origin. The same Hmong Thai aid worker illustrated that the Hmong needed legible proof that they qualified as refugees. For her, the veracity of their claims to refugeehood hinged on whether they had lived in the forest and had obvious battle scars. She noted as a translator and record keeper in interviewing. She saw that that only some:

“were truly [insurgents] that we saw. Because they had scars from when they had war and scars from when they were in the forest, and the police shot them, you could see holes from guns, and around their legs, they had them. Because we took pictures right, you could see everyone that had received this. because at first, we recorded it for translating and sending the information to other countries to ask for help.”

Furthermore, these people were poor and uneducated. Those who she considered not likely to be insurgents were those people who wore good clothes and jewelry. Not only does this betray her possible biases, but it confirms again that these Hmong were legible because their political positionality had marked their very bodies just like former Hmong combatants applying for naturalization in the US (Vang 2012: 692). For Hmong Lao immigrants, this seemed to be the primary way of proving one's refugee status. Most of whom I met came with few supporting documents to prove their persecution from the Lao government. It seems likely that this happens because many of the Hmong Lao refugees I met were only literate in Hmong, and some of them were not even literate in Hmong. Though they speak some Lao, reading Lao Language documents was difficult for them.

Disciplinary Power and Legibility in Pa Kluai

Added to the specter of Ban Huai Nam Khao is the present reality of Thai disciplinary governance in the lives of the Hmong at Pa Kluai. In this case, discipline describes the modality of control which the Thai government exerts over the Hmong. Matthew Hannah's understanding of Foucault's concept of discipline is helpful for understanding how the Thai government affects the Hmong in Bangkok and central Thailand. Hannah explains that:

“This disciplinary power was rooted in visibility and surveillance and involved the minute regulation and “normalization” of individual behavior through impartial observation and standardized, calculated punishment or correction of behavioral abnormalities.” (2000:18)

Hannah delineates the three-part structure of the system of control which Foucauldian discipline uses to accomplish its goals.

“Systems of control structured in this way can be seen to attach to individual activities what I call (adapting some of Foucault's concepts)” cycles of social control.” In an ideal panoptic system, each activity is (1) subject to constant threat of observation; and when

observed (2) judged as to whether it is sufficiently “normal” or regular,” and finally if not judged acceptable; it is (3) punished or corrected in an impartial, impersonal way. Although it takes very different forms in different situations and at different situations and at different spatial scales, this cycle structures all forms of power organized around relations of vision” (Hannah 2000:18).

For the Hmong, their very existence in Thai space is deemed abnormal to some degree.

However, their summary deportation is held at abeyance due to Thailand’s sharing decisions making power with the UNHCR, which allows these immigrants to stay in Thailand for the time being. This has some conditions, though, which require the Hmong to live in certain ways. Chief of these conditions is that they do not find employment in the Thai economy. Many of the Hmong who have been punished in a harsh or impersonal way were found to have been working. A couple of the men who were sent to the IDC were caught while working in Lopburi.

The IDC

After being released from the international detention center (IDC) at Suan Phlu, this connection serves as continuing surveillance, since they are required to report to the IDC twice a month. At least two families I knew in Pa Kluai, and more in other groups had members who lived in the IDC for significant periods. The IDC is not a comfortable place to live. Houa Her and his family spent more than a year there. While incarcerated, he was separated from his wife and daughters. Medical care was insufficient, as well. He lamented that his baby son almost died in those conditions:

“In one month they only let husband and wife meet for a little bit. Sometimes people could get sick and die, and their wife did not even know. Prison guards (police) just tell her that her husband went back to Viet Nam.[...] My son got very sick in prison and was unconscious. I prayed [...] and then massaged him, then he poked him, and he did not even bleed.”

Beyond alarming other migrants about what can happen in the IDC, such stories exert a panoptic force on the community because they know that some members among them will be reporting to the IDC, so some among them are clearly visible to the Thai police. However, not all members of the community are formally recognized by the Thai police. Also, police connected to the IDC make telephone calls to the community leader Xf. Kong Meng and the nearby Catholic church to set up impromptu reporting, which can pop up at any time. On some occasions, the police will show up at their house and ask to see their Asylum card. I once looked on in horror while a Thai police officer questioned the preteen son of the Houa Her's upstairs neighbor. The young man later told me the officer approached him in the doorway and asked "whether he had an ID card (UN protection papers); luckily, he and his family had such papers. But not everyone in the community does. Some have been denied asylum. Others have just arrived and are either preparing to make their initial asylum application or haven't received any type of documentation yet. It was likely that the officer knew that since Houa Her lived there, other Hmong immigrants were likely to be around as well. Succeedingly, Houa Her later moved from the first floor of that row house located in the main part of the community to a single block apartment on the outskirts of Pa Kluai. No one would admit whether he was encouraged to move because of the IDC's knowledge of his whereabouts. This would have made sense since the undocumented in the area need to go unseen.

The English Teaching Scare

A similar event took place one night and seemed to affect the entire community all at once. One evening while I was teaching English to a beginner level adult class, I tried my best to loosen the crowd up with a dosage of silliness. The class seemed to be enjoying the lesson and

laughed frequently. About halfway through the lesson, my co-teacher Ger Tha, who is an elder (*txwj laus*) in the community, came and told me in English. “Please teach quietly. The situation is not good right now.” Surprised by this warning, I assumed that my loud voice was bothering the neighbors. I later learned at the conclusion of the lesson that motorcycle mounted police had been in the area. Though we were in Kong Meng’s row house on the south side of Pa Kluai, The police had been in the northern half of the settlement in the crumbling apartment blocks. This was not out of the ordinary since, for this period of time, since the death of the King of Thailand, the police seemed to tighten watch over areas where migrant workers were living. I heard reports the next day that those in the north settlement stayed inside their apartments with their doors locked and lights off, waiting for any danger of police encroachment to recede. Because the apartment blocks are all accessible by a long open-air veranda/walkway running along in front of each front door and set of windows, the police could come to investigate at the window of each apartment if they decided to do so. On this night, they opted not to.

At the conclusion of the lesson, Ger Ta instructed the group to return home in an orderly manner. He encouraged them to go straight home rather than dawdling or chatting at the corner. They were to walk in order not to draw attention to themselves rather than run and to go two by two rather than a large group. However, the explanation was short and came with an air of concern and urgency, prompting a somewhat frenetic response. As he told the group, one could feel an electric shock of worry shoot through the air. Several children on their way out scuttled quickly home, darting through the allies. In the end, a large number of the group made their way up the stairs of the four-floored building opposite from Xf. Kong Meng’s rowhouse or community center, making sure to stay away from windows. I was worried myself as I made my way up. Seeing the community leader’s son lying staring at a smartphone on the top floor of the

building in a room facing the street, I wondered if he knew what was happening and whether I should tell him to turn off the light and lock the door. I eventually made my way back down to the third floor, where many in the group afraid to walk home had set up camp. They took seats in the waiting area of the Xf. Kong Meng's office on PVC lawn chairs. Xf. Kong Meng's usually rambunctious four-year-old daughter shushed her slightly younger cousin and told him in a mixture of Thai and Hmong, "Sssh cov Tamruat yuav tuaj (quiet or the police will come). Awkward pauses and jokes revealed each member of the group's method of coping with the circumstances. The group waited in the waiting room until well after their normal time of departure, the women and children would not have usually stayed in the school until 10 pm, as the chatting men often do, but this was not some pleasant change in pace, it was worrisome. Many of those at the lesson had recently come to Thailand, and because they had just registered with the UN were still without even a UNHCR protection document for asylum. Furthermore, they were less accustomed to events like these, considering them shocks rather than manageable occurrences. Although my worry subsided that I had contributed to some sort of police call to the area, I worried when I heard that the police called the community leader the next day, telling him they would soon pay a visit. These local officers' hackles were raised in Pa Kluai when they saw shadowy figures darting frantically through the shadows of darkened alleys of the area, belying their fear of being caught without documentation, which a significant portion of the community lacks.

Refugized Place

Here is an opportune moment to further discuss the concept of *refugized place*. The preceding two anecdotes reveal that positionalities of political legitimacy in Pa Kluai have

variegated geography. Not only are there Hmong who have been interdicted by the state and are formally recognized by the IDC processing, but there are also those whom the police come in contact with who have asylum papers but are not involved in IDC processes. Still another shade of space occupied by the subliminal, completely undocumented immigrants. As denoted by the subliminal designation, this last group often goes unseen by police, but they are as out in the open as many of the other immigrants who have asylum papers or refugee status. So why do not the police conduct a raid in this area as they have done in other communities? Why do they not make mass arrests in the nearby market, as they have done elsewhere?

The answer is that Pa Kluai is a *refugized place*. A *refugized place* takes on the identity of legitimate refugee claims. The police consider it to be occupied by legitimate card-carrying refugees. Since they obviously do not have the capacity of the UNHCR or AAT to make any other evaluation, apart from those organizations sharing their documents with the Thai police, the police have no way of knowing, apart from asking, which particular individuals are legitimate card-carrying asylum seekers and which have already been denied refugee status and so forth. Undocumented folks who come to the area benefit from this assurance that the police do not harass them as often in this area. Again, this status is constituted by aspects of affective interactions. The confidence shown by Xf. Kong Meng in telephone calls assures the police of this. But the community has recently increased from seventeen families to nearly forty. Some of the new families did not yet have documentation and were scared of the police. The police were clued in to this change when they saw people scurrying hurriedly through alleys rather than walking calmly from place to place.

Legibility to the UNHCR

I now move on to discuss the modality of power between the Hmong at Pa Kluai with the UNHCR. The UNHCR seems to exert aspects of both discipline and pastoral power. Much of what the Hmong are asked to do by the UNHCR, such as forming groups behind definite leaders, seems to be in the Hmong's best interest. The UNHCR is, in many ways, a benevolent force in their lives. Certainly, it is through the UNHCR that the Hmong at Pa Kluai have the opportunity to be granted passage to a third country. Also, the UNHCR has encouraged the Hmong in Pa Kluai to select a leader (as I will discuss in chapter seven) and to gather together as a group. This has been of great benefit to the community. And has obviously influenced the building of territorialization. This last fact conforms to a large part of the argument of my dissertation that the Hmong at Pa Kluai have established a territorialization based on a topological bean-pole construction of territoriality. But the fundamental relationship between the Hmong and the UNHCR is also disciplinary in the following sense. Matthew Hannah's simplification (systems of control) of Foucauldian discipline includes 1) surveillance, 2) normalization, and 3) punishment for abnormality. This relationship clearly exists between the Hmong and the UNHCR. The reporting process in which Hmong people write the UNHCR reports and histories about their claims to refugeehood is an incredibly rigorous form of surveillance that constitutes a form of legibility possibly even more rigorous than Vietnamese state surveillance formerly experienced by the Hmong of Pa Kluai. The behavior of refugees is scrutinized according to traditional legal constraints, and the intricate weighing of the standards of truth-telling. This is the process of normalizing in which their behavior is watched by the UNHCR and seemingly abnormal aspects of their life are questioned and scrutinized. They are asked to provide proof. In the end, a candidate is rewarded with refugee status and the promise of passage to a third country. Or they are punished swiftly and impartially by being sent into the purgatory of having

their application rejected, which is referred to in Hmong as cutting your papers to failure, *muab ntaub ntawv txiav poob*.

The Hmong at Pa Kluai and elsewhere are not taking lightly the understanding that they have become legible to the Thai state and the UN. Forming counter-legibility for the Hmong Viet at Pa Kluai has been a process a long time in the making. Their counter-legibility rests on a foundation of literacy. Unlike most of the Hmong Lao I have met, the Pa Kluai Hmong tend to be literate in Hmong. Lee Zai would be happy to see so many literate Hmong (see Chapter 2). Though it is true that few in this group were able to be formally educated—because of their early lives were spent moving from place to place after becoming Christian—their participation in frequent bible study and religious teaching gave them opportunities to become literate Hmong. A lower percentage of Hmong Lao immigrants were Christian before coming to Thailand. Hmong Lao might have had less interaction and less literacy, possibly because of less exposure to Christianity and the reading of the bible. Most of the men in Pa Kluai can read Hmong. Several also read Vietnamese well, including the Hang brothers, and Xf. Kong Meng. Individuals like these used their understanding of Vietnamese to read documents given to them by the Vietnamese government and the companies that took their land. It was imperative for them to outthink the government and these companies in order to get back their land, though, in the end, they were unsuccessful.

Unlike some of the Hmong in Laos who became aware of government legibility much later in their lives,⁶³ Hmong Viet were clued into the idea that they needed to make documentary

⁶³ New Lao Hmong immigrants seem generally less aware of the Lao government's formal legibility. Some of them mentioned that they only became aware that the Lao government looked askance at them until they registered to be married. Aside from that they government didn't seem to make much connection between them and the former insurgency. However, after the Lao government first noticed the connection, the harassment and mistreatment often ramped up quickly. This stands in contrast to the Viet Hmong situation in which there was a generalized sense that the government was watching them.

evidence surrounding the history of their lives from an earlier age. Many of them have prepared by gathering and keeping any relevant documents to their history. They learned from people who sought help from the UN before them. Earlier applicants were denied UN protection simply because of their lack of documentation. This is an all too common occurrence among the Hmong. Before meeting the Hmong at Pa Kluai, I had worked mostly with Hmong Lao who had no comparable tendency to collect documentation while they lived in Laos as Hmong Viet have often done at Pa Kluai. Those Hmong Viet who come later are instructed by friends and family to bring the right documents. They help them to know what types of mistreatment might make them more likely to gain UN protection.

Running Papers

Hmong visibility to the UNHCR is the relationship that is likely the most important for the Hmong at Pa Kluai to manage. The Hmong at Pa Kluai become legible to the UNHCR through the process of *khiav ntaub ntawv* (*khiav* meaning run and *ntaub ntawv* literally meaning papers is a process). The *khiav ntaub ntawv* process involves the preparation of papers and running them back and forth to the UNHCR office. Through this process, the UNHCR gets to know the intricate life histories and details of each asylum applicant and makes the Hmong legible. In some ways, this is heavy surveillance.

Pa Kluai residents often let me view these documents, which usually included police summons that marked a beating or some important meeting. Similarly, since a majority of the events which brought Pa Kluai residents to Thailand were rooted in land conflicts, land titles were important documents. Paper documents were often accompanied by grainy cellphone photographs or videos. From my point of view, it is impressive that anyone fleeing a country can

be expected to bring relevant documents along with them on difficult, sometimes physically demanding journeys, let alone know which documents they should bring. The transport alone is difficult, to say nothing of knowing ahead of time which documents will be needed by the UN. Though a good bet as I was often told is that any document has been given an official Red Vietnamese governmental seal or stamping (“Ntaus Thwj” in Hmong). With such documents, in one case, a young man was able to demonstrably prove that a large paper company had been claiming to have a land title with fraudulent documents made by corrupt local authorities, based on the dates of the stamped seals. He successfully gained protected status based at least partially on these documents.

This process is very involved and takes long months (often years) of stressful waiting. In applying for protected status, applicants must turn in documentary evidence for their claims for protected status and face a series of interviews with lawyers and UNHCR officials. On top of the fact that the UNHCR has the power to decide the future of the applicant’s life, the processing of papers (*Khiav ntaub ntawv*) is somewhat Kafkaesque, confusing, and frustrating, especially in translation. From my point of observation, applicants running their papers were often unsure when interviews would happen. There were sometimes misunderstandings about what will take place at a meeting with the UN. Hmong translators (usually from Thailand) were sometimes deemed inadequately familiar with Hmong dialects spoken in Vietnam. Hmong viewed Thai lawyers as unsympathetic. Furthermore, the process is long. After turning in their papers and receiving an NI processing number, they could wait for the first round of interviews and document review in a protection application that can last months or even years. Even if an applicant is granted protection, one still needs to be accepted by a third country for resettlement before their journey is over.

As such, this process becomes one of the overriding contexts of these migrants' lives. They are almost constantly worrying or anticipating the completion of the process or wondering about what will happen at the next step. When an applicant is denied protection, as they often are, they are allowed to make one appeal within 30 days of their first letter of rejection. Applicants can be denied for a number of reasons, often because of insufficient evidence supporting points in their history (or *Keeb kwm* in Hmong). Rejection letters often provide thorough explanations of which claims they hold credible and where insufficient evidence is provided. For example, not proving that a warrant was issued for an arrest can be the grounds for the denial of an application. The level of detail at which the UN is able to reject one's claim seems to have given many Hmong in the community an understanding that the UN is very knowledgeable and cannot easily be lied to. They have the sense that the UN sends spies into refugee communities.

Assuming nothing makes it past the UN's gaze, Hmong immigrants respect and fear the UN's assumed panopticon-like position. As such, many Hmong at Pa Kluai have brought documents with them from Vietnam to prove their refugee status. Though not universally, Hmong asylum seekers are increasingly aware of the need for documentary evidence to support their requests to receive protected status. They have been asked to give the UN reports on their life history and provide documentation proving this history. Hmong already in Thailand advise relatives, friends, and acquaintances still in Vietnam on which documents are necessary for UN purposes.

Some documents are lost during the journey. Dao Hang shared with me his frustration at having documents damaged while hiding in the forest. He lamented that the constant drizzling rain and humidity of the Vietnamese rainy season destroyed documents that were not properly

stored. When I asked Dao Hang whether there are some immigrants who should be considered refugees, but who have no evidence of their persecution, he said:

“According to my investigation, Farang [white people] believe in evidence. You can speak, however much you want but, they want your evidence. Because I have met westerners before and saw that they ask you whether you have proof. So I knew, and I answered, I have it. Here it is. Then they say ok. But if you do not have any, they say you should go and pull out your evidence. So because of that [I know], you should have evidence. Because there was someone in the scriptures that wrote: "if you are going to say something, you should have a witness.”

He later told me that:

“Some of them, the UN asks them, and they do not know how to answer because their minds do not work for them. They were truly persecuted, but they did not bring their evidence with them. So because of that, the UN says, ‘Why is it that this person could bring their evidence and this one could not. If you did not bring it, then you do not know how to answer. [...] It’s just like if I ask you, why did you come; if you answer one thing, then you answer another thing it is incorrect, then it doesn’t work. And it’s not that everyone at the UN is smart. The important thing is that your mind works. So you can tell them. Because before the Viet government calls and says before you come and see us make sure to bring your papers to us. So they go, and they bring their papers to the Viet authorities (the police), so now they do not have any evidence.

Beyond the worry of not having the right evidence, Hmong immigrants are concerned about the other Hmong people working with the UNHCR, Asylum Access Thailand, or BPSOS. They think that Thai lawyers or Hmong Thai translators do not do the best job assuring their attainment of refugee status. Several have told me that Thai Lawyers are unsympathetic and that the Hmong Thai translators do not understand Hmong well enough to translate their documents. There is concern that while the Hmong Thai speak Hmong, they commonly intersperse Thai words in their speech and do not commonly use many of the Hmong language terms that the Hmong in Vietnam use. Similarly, there are some Vietnamese words that Hmong Viet use in their speech that these translators would not be familiar with. Beyond this, there seems to be the

unspoken assumption that the Thai lawyers are somewhat unhelpful, and one working with a Thai Lawyer or interviewer at the UNHCR is not as likely to be granted asylum or refugee status as those working with Western lawyers and interviewers. As such, the Hmong Viet try as much as possible to translate their documents into English in hopes of getting an English-speaking lawyer.

Even with all this effort, many applicants are denied asylum. Unsurprisingly, the Hmong at Pa Kluai view the judgments of the UN as unfair. Several Pa Kluai Hmong who have had their asylum claims rejected by the UN are incredulous that they will not be granted refugee status. Pao Her and Fai Lor come to mind. Fai, whose close associate was murdered by Vietnamese authorities, was denied asylum. Since the Hmong believe this hinges on only a few mistaken lines of history, an unsympathetic attorney (usually Thai), or a bad translator (Hmong Thai translators), they do not take no for an answer. Similarly, the apparent capriciousness of the UN's decision making, as seen in the 2012 blanket rejection of Hmong Viet claimants. They seem certain they might be able to influence a changing decision. More importantly, though, they cannot go back to Vietnam.

Conclusion: Community Reporting and Counter-legibility

The primary topic of this chapter is legibility. The Hmong people living at Pa Kluai realize that the government actors are watching them and making them intelligible and legible. This understanding is based on experiences the Hmong had earlier in their lives, usually in their homelands, as they faced police persecution and land alienation. For the Hmong in Pa Kluai, this was mostly Vietnam, but there are a few Lao Hmong there. They have been reminded of the importance of legibility for their future as they consider themselves possibly being put in the

same simplified categories as the Hmong at Ban Huai Nam Khao, who were deported some years earlier. This legibility works in some ways to discipline the Hmong at Pa Kluai to keep some rules and respect Thai ordained geographic parameters. Whether it is the specter of being taken back to the IDC or being watched by Vietnamese or other spies, the Hmong in Bangkok find this stressful. Most of them, finding this surveillance of their legibility tend to disperse and not form a group—Thung Raab is a good example of this. However, this disempowers them from establishing some territorial control. The threat of Legibility militates against people actually gathering together because dispersal is a way to escape legibility and control (Scott 2009). Similarly, this fear of legibility stops most of the Hmong people in Bangkok from developing enclaved social relations strong enough to build a topological territorialization.

The UNHCR is another governing body that watches over the Hmong. It would seem that in some ways, the UNHCR serves a benevolent function. The modality of power it exerts over the Hmong in Bangkok might be described as more pastoral than disciplinary. Yet the Hmong are much more legible to the UNHCR than they are to the Thai government. Beyond the asylum interviewing process—which I call *running papers*—the UNHCR has encouraged immigrants to report any conflicts or crimes committed against them to the UNHCR office. However, as I mentioned earlier, The Viet Hmong believed this mechanism of making reports led to the blanket denial of all Hmong Viet asylum applicants. It may not have been the case that UNHCR was given information that portrayed the Hmong Viet in such a bad light that they simply denied them all. Unable to know the inner workings of UNHCR decision-making, I would assume a less direct geopolitical cause. However, it does not matter what I think as much as what the Hmong people believe. Their understanding is that reports on intra-community fighting, reports on human trafficking, an illicit political activity like ethnonationalism, and other

illegal activity could very well have been the reason for the suspension. As I will discuss in chapter seven, Reports of such crimes have been frequently weaponized for revenge.

Furthermore, the UNHCR uses such reports to refine their categories of legibility and make decisions about asylum claims. They have the unfortunate side effect of creating community disharmony and distrust and preventing the gathering of communities. As such, full legibility to the UNHCR is also seen as a problem for the New Hmong Viet immigrants.

In the chapters that follow this one, I explain my understanding of Pa Kluai's solution to this problem. That is, they counter-legibility by instituting a *counter-legibility*. This *counter-legibility*, as I explain in the next chapter, requires the community's members to become more legible or transparent to one another. They then ensure that members of the community trust one another enough not to depend on the UNHCR to mediate conflicts. Instead, conflicts are mediated at the local level and not reported to the UNHCR or Thai police. This way, Pa Kluai restricts the flow of information to the UNHCR by organizing and ensuring trust in the community. As I noted in the case of the English teaching scare, this counter-legibility has helped to create a refugized place, where the restriction of the flow of information—to the UNHCR, Thai police, or even other members of the Bangkok Hmong community—keeps the situation of each individual member under wraps. Staking the benefits of Pa Kluai's mutual aid and refugized place to the successful restriction of information to the UNHCR has allowed Pa Kluai's leadership to leverage enough power to control their community in a pseudo-legal way with a marked level of formality. Furthermore, pseudo-legal institutions have helped to ensure the administration of a topological territorialization. I will elaborate on this important topic in the following two chapters. In this way, the sociotechnical practice of formal conflict resolution and the internal organization of the community helps establish Pa Kluai's territory effect.

Imagining Pa Kluai in the beanpole metaphor of territoriality explains why the community seems to be growing, drawing the vines of disparate social relations toward it and stabilizing them.

Chapter 7

Twelve Oxen Gathered Together: Pa Kluai's Internal Organizing for Counter-legibility

In chapter five, I focused on how the built environment helped bring people into a network of material propinquity, which facilitated material and social cohesion. That network of material propinquity allowed for the Hmong at Pa Kluai some degree of cohesion that assisted in forming a counter-legibility. In this chapter, I continue that conversation and focus on the other end of the sociospatial dialectic by analyzing two human-centered social aspects. First, I examine how the Hmong at Pa Kluai organize their internal social group's dynamics through a system of pseudo-legal interactions and other community institutions. The social dynamics produced through these rules and institutions help establish a group affect of trust, which encourages conflicting parties to restrict the sharing of information about intragroup conflict with other parties (especially the UNHCR). This is precisely how the group leverages the counter-legibility mentioned in the previous chapter.

Theoretically, I am basing much of my understanding on a territorial tendency of the formation in Pa Kluai on the logic of territoriality described by Steinberg (2009). Though I assume, he refers only to the state-centered, bounded Anglophonic territory, I think Pa Kluai's topological boundaryless version can fit in this model as well. In reference to movement across borders, Steinberg (2009: 470) said:

“To analyze the role of movement across and beyond borders in the ongoing construction of the modern state system, one first must discuss the core principles of that system and its fundamental unit: the sovereign, territorial state. Although the concepts of sovereignty and territoriality frequently are used interchangeably in discussions of the modern polity, the two terms in fact reflect different organizing principles that can exist independent of each other. Territoriality (when applied to the modern state) refers to the manner in which

the definition of a society's geographic limits, the organization of its processes, and the control of its people are exercised through claims of authority over bounded swaths of land."

Aside from the idea of "bounded swaths of land," this description, as I will show, fits closely with the territorial management in Pa Kluai. Although Pa Kluai's level of sovereignty is questionable, it certainly has a territorialization irrespective of the recognition of other states. He continues:

"A territorial state thus can exist in isolation; it is essentially an inward-looking entity. On the outside of a territorial state might be a world of other inward-looking states; a world of nonequivalent political (territorial or nonterritorial) entities over which the ruler of the initial state might have some influence; an ungoverned "wild"; or absolutely nothing (in the event that one state manages to encompass the entire planet within its territory; Kratochwil 1986). Thus, at the abstract level, the concept of state territoriality can exist independent of a state system." (Steinberg 2009:470)

I would not argue, however, that Pa Kluai is only an "inward-looking entity." Though it certainly does look inward, this territorialization continually sends linkages out across space, irrespective of any scalar logic which might otherwise restrict them. The space-time compression of their digital communications has allowed them to build networks that include actors as far-flung as the United States, Canada, Australia, France, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and several other places but certainly into the broader Bangkok and Thailand community. However, I save discussion of this outward orientation until chapter eight. In the present chapter, I will focus on how the Hmong at Pa Kluai established a territorialization through the territorial effect (Painter 2010) by focusing on their internal relations. They do this in a number of ways, including the establishment of leadership and pseudo-legal practices leadership. This involved the use of sociotechnical practices that acted in prosaic daily actions, all of which helped to build affects of trust among community members to maintain Pa Kluai's counter-legibility.

Though the theoretical frame is helpful, ethnographic detail clarifies the Hmong at Pa Kluai's motivations for establishing this territorialization. A common refrain of Hmong Lao

diasporates in the US is “*Hmoob tsis hlub Hmoob*” or “*Hmoob tsis pab Hmoob*,” meaning “Hmong people do not love one another,” or “Hmong people do not help one another.” These phrases are usually followed by “*Hmoob Yuav tsum sib pab, sib hlub nawb mog*” (Hmong people should help and love one another). I once heard the answer to this problem shared in an anecdote that likens the Hmong need for cooperation with 12 oxen gathered in, tail to tail. In the face of an attack by a tiger, these twelve oxen gather in, tail to tail each pointing its horns out, forming a protective circle on the perimeter. In this formation, the oxen are protected from the tiger attack by their eleven other animals on all sides. However, when one ox leaves, there is a weak spot open, allowing the tiger in to attack the other oxen from the side or behind. This allegory is representative of Hmong endosociality and helps us to understand why the Vietnamese Hmong in Pa Kluai organize themselves to form a counter-legibility. In the case of the Pa Kluai Hmong, however, there is no tiger seeking to penetrate the circle, but there are those who would break through to pass along information to their UN and Thai overseers. Like the bulls, the Hmong use internal cohesion to protect against vulnerability from outside aggression, with each bull having a part to play in maintaining this internal cohesion.

Xf. Kong Meng's Leadership in Pa Kluai

Compared to the other communities of Hmong immigrants in Thailand, Pa Kluai has strong leadership. This term “strong leadership” here is relative to the other Hmong immigrant communities who seem to lack community leaders. Kong Meng has taken on the role of directing Pa Kluai and is chiefly responsible for the tactic of organizing the community to have counter-legibility. He has been selected as leader because of his charismatic position and his leadership style, which involves, as he sees it, being smart, hardworking, and service-minded to

his community. In this way, he has drawn on Hmong practice and devised rules that encourage the community to self-police in order to resolve conflict and regulate the flow of information to the UN. In this way, though, conflicts certainly persist, but members of the community feel a sense of security and are able to project positive affects toward one another.

Reminding briefly of the bean pole territorial metaphor, I should note that this leadership helps to ensure the establishment of the community and a territorialization. However, in keeping with Lee Zai's understanding of the bean pole, the leader themselves are not the bean pole. Lee Zai envisioned writing as the pole which gathered people together, He externalized sovereignty from the body of the messianic leader and placed it on a surface containing writing. I will show that Kong Meng similarly externalized the territory from himself by creating institutions which bind the community together outside of his control. Members of the community have faith in the workings of the institutions rather than in Kong Meng himself.

In a situation of scattering, most of the other immigrant Hmong communities in Bangkok and upcountry lack strong leadership. In my own observation, no one in the Thung Raab community acts as a clear leader. Furthermore, Her Chi Moua, a longtime resident, and others confirm that there are no other leaders of the Hmong immigrants there. He, a Hmong Lao himself, has lived in Thung Raab among the Hmong Lao since 2011 and has spent time in Hmong Lao communities in Bangkok. This situation seems contrary to the desires of the UN. According to several sources, UN policy prefers that each immigrant community has a leader. This leadership usually follows the ethnicity or national origin of the group, leaving the Hmong Lao without leadership. Summarizing this relationship, Dao Hang described Xf. Kong Meng's duty as leader of Pa Kluai:

“When they have a leader, for example, when the UN calls these people to come to any sort of meeting, then the leader speaks to the people and meets with the UN for all the

people he represents. For example, if you are the leader, I say to you [speaking as the UN] ‘*you tell your Hmong people, or you speak to your Farang [Thai word for a white foreigner] that today there is a meeting and you need to tell them everything.*’ In this same way, they say [to Kong Meng] today you speak to your Hmong, or that today we have a meeting. [...]”

Speaking of past situations in the Lao and Hmong Viet communities, there were once leaders in most of the gatherings of Hmong in the city, including the Hmong Lao groups. The Hmong Lao leaders had now gone to a third country, and their successors lost authority in their communities, becoming irrelevant. Admittedly, the Hmong Lao are rarely, if ever, given protection status by the UNHCR, abrogating the UN push for them to have a leader. In the past, there had been a leader, though more recent aspirants to Hmong Lao leadership have not succeeded because they ask for money to adjudicate in conflicts and have given what is seen as bad advice. The Hmong Viet community of Khlong Bua, which was one of the first Hmong Viet communities in Bangkok, was led by a Hmong man from the Vang clan who has since gone back to Vietnam. Yong Vue was another leader at Khlong Bua who came to live in Pa Kluai since 2017 and has given up duties as leader of the fractured community of Khlong Bua. Tha-In, on the other hand, though fairly heavily populated with Hmong now, is a more recent settlement and so far does not have a leader, though it may have one in the future. It remains that only Xf. Kong Meng’s grouping at Pa Kluai has strong leadership, at least since my visit in early 2017.

According to members of the community, Xf. Kong Meng became the leader of the community through election or *xaiv tsa* in Hmong. Kong Meng told me that the UN, BRC, and AAT approached the community and told them that because there were too many of them gathered together, they needed a leader. He was then selected. Kong Meng recalls that after he was selected, the UN made a shirt for him that says “refugee protector” on it. Though he is too embarrassed to wear it often, he has worn it to special events involving the UN. Already, the

tendency to create somewhat formalized and transparent processes does seem characteristic of Pa Kluai, and he was elected in a competitive manner; however, it seems more likely that Xf. Kong Meng was fore-ordained to be the leader of the Hmong at Pa Kluai because of his charisma. Following a Weberian analysis of Pa Kluai, Xf. Kong Meng fits the mold of the charismatic leader. The confidence and optimism he emanates rubs off on those around him. Although he was not formally educated in his youth, Kong Meng has penetrating curiosity and is full of insightfulness that has come with his study of human rights law with the UN. More importantly, though, he won his charisma through leading opposition to land grabbing in the Vietnamese Central Highlands. He was well respected by people who live in the Pa Kluai community even before they had come to Pa Kluai or had met Xf. Kong Meng. Tub Ger Yang recalls that “Kong Meng is a person that represented everyone in that area and he was a leader that tried to get everyone to cooperate, he did not take anyone’s money, but everyone was taking him to court.” Similarly, Dao Hang told me:

“[...] In Vietnam, I knew Kong Meng. I knew him in Vietnam because he was the one who spoke back the truth to the government. He lived in another province and was far away. Kong Meng was in Binh Phuoc, but I was in Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông is in the middle and then Binh Phuoc. So the reason for this was that Kong Meng...the authorities came and canceled his efforts [using the Thai word “yup” for cancel] and took his land back.”

Xf. Kong Meng’s popularity made even his arrival to Thailand a cause for conflict with others harboring intentions to become leaders themselves, even before he had become the community leader. Not only was Kong Meng’s election a foregone conclusion, he will also likely choose his successor. This further confirms his leadership follows classic Weberian archetypes. Since Kong Meng himself received his official refugee status from the UNHCR, it is now only a matter of being accepted by a third country. He has been considering going to Canada, but he has had some proposals from some sponsors in Minnesota as well. In light of this

change, he realizes his leadership role will come to an end. He confided in me that he has been laboring over the ‘selection’ of his successor, hoping to find someone who is smart, hardworking, and patient.

Unlike many Hmong, Xf. Kong Meng does not shy away from leadership. He has expressed to me that he is skeptical of the traditional disdain Hmong people have for those that seek leadership. There is even a spoken phrase shaming those who crave leadership. Hmong people say those who crave to be a leader, “*ntshaw ua nom.*” The verb “*ntshaw,*” meaning “yearn, desire, crave,” is often associated with the baser types of desire, such as lust and greed. Xf. Kong Meng thinks perspectives about leaders is unfortunate, and he encourages his children to be leaders.

It should be noted that Xf. Kong Meng is both the primary religious and lay leader in Pa Kluai. In other communities where there is not an autonomous religious congregation, this distinction matters more. For example, a few of the members of the prison ministry are designated leaders in the prison ministry, but they have little role in community leadership of the broader group of congregants at that church. However, in Pa Kluai, these duties are more or less synonymous. Although he is now called Xf. (An abbreviation for Xib fwb⁶⁴ meaning ‘pastor’ in English), Xf. Kong Meng was not ordained a pastor until 2017. So his name was previously prefaced by the word ‘leader’ (or *thawj coj* in Hmong).

What kind of leader is Xf. Kong Meng? From Xf. Kong Meng’s own perspective, a good leader, is someone who works hard, is smart, and serves one's people humbly. As I will discuss, it appears that Xf. Kong Meng is meeting his own criteria. However, this chapter is concerned

64. Xib fwb has its root in the Chinese word shifu 师父 denoting the broad definition of master or teacher in Chinese. The same goes for the words Hmong cognate. However, in the protestant religious context Xib fwb means Pastor. On the other hand, “Thawj coj” is a strictly Hmong term meaning leader. This can be a secular or religious leader.

mostly with how Kong Meng promotes affects of trust and conviviality. This affect of trust combined with the network of material propinquity discussed in the previous chapter help to create a community where Hmong immigrants, including those without papers, would remain, even under the nose of the Thai government. And in filling this duty, he seems aware of the power dynamics between his group, the Thai state, the UN, and the Viet state. He balances these needs well enough that his community members share enough common goals to stay together.

Regarding the community's evaluation of his success or failure as a leader, I am under the impression that most in the Pa Kluai community view Kong Meng as an effective leader. If the lines to speak with him are any indicator, many value his opinion and help. He is constantly being consulted by people from Pa Kluai and elsewhere. This gathering toward him suggests members of his community and others trust his judgment.

However, lest I slip into hagiography, I should note that the selection of my sample has some problems since anyone unhappy with his leadership could have left and not told me their story. Whether people often leave Pa Kluai, or whether there are many who live physically near but do not take Kong Meng's leadership, are both important questions for judging the popularity of Kong Meng's leadership. I have met a few that have left the community. One of them left because he did not like how out in the open Pa Kluai's Hmong were. He feared spies, so he left. Another, Thai Hang, left because of a conflict he had with Dao Hang, and another was forced out, according to Kong Meng, because of this individual's dalliances with women and girls in the community. Furthermore, because most other Hmong live far enough away from Pa Kluai, it makes no sense to attend Pa Kluai's church services. The prison ministry is the main source of food donations, so most attend that church but are only loosely connected to the ministry.

Though members of far off communities like Khlong Bua and Tha-In did participate in Pa Kluai's large events like their Christmas celebration.

Dao Hang has evaluated Kong Meng's leadership positively, for his ability to get things done. Speaking of a common perspective of people arriving in Bangkok seeking help from a leader, he said:

“When you first come here, you do not really trust them. That's what [people] think. Some people come and represent others (*los sawv cev*) [to the UN], and they are not righteous leaders (*nws coj tsis ncaj*). [...] so like if you knew me and you asked, ‘do you think you could help me [...]?’ so I buy some food for us to eat.’ [...] I only buy something for you alone (*ib leej*) to eat, and I do not take it and share it with the others. Then you see me, and you say, ‘there were ten households when you could have helped all ten households, you helped only one.’ Some do things this way. So, when people are electing (*xaiv tsa*) a leader, they need to look at this issue. Find one who is a righteous, straightforward (*coj ncaj*)...do not select the smart one (*tus ntse*), or the able one (*tus txawj*), just get the one that is straightforward.”

Kong Meng is a smart leader and has the ability to maneuver the rules and laws that his community comes in contact with. In a state of bewilderment for many of these immigrants grasping to find their place, this skill and knowledge is invaluable to the community. At present, he is engaged in a series of courses hosted by the UN to teach international human rights. This has helped him give encouragement and realistic advice to his community. He has pondered on several occasions that if he goes to the west, he would like to become a lawyer. This interest in law has been with him even when he lived in Vietnam. He told me that he studied a six-volume set of Vietnamese law books to become familiar with the laws of Vietnam. He thought to himself, ‘if I go farming and the police came to arrest me on the way which law would I refer them to. What would I say to them? After taking up this study when someone in his village had a legal problem, they would ask him, and he would refer them to the laws he knew relating to their questions.

Kong Meng seems to live up to his ideals of service-filled leadership. Similarly, his service to and sacrifice for the community does seem to affect relations in Pa Kluai. Kong Meng positions himself as a leader who makes sacrifices. His work requires secular and religious duties. As the secular leader, he is tasked with both organizing the community to fulfill group needs and to assist in activist work for the benefit of Hmong in the community and back in Vietnam. Early in the morning, his office lobby fills as members of the community unable to write their own histories. Although he has been asked by the UN not to assist in this process, he continues to do so because he knows some of what the UN is looking for in the review of these documents. Furthermore, he does much of these services for free even though they can cost a lot if taken to document services near the UNHCR and foreign embassies. He locks himself in the room off to the side with a few members as they recite their histories to him, and he dutifully writes them down in Hmong or Vietnamese.

Furthermore, Kong Meng works to assist Hmong Christians in Vietnam who have been abused by authorities. He works to get Hmong people in Vietnam's voices are heard by others who might be able to help them. After realizing that most other ethnic groups he knew of whether Ede, Jarai, Kinh, or others had some sort of outside group to assist them, he decided to begin recording and reporting human rights abuses of Hmong. Kong Meng knows that making these people visible to the world community pressures the Vietnamese government to clean up its treatment of Hmong Christians. He believes that having someone outside of Vietnam allows him to keep records and do work he would not be able to do in the country. It is not uncommon for him to transcribe videos of persecuted Hmong giving explanations of police abuse. I remember a video of a family speaking from the forest after being forced out of their village or sent on the run. They then ducked the incessant rain of Vietnam's forested uplands in the shelter of caves or

under blue tarps. Beyond this work, Kong Meng attends occasional UN meetings, acts as the contact person between the community and the police, and communicates with donors such as Dwight and Dr. Thanh of BPSOS.

As a religious leader, Xf. Kong Meng's duties are also large. Although he is part of a group of leaders, he is tasked, almost every Sunday, to give a sermon, however short or lengthy. Xf. Kong Meng must collaborate with leaders at the Catholic church for the use of their facilities. Every week a collection bag is passed around the congregation for donations. Xf. Kong Meng and a few other leaders are tasked with making decisions about how this money will be distributed in the community. Much of this goes to medical bills. Since the Hmong are not Thai citizens, they are not entitled to the same low-cost healthcare services as Thai citizens. A few of the community members and their children have chronic health problems, including a child with a serious eye condition, another who has contracted tuberculosis and for a period was requiring frequent fairly expensive drug treatments. Pregnancy and childbirth are also costs that the church's fund helps to defray. Though I am not privy to the details of all these interactions, the level of trust and responsibility places another burden on Xf. Kong Meng and other leaders divide these funds fairly and maintain trust. I have heard no complaints thus far.

Most in the community understand that this is hard work, though Kong Meng has felt the need to explain to me that even though he is mostly sitting down, the work is exhausting. During my most recent trip to visit him in Thailand in 2017, he had reached something of a limit and was experiencing serious migraines. He hoped to take a short vacation to Phetchabun in the coming months.

The decorative photograph hanging above Xf. Kong Meng's computer of him and his wife dressed handsomely in traditional Hmong clothes during the early years of their marriage

remind him of the thin young man he used to be. For Kong Meng, coming to Thailand has removed the necessity of hard physical labor like the farm work was more likely to do in Vietnam. But he misses this. He now has a desk job, learning human rights, and doing activist work for the Hmong in Vietnam. This has kept him at his computer in a seated position, and he has gained weight, though he is nowhere near obese. He often has recounted that he does not like “being fat,” he says. It makes moving and sitting difficult and uncomfortable. The absence of chairs in most rooms of the house forced him to sit uncomfortably on the floor as he plumped consistently in the first few years in Thailand. And thus, he goes to play soccer, hoping to manage his weight. During my last visit, he had given up the necessity of three-square meals, opting for breakfast, no lunch, and a modest dinner, in the hope that this would manage his weight.

As mentioned, Kong Meng keeps his home open to the community. This means that he is even more of an open book than many of the other community members. Community members use his computer and look through his house. His early mornings often turn into late nights of planning, counseling, and back and forth banter in his office room. Though his family might be sleeping upstairs, five or six people still occupy his office until ten or eleven o’clock at night, discussing church activities or other matters. I never saw him turn someone away. During my post fieldwork in 2017, Kong Meng confessed as to how tired he had become lately from his work. He suffered from more frequent illness and had been having serious migraine headaches.

Xf. Kong Meng has positioned himself as a leader who forgives, forgets, and is humble. Aside from proving himself as a humble individual, this attitude promotes an atmosphere beneficial to his group’s standing in the eyes of the UN. Although he has been reported on to the UN by others, in what he claims are sometimes false charges, he does not hold it against those

who have made the reports even though they could have had serious effects on his asylum status. Most notably, Xf. Kong Meng forgave some members of the Xiong clan after there was a significant conflict between the two parties. Prior to Kong Meng's coming to Thailand, the older of these two Xiong brothers, Tria, had aspirations to be the leader of the Hmong community in the city. Kong Meng held considerable recognition in Vietnam. As an advocate for Hmong land and religious rights, he had made strong connections, including many that already resided in the city (this claim is well attested by others in the community). As such, Tria anticipated the diminishment of his claim to leadership in the city's Hmong community. According to Kong Meng and friends, not long after Kong Meng arrived in the area surrounding Pa Kluai, he was threatened with murder by Tria and was accused of something and reported to the UN—likely some accusation of ethnonationalism. Since that time, however, Kong Meng has openly sought reconciliation. This posturing places him in the dominant magnanimous position and shows his strength as someone with the strength to receive former enemies without fear. As a leader of his community, he is periodically called on to speak at the UN. At these meetings, he realized that he often hears community leaders from other refugee communities stand and complain about their communities. In contradistinction, he claims not to report on any conflict in Pa Kluai or other communities and does not speak badly even of those who oppose him. This overall strategy helped people remain secure in the endosocial relations at Pa Kluai. This is especially important to this community of subliminal subjects, many of whom await UN refugee status or have been denied this status but remain for fear of returning to Vietnam.

Conflicts: Marital Issues

Marital conflicts often threaten group cohesiveness in Thailand's immigrant Hmong communities. For a few reasons, this has especially been the case for Hmong Lao, to the point that it has erupted and has become recognized by the whole community. Marital problems occasionally surfaced for the Hmong Viet as well, but apparently not so chronically. For example, Her Chee Moua, who originally lived in Thung Raab, had a period of separation from his wife. The stresses of living undocumented in Thailand as a Hmong Lao with no real promise of passage to a third country were wearing on their relationship. Her Chee recounted to me that his wife, Pang Lor, did not understand him. Her Chee's constant searching for solutions seemed to come up empty-handed, and she was unsatisfied. He was also accused of flirting with young unmarried women in a few settlements in Thung Raab, and Pang knew about it. As such, Her Chee became generally distrusted among the Thung Raab Hmong. He later moved with his wife to Pa Kluai after his conflict with Fong Moua and his son where they benefited from the community, but because his children still lived in Thung Raab and were overseen by a schoolmaster, living away from their children pained them and they eventually went back to Thung Raab.

Life as an asylum seeker forces very difficult choices that affect marital relations. An ethnic Kinh man living among the Hmong in Pa Kluai was granted refugee status. When it came time for him to leave, his wife did not yet also have asylum. After waiting a while, this Vietnamese man decided to divorce and go on to a third country. Interestingly, while I helped Dao Hang, who had been friends with this Vietnamese man, move some leftover belongings to Dao's house, he opined to me regarding marriage problems and love potions. Among the Hmong at Pa Kluai, love potion is often mentioned. Several people claim that in Vietnam, there were

herbal specialists capable of making love potions that would make your wife fall in love with you again. Dao Hang told me more about this while I helped him move some furniture. Though heaving lifting prevented me from taking exact notes at the time, Dao told me how there were marital problems among the Hmong in Pa Kluai, and he had wondered about getting this potion. Furthermore, in preparation for his moving to Canada or the United States, he reasoned that he might be able to make a living selling this potion since he had heard that there are so many marital problems in the United States.

The Hmong Lao in Thung Raab were more frequently getting married than the Hmong Viet youth at Pa Kluai. The most recent marriages in the migrant Hmong community were between partners who were both Hmong Lao. This occurred in the Thung Raab area. A couple of instances of New Hmong Lao marrying Hmong Thai have happened. The largest contingent of marriages has been Vietnamese Hmong men taking Hmong Lao wives. They also live in the Thung Raab area. This tendency highlights an interesting dynamic in this immigrant community. Which is that in many cases, the Hmong Viet men possess a level of prestige over Hmong Lao men as potential husbands or boyfriends. Some Hmong Lao men complained to me that Hmong Viet men have been known to create problems with married Hmong Lao couples through flirting with wives (*tham poj niam*) rather than limiting their flirting to unmarried women (*tham hluas nkauj*), which is somewhat common among Hmong men in a polygamous society (though less so but not unheard of among Hmong Viet Christians). The Hmong Viet men are able to boast of their potential of going to a third country in a way that few Hmong Lao men can. For the most part, young Hmong Lao men in the area have little to no promise of getting refugee status.

The Lao and Hmong Viet alike surmise that the promise of going to a third country has attracted several Hmong Lao women to marry Hmong Viet men. Similarly, Hmong Lao were

known to lose their wives to Vietnamese Hmong men. However, marriage to a man granted asylum is not always a guarantee of passage to a third country or of a stable marriage. Many in the Hmong refugee community know about the rocky marriage of a Hmong Lao woman and her Hmong Viet husband who live in Thung Raab. The Hmong Viet man named Cha Fong Vue has hit his Hmong Lao wife Mai Thao on more than one occasion. In Hmong Lao communities like Thung Raab, these situations led to group fracturing. Although there is now no recognized leader of the predominantly Hmong Lao community in Thung Raab, there once was a Hmong Lao leader. He had apparently gone back to Laos. A few new Hmong Lao have attempted to establish themselves as leaders of the Lao Hmong community but seem unable to gain primacy. Hmong at Pa Kluai reason that it was the ill-advised adjudication of marriage problems of his failed successors—usually advising for the troubled couple to have a divorce--which has led to community fracturing since--as is often the case in Hmong society—marriage problems often become conflicts between clans. Furthermore, this led to the reluctance for Hmong Lao men in Thung Raab to take council on marriage issues from anyone posing as a community's leader. For this reason, the marriage issue between Cha Fong Vue and Mai Thao was brought from Thung Raab to Pa Kluai for Xf. Kong Meng to adjudicate and *Sib tham kom haum*. He duly rebuked the man for his mistreatment of his wife and helped negotiate a solution with her and her co-clan members without a divorce.

Considering the endosociality and legal subliminality of the Pa Kluai Hmong and other Hmong immigrant communities, Kong Meng cannot appeal to the formal legal authority of the Thai state, as this is an existential threat to his community at an individual and group level. The Hmong people, as an ethnicity, have often been considered an autonomous people. Their integration into states has been an ongoing process preceded by other ethnicities. Thus, Hmong

societal groups commonly manage social conflict through a system of in-group laws and rules which did not always fall within state purview. In meetings invested with varying levels of importance and formality, Community elders meet with concerned parties to discuss solutions to problems. So, not only is Kong Meng a Pastor and leader, he is a Hmong elder. His claims to be a good leader and his power to hold Pa Kluai together as a group partly depend on his success in resolving conflicts between members of the community as well according to traditional Hmong practice.

Endosociality and Subliminality

I should say a word on endosociality. In comparing Pa Kluai with the other settlements, whether in rural central Thailand or elsewhere in Bangkok, the topic of endosociality explains much about the key differences between Pa Kluai and these other settlements. Tomforde explained that endosociality “is marked by the closeness and social proximity of group members” (Tomforde 2008: 191). With this understanding, it is possible to imagine that the closeness and social proximity discussed can be manifest in a number of ways and to varying degrees. Overall, I argue that the Hmong at Pa Kluai have developed a different type of endosociality than those at other settlements. Their social proximity is close to one another and characterized by trust more than those of other communities because of how they organize their community. This contributes to an affect of trust and conviviality.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, Hmong people have an endosocial arrangement. Though Tomforde does a good job illustrating that this is the case, she does less to explain why Hmong people are endosocial beyond the maintenance of clan relations. On this front, she hints that “endosociality entails a high level of security and intensity in

religious and social life for the villagers” (Tomforde 2008: 409). Endosociality facilitates security for vulnerable people. I would argue more specifically that my subject communities’ endosociality exemplifies such social group’s general security deficit. And thus their insecurity influences their subliminal comings and goings. In other words, the same social disenfranchisement that creates subliminality creates endosociality. Though obviously not always the case, the commonality of not having legitimate citizenship claims often forces Hmong people to look for markers on those they interact with, which indicate similar positionality before engaging in social interaction.

However, interactions with outsiders cannot always be avoided. Meeting with outgroup individuals and institutions seems inevitable, especially those with the UN or Thai police, employers, or religious officiants. Furthermore, these interactions are sometimes beneficial. Pa Kluai Hmong are employed by non-Hmong, but they have learned to be careful when dealing with employers who are socially and economically privileged individuals or those who might take advantage of power disparities between themselves and the Hmong. It is an all too common occurrence for a week’s worth of work to go without pay when the employer realizes the Hmong’s vulnerable positionality. Similarly, a Thai resident at Wat Tham Krabok often raped and molested refugee women and girls because he knew they had no citizenship and would not call the police on him. Pa Kluai people are careful in dealing with the UN as well in that they have learned through hard experience that conflict in a community can spill over into their dealings with the UN. This can have lasting and even life-altering consequences, such as the denial of one’s asylum claim.

This vulnerability is not just exploited by outsiders. Hmong people, realizing they are in a subliminal position, react to conflicts differently than those who stand in full view of the state.

Understanding that Hmong will not call the police to resolve disputes with other Hmong, one can take advantage, as did the aforementioned Thai. This positioning also pushes one to take the posture that infractions will be met with extreme retaliation, threatening murder, or reporting the other party to the UN to spoil their refugee claims. Because Pa Kluai maintains mechanisms to resolve conflicts, the community does not live in fear of being killed or reported to the UN. This form of endosociality is characterized by security.

Traditional Hmong legal Proceedings in Pa Kluai

According to Kong Meng and others, their understanding of common Hmong traditional legal practices follows an order of scalar progression. The attempt to solve an interpersonal problem begins with the parties involved discussing (*sib sab laj*) or (*Sib Tham kev tsis sib haum*) the issue together in private. Kong Meng explained:

“The Hmong do like this. Whenever there is a problem, speaking of a problem that is small, that has to do with understandings, then we must speak together...and if we have spoken and see what was wrong then it is done. The elders need not have anything to do with it. Or like this example, if one person says something bad to the other person, then if we talk and I was wrong, then I admit it, and you forgive me. Then we become friends just as before. Then there is no reason for anyone else to know.”

Problems are managed at the personal level before moving toward more general societal realms. In practice, this means that when a Hmong person has a disagreement or conflict with another in their community, they should first address the conflicting party discretely. Discretion helps restricts spreading information about those problems to the community. Kong Meng’s indication that the elders “need not” be involved and “there is no reason for anyone else to know” maintains his intention for conflicts to be kept in secrecy and not interfere with Pa Kluai’s endosocial atmosphere of security. I know of some conflicts between members of the

community that ended in this way and were not brought to light, including a man accusing another of speaking improperly with the former's wife. However, further conflicts on the issue merit another meeting known as *hais teeb meem*, as Kong Meng explains:

“[...] If we have spoken and still are not in good relations, then we pull in two or three relatives. Those relatives help solve the problem. If those relatives cannot help fix it, then we bring in the elders to fix (*sib kho*) the problem. This is the only way Hmong people do it.”

After the conflicting parties have called on relatives to help solve the issue, clan antagonisms can surface quickly. Thus more neutral authorities will likely need to become involved:

“If you pull in the elders and speak and exhaust the conversation, but still have not solved the problem, then you leave the problem with them to think about whether or not they can resolve it. If they forgive one another, then we allow that to proceed. But if there can be no forgiveness, then you wait seven to 15 days and then report to the authorities.”

These conflicts, as the last line posits, involve issues that have criminal or civil implications. If they cannot be resolved in the community, they can be sent to civil authorities. The final step in this process of reporting to authorities is called *hais plaub ntug* (telling the four sides) and suggests telling the widest possible audience, even bringing the four corners of the earth in to help solve the issue. For the immigrant Hmong, analogizing “the four corners of the earth” with the United Nations or Thai police makes sense. They can report conflicts to the UN without immediate risk to their own bodily harm as might be the case with a police call (though some make anonymous police calls), but present more long-term unknown consequences. However, it is Kong Meng's intention to block this impulse to call the UN. Because the unforeseen consequences of such a report to the UN could be more than one person having their asylum claim denied, but it can create an atmosphere of distrust in Pa Kluai that disadvantages

the whole community. Following this overall logic, Xf. Kong Meng has set three rules for the members of Pa Kluai to remember and follow. They are:

- “1. Do not be quick to speak (*Tsis txhob maj hais*)
2. Do not be quick to anger (*tsis txhob chim saib*)
3. Do not do wrong (*tsis txhob ua phem*)”

Sib Tham Kom Haum: Adjudicating Trust in Pa Kluai

One afternoon, members of the community gathered in the second-floor classroom of Xf. Kong Meng’s house for an important meeting, which taught me about the importance of legal proceedings in the Pa Kluai community. I had just finished a group interview upstairs on the floor of Xf. Kong Meng’s office and expected the group to sit around chatting, so I decided to peel away from the group to complete some translations in the quiet of another room. From my quiet room upstairs, I began hearing a loud discussion ensue below. Hoping to join what sounded fun at first, I tried to descend the stairs. But I found the room full and the stairs too crowded to walk down. I made it halfway down the stairs and sat next to a few other spectators. The conversation moved quickly back and forth, involving a long-time resident of the community, Pao Her. A new arrival from the same clan, named Cha Sue, accused Pao of offering help, which had now not been forthcoming. Though the Hmong at Pa Kluai are loath to admit arranging for immigration, for fear of appearing crosswise to the UN, it is likely that Pao offered this help before Cha Sue came and encouraged him to make the decision to leave Vietnam. Cha Sue’s accusations were met with an incredulous and somewhat shamefaced response from Pao Her. While Cha Sue insisted that Pao Her had promised help, Pao Her softened the interaction with an awkward smile saying, “We were just chatting for fun” or “*wb thaam ua si xwb.*” This somewhat unconvincing affective displays hung in the room momentarily before the conversation shifted to another conflict between Cha Sue’s wife and another new arrival. The

conflict between these two women stemmed from a misunderstanding surrounding the repayment of money shared for making the journey to Thailand. Now that the two families at odds had come to Thailand waiting for asylum status, they were unable to work or easily leave their immediate surroundings. Finances were now tight for families not previously destitute.

The conversation shifted from the group to the individual claimants. Rarely did the claimants speak directly to one another. However, elders in the community sat listening then made intermittent comments suggesting what should be done to fix the situation. Solutions were passed about, but frustrations seemed to rise. Finally, the group leader half-jokingly submitted that he would pay the difference in the amount in question. However, this was not the important part of his statement. He went on to stress that in situations like this, each party needs to write a history (*sau keeb kwm*) about the transaction so that these histories can be compared and trusted. The conflict, furthermore, must be solved within the group and stay within the group. This solution fits in line with Chee Nou's thrust toward keeping records and expanding intragroup transparency. He reminded the group that, above all, they must solve these conflicts within the group and not go outside. His fear was first and foremost that the UN be notified of conflicts in the group. Again, we can see his concern for this key lynchpin of maintaining counter-legibility.

The aforementioned story illustrates Kong Meng's tactic, which is the lynchpin for the viability of trust at Pa Kluai. This tactic helps the community maintain a good status in the eyes of the UN. After some conversation, Xf. Kong Meng said of the Pa Kluai community, "you can compare it to a country." He continued:

"We Hmong have a saying, and that is whatever else you do, make sure that 'Hmong boil their own medicine, and the Chinese boil their own medicine (*Hmoob rhaub Hmoob tshuaj, Suav rhaub Suav tshuaj*). This means that [regarding] the problems in Hmong households, we fix our own problems and finish them ourselves."

He continued by explaining that the historical trope of Chinese outsiders' legal cases did not fit Hmong contexts. Though outsiders may, they conduct trials for inappropriate reasons in the eyes of the Hmong or take, however inconveniently, a long time to complete them:

“We [Hmong] solve our problems to end them when we were in villages in Vietnam. We had to fine (*nplua nyiaj*) one another for offenses. If someone had done something wrong that was very serious and the village did not want to deal with that person anymore, then we fine them to solve this problem. Because we have that right. But regarding the authorities, when we had finished fining that person, we did not send them to the authorities.”

However, the problem does not necessarily end there. Xf. Kong Meng realized,

“You must talk about that problem until there is reconciliation (*hais kom haum*). [Otherwise] if you speak with the authorities, [...] then they will have two or three of [their people] come to take up and solve the problem. [...]. But if we are speaking of *Hmoob rhaub Hmoob tshuaj* in which we work together to solve [the issue], then we do not want to tell the authorities the bad things mixed up in the case. So we fine a bit and fix it this way.”

In the Pa Kluai context, some common ways of being fined might be that “you are fined to make some food for the people who have come together to solve the problem. And when the problem is solved, then we do not hold any record of it.” Following this line of logic, I confirm that “each person knows that they should listen to the rules, because if [they] are not reconciled. It will cause problems for everyone.” Kong Meng echoes my last word with emphasis,

“Everyone!” He then continues:

“Our goal is not met just when we have finished counseling. We know there is a person that is very upset. We should find someone who is very good at talking and use the time to speak with that person. I do not always have time, but for example, I would go and speak with Cha Sue Her and his people...and be with them...and speak and ask what they will do...and strengthen them (*txhawb lawv lub zog*) and encourage them not to lose hope...to not become discouraged (*qaug zog*). This way if we think that there is anything still amiss, then we speak about it together, and when we are finished then the issue is finished, we cannot let them become unhappy (*tsis txaus siab*), or they will write to the UN and say "oh this happened and this happened.”

Now explaining how soured relationships between Hmong individuals affects the community as a whole, Kong Meng explained:

“Two or three days later after the UN knows that this and this [...] happened, the UN will say ‘oh these Hmong have this many problems! Are they really people that were persecuted in Vietnam?’ When they are investigating, they say that people who had problems in Vietnam, when they come here, they do not like to create problems.”

“Yes, the UN believes that people who the communist authorities or the police pursued and arrested and they fled for their lives, they should be people who do not like problems...do not like to create problems. And those who have problems or conflicts they do not like to accuse. They like to solve them. The UN believes this. I have been in the country, and I have never accused someone else, but I have been accused by people many times.”

On principal, Xf. Kong Meng will not report on members of his community to the UN. He and a few of his assistants in the community believe that if others sow conflict, it is better not to play into it or even report on it. In one case, he was criticized by the UN for this. After Dao Hang had his conflict with Thai Hang, Thai’s group reported the incident to the UN, but Kong Meng had not reported. He explained that although the UN criticized him, this was something that helped the people trust him more. Tou Ger, who was also present for the conversation, explained that the UN keeps detailed records of each person, and “if you cause problems, then they put a mark on your record.” Pa Kluai residents are encouraged to avoid this problem by not reporting on one another. This is the rationale and motivation not to report to the UN or Thai police and to find another way to establish order in the Pa Kluai community. Xf. Kong Meng and others realize the legal subliminality of these Hmong immigrants might encourage them to call Thai police to resolve conflicts, so the community itself must establish its own legal practices and means of surveillance to fit in what it believes is the UN’s category of worthy, genuine refugees

Having established that Pa Klui's leadership is interested in building patterns of positive affect and trust, I now turn to explain how they help to organize the community for this goal, and in doing so, established a counter-legibility by regulating the flow of information to the UN or Thai police. Xf. Kong Meng and other leaders help establish transparency, which leads to counter-legibility of their community through internally organizing themselves and promoting transparency as they share donations and resources.

Transparency, Food Donations, and Coding the Territory Effect

The most important way the leadership helps minimize conflict is by making the food distribution process legible and transparent to everyone involved. Kong Meng's home, whose rent is paid largely by the American donor named Dwight—whose role I will explain—is a narrow four-storied building. In the lowest floor, one can find men and teenaged boys scurrying between piles of food—including donated fruit, rice, packaged noodles, and other foodstuffs or dried goods—making sure that all seventeen piles are equally divided before each household is notified that a donation has come and a representative of each home comes to pick up the food. This usually happens on Saturdays but can take place whenever food is brought to the community. Not only does Kong Meng's home provide a space for dividing this food up, but Kong Meng takes a history of the process, so community members know the food was divided fairly. Once the piles of food are apportioned correctly, a photograph is taken of them. Representatives from each family that will be taking food are photographed together before they leave. This provides proof of which families received food from the donation and who has already taken their food home. The same goes for other donations: money, clothing, household wares like plastic chairs, etc. Though usually, most are notified to come and take their portion. The donations are invariably photographed, and those photographs are sent to community

members. When others in the community see the photographs, they know exactly what happened, and they have their own record of it.

This is a clear example of the Joe Painter's territorial effect (2010: 1103) occurring in Pa Kluai. The territorial effect which he posits is established through sociotechnical such as Britain's statistical processes, which code locations. To Painter, the flows of these technologies are coded to a territorialization, thus "territory is an effect of such coding" (Painter 2010:1114). There are such practices at Pa Kluai, which also code territories. Every family in this territorialization have equal claim to food donations. As such, they all receive an email or phone call notifying them that the food has come. Similarly, they all have access to the photograph of those who received their food donations. This can be emailed or texted to community members who occupy their locations in the community. Everyone who received an email has been coded as part of the Pa Kluai territorial topology. Each time they receive this email, they are again coded into the territorialization week after week, so the places they live become long standing portions of the topological territorialization.

This record-keeping is important to members of the community for building trust. When I questioned him whether Kong Meng is a straightforward leader Dao Hang told me that his opinion of his leader had a lot to do with Kong Meng, facilitating this historical record.

"I am not totally sure if Kong Meng is straightforward or not (*coj ncaj los sis tsis ncaj*), but I know he does proper work (*ua hauj lwm kuj tau thiab*). If anyone helps [by donating food to us], then he takes pictures and tells all of what was given. So if someone gives 2,000 THB, he tells that that person sent 2,000 THB and then sends a picture of him giving it to us."

This aspect of using photographs to ensure that donations and resources are handled properly and distributed equitably is a key to Xf. Kong Meng's success as a leader. He encourages members

of his community to do the same. As the reader might recall from his mediation of the conflict with Pao Her and Cha Sue Her, he advised them both to keep a history of their interactions.

Not only does Kong Meng keep a record for the community and encourage them to keep their own personal records, but he also keeps his own personal historical record. He is aware that some in the community might accuse him of doing something wrong. He told me:

“We Hmong, some of us are stupid (*ruam ruam*). They think if I want to cause a problem for that other person, then they say that 'on such and such day' [something happened], but they do not investigate well what that person did on that day. “

Kong Meng has been accused of things before, so he keeps a record of his daily comings and goings. He explained his rationale for this, saying:

“I do this work because I think like this. [For example] If today I am going somewhere, like today, I went to [the hospital]. So if someone comes and accuses me [of doing something on this day], then I can tell them, “No, that day I went to the hospital, if you do not believe me then you can go there and check with them.” and when [the hospital] explains, then we find, ‘oh’ that other person lied.”

Computers, Technology, and Pa Kluai’s Historical Records

For the community to take and share historical records between them, they need access to sufficient technological resources. Xf. Kong Meng and others have made sure to gather these resources, including laptop computers, smartphones and cellphones, printers, and digital cameras. Though these resources are commonly found in western or even Thai households, as I mentioned earlier, I rarely found them in Hmong immigrant households other than those at Pa Kluai. Admittedly, Hmong Lao in Thung Raab often had a television and VCD player. They rarely had laptop computers, sometimes opting for smartphones. Even Lao Hmong that moved into Pa Kluai from began using computers once they moved into Pa Kluai. After moving to Pa Kluai from Thung Raab, my Hmong Lao friend Her Chee Moua bought a computer for the first

time. This sociotechnical practice was distributed in this community, setting them up to receive emails such as photographs of food donations (see chapter eight), which confirmed that they were part of the territorial community.

Almost every family in Pa Kluai has laptop computers except the newest arrivals to the community. Their tendency to have them has partly to do with help from the same American donor who helps pay for Xf. Kong Meng's rent. Though he certainly does not buy computers for everyone in the community, he occasionally helps with limited costs. When the community's digital camera broke, Xf. Kong Meng turned to Dwight to help purchase a new one. The printer and scanner in Kong Meng's office seem to be a similar community resource that Dwight might help defray the costs to replace. However, others explain that the Hmong at Pa Kluai work together to provide computers for the group. This includes repairing old computers and selling them cheaply to other community members. This is fairly easy since there is a computer repair shop in the nearby market. I have accompanied a few Pa Kluai Hmong to this repair-shop to check on repairs and pick up computers.

Not only are community members able to check their email and see photographs of food and money donations, but Hmong here also use computers for communication with relatives and friends, through Facebook entertains them, along with websites like YouTube. Overall, there is more computer literacy in this community as a result. Young children spend their time watching juvenile English teaching videos on YouTube, Hmong movies, and music videos. More commonly, adults and teenagers might also be found watching Hmong dubbed Chinese and Korean dramas, as well as Vietnamese newscasts. Contact with relatives and friends via Facebook has kept the tendency to search for relatives alive in this community, although the Hmong in Pa Kluai are restrained from traveling. Their Facebook accounts often use false

names and locations. Dao Hang and a few others continue to search for relatives (or nrhiav Kwv tij) virtually. I will discuss this topic later. However, a few in the community are wary of using Facebook as refugees, including Ger Ta, who encourages others not to post pictures of the community on Facebook.

It should also be noted that while this technology is a good tool for organizing counter-legibility in the community, it should be obvious that Pa Kluai Hmong also uses it to build trust with outsiders. After the conclusion of my fieldwork in 2016, Ger Ta emailed, asking for help to pay for surgery on a leg that was injured during a soccer game. Though I did not have the money to help, a few of my friends in the US chipped in to pay the costs. Following the surgery, Ger Ta sent an email with an attached photograph of himself displaying his cast and crutches.

Informal Trust Building

Pa Kluai Hmong engage in various informal activities that build trust and help leverage control of information (or counter-legibility) in the face of UN and Thai surveillance. Many of these remain activities that would be normal in Vietnamese village settings but have been less practiced in immigrant Hmong communities in Thailand. Chief in these activities is making visits. Members of the community often visit one another's homes.

The Hmong differentiate between types of visits. Pao Her explained to me that one might *ntsham zos*, *cuav zos*, or *ncig zos*. Firstly, *ncig zos*, which is the most informal of these visit types, where one simply goes around the village to other people's homes for recreation, roughly equivalent to the Thai idea of *thiaw*. Next, *ntsham zos* is equivalent to running errands, and has an added level of formality. Lastly, *cuav zos* is going to visit someone with a specific purpose that might involve discussing important matters. Members of the community use these words to

communicate their intentions in visiting and help the receiving party know how they should prepare to receive their guest (*tos qhua*). As I have mentioned, Vietnamese Hmong are proud of their tendency to call (*hu*) passersby to come in and visit. Hmong people in Pa Kluai can be seen fairly often walking to the homes of friends.

Such visits add excitement to the atmosphere of an otherwise boring afternoon or evening, bringing people's spirits up after a long day of work or a nervous period of waiting to hear from the UN. Of particular note, Pao Her is someone who I saw making many house visits during my first year of research. Before 2016, Pao's family's asylum claim had been rejected for the second time by the UNHCR. This meant that he would not be allowed another appeal. In 2017, his teenaged daughter was caught by the police, and his young adult son had also been taken by the police. Though he had been helped to pay for their release by Dwight, Pao was feeling down. As such, he seemed to go to community events less, but made frequent visits with his closer friends. I would often see him sitting with a neighbor that had moved in downstairs from him in the dilapidated apartment block. These meetings seemed to keep him going through the walls of his situation seemed to be closing in on him.

Women often gathered in informal embroidery groups to work and assist one another on embroidery together. Though some work was done for their own families, this embroidery work was mainly done for sale through BPSOS. Though I was not really privy to sit in on embroidery circles made strictly of women, the group that meets on a bridge that extends from one wing of the dilapidated apartment block to another is a mixture made up of elderly couples, a few middle-aged and younger women, and several children. I would often see from a ways off, the group of four or five women sitting together, seeming to enjoy one another's company as they passed around and closely examined the stitching on squares of fabric. Aside from the Hmong

wing of the dilapidated apartment block, the young and middle-aged married women in the rectangle of row houses tended to be engaged in household tasks and were not often seen in these groups. Rather, they would sit and talk while they watched children, sometimes gathering in Dao Hang's wide row house.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, frequent soccer games are an important informal activity for maintaining some social cohesion among young men and youth at Pa Kluai, though not every male in the group goes, most have attended, even the most elderly grandfather in Pa Kluai plays while others watch from the sidelines. This is an important bonding experience. For several months during my primary period of fieldwork, the men and teenaged boys' favorite activity seemed to be football at the dry lot behind the neighboring catholic church. The field is just a short walk away, making it a perfect spot for nightly soccer matches in the early evening before dinner. The majority of even the older men in the community are still not even forty years old and enjoyed playing soccer as a healthy outlet. Although the men who work most days doing hard physical labor did not participate as consistently, the older teenaged boys and young unmarried men were keen to take part. My host, Kong Meng, depended on it to keep his weight down. Others in the group enjoyed the show of camaraderie near the end of the day. Several among them were less skillful football players but usually kept a cheery attitude as they muddled through the game as back fielder or goalie. This activity has, however, proven hazardous for a few members of the group. Tall and thin Ger Ta broke his foot in 2016 during one of these early evening matches. The injury required significant surgery. Though he does not seem to play soccer much anymore, he staffs the camera at soccer games while the others play.

Courtship in Pa Kluai

Hmong young people at Pa Kluai do not tend to court one another. Importantly, it should be noted that this tendency probably limits the not insignificant conflict-related the tempests of youthful romance that often arises in Hmong communities. Although I became close with several young people at Pa Kluai, especially Xf. Kong Meng's son Fue, who is nineteen, and Chao, who is sixteen, their tendency to talk about and engage in courtship was limited, though Chao was likely the most popular boy in the community. In Pa Kluai, I have seen no weddings take place. This is partly because most of the children in the community are only just now nearing marrying age. It is difficult to say which in the complex of reasons is most important to this apparent tendency not to court or marry. However, their secret position as asylum seekers/refugees is an overarching factor that circumscribes their potential to court or form marriage unions. This positionally limits their range of movement, shrinking their potential pool of partners. Furthermore, as refugees, the majority of families hope to leave Thailand for a third country. With this hope dominating their constructions of the future, forming new bonds which might tie one of their children to their current place in Thailand, are considered with great care. This orientation to the future helps young people in the community focus on long-distance goals like education, English acquisition, and musical talent. Young Hmong in Thung Raab are more likely to marry than those in Pa Kluai, it seems, as they do not necessarily expect to go to a third country.

Hmong youth in Pa Kluai are also reluctant to court other members of the community because they know one another too well. The community has limited visits from Hmong Thai. Pa Kluai youth spend most of their time with members of their own community. Kong Meng's sixteen-year-old son Chao explained to me that he grew up with the girls in Pa Kluai and thinks

of them more as sisters or friends than as potential romantic partners. When we spoke, he was more content to focus on his studies. For fear of perceived impropriety, I was not able to ask the young women much about their romantic interests. It would be difficult and inappropriate for a man, especially a white man, to talk with the younger women in the community without causing concern. However, a recent influx of Hmong Vietnamese families as of 2016, made Pa Kluai's young people, Chao included, seem more interested in finding romantic partners among the Bangkok Hmong than they had before. Admittedly, Chao ended up somewhat broken-hearted and wished he had not wasted his time. Again, young passions are prone to cause conflicts, so the dearth of courtship among members of the community has likely saved the broader community from tensions and conflict.

Finding potential dating partners outside of the community is another option. Only during middle school are these younger folks allowed by the Thai government to attend school. At high school age, some Hmong teenagers are able to continue in school, but this is usually through missionary schools or through the BRC school provided by the UN to refugees. The BRC classes have a limited size and are sometimes a mixture of teenagers and adults. Most children at Pa Kluai have lived several years in Thailand and speak Thai fluently, but the teenagers are not likely to spend time with Thai friends or potential romantic partners, except for the two or three young adults that work outside the community at restaurants, car washes, markets, etc. Again, this limits the pool to those in Pa Kluai, Tha-In, Khlong Bua, and or Thung Raab even farther away. Lastly, the internet is a venue for finding potential partners. Nineteen-year-old Fue showed me pictures of a beautiful Hmong woman from northern Thailand he was speaking with on Facebook. Furthermore, Chao's friends often gathered hushedly around a smartphone, commenting on some young woman's social networking profile. Sometimes these Facebook

profiles were of Hmong women, and sometimes they were Thai. But Chao assured me that Hmong boys are suspicious of Thai girls because they assume that they are only interested in men for money.

Normative attitudes of shyness about romance also likely play a role. Traditionally, Hmong youth are somewhat terse to express interest in love and courting for fear of teasing. Though it is excepted that Hmong youth may love one another, this is usually kept secret. Direct conversation by young Hmong people (as with many cultural groupings) is purportedly rare. This shyness is both facilitated and overcome by using song as a medium of indirect expression of feelings. The *kvw txhiaj* or *thaam txuj* form was itself often the exchange of messages of unrequited love and former dalliances between a male and female partners. These verses are often sung within earshot of their intended target. Even more secretively, Hmong can communicate *kvw txhiaj* verses without even announcing words. Because Hmong is a tonal language, simply emulating the tonal succession of commonly uttered verses on a flute, a Jew's harp or even a blade of grass communicates the exact meaning of a song's message; it's as if one can speak with a flute. Middle-aged members of the community recall how singing *kvw txhiaj* themselves fell out of fashion for Hmong in Vietnam about twenty years ago. They recall hiking the mountainsides near a group of teenage girls to play songs on the radio cassette player they toted along. Echoing the songs across the hillsides broadcast the young man's status; it also sent messages of love to potential and current girlfriends.

This may be why the youth in Pa Kluai spend most of their time practicing singing rather than courting directly. Though these practices of singing *kvw txhiaj* or playing the flute or Jew's harp are nonexistent among Hmong youth at Pa Kluai, youth here are constantly playing the guitar and practicing songs to be performed in church. As Dwight sees it, he is constantly

finding them practicing music when they should be studying English. Be that as a may, a few times a week, the teenaged youth will come together supervised by Dao Hang, either in the loft of Dao Hang's row house, Kong Meng's second floor, or the funeral parlor of the Catholic church— if they ask permission—to practice the songs they will perform in church or at some upcoming event. Prior to the community's big Christmas party, which includes extensive musical performances, the better part of a month is spent practicing music every night. The activity seems to do two things for the youth group. First, frequent singing practice gives Pa Kluai youth an excuse to enjoy one another's company; and secondly, they thoroughly enjoy singing. I participated once in the activity and found the exultant voices of the youth seemed to light an otherwise dimly lit, cockroach-infested room. Rather than dating then hating one another, their relationships seem mostly restricted to sibling-like annoyance, teasing, and flirting.

Eating Together in Pa Kluai

Another informal way Pa Kluai people organize themselves for positive affects of trust is through frequently eating together. As is common among Hmong people everywhere, if one is present at the time of a meal, they are invited to eat. No matter if the individual has already eaten or is not hungry, Pa Kluai Hmong will relentlessly pursue them to eat. In some ways, this is a face-saving technique. In some cases, a hungry guest will turn down a meal, knowing that their host will press them to eat. Obviously, sharing a meal shows one's hospitality and care for the guest. Furthermore, guests' acceptance of meals marks a level of acceptance and shared indebtedness to members of the community. Inviting neighbors to eat is universally observed.

The culture of eating at Pa Kluai is decidedly distinct from any place I have been, including Hmong Thai and Lao villages. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the

Hmong at Pa Kluai are from Vietnam, they take pride in the peculiarities of Hmong Viet practices. Pointing out the differences between the way Hmong Viet's eat and Hmong, Thai, and Hmong Lao eat is an important boundary-making⁶⁵ practice (Winant 2015; Thomas 2005). Furthermore, the Hmong Viet practices are so familiar that they become performances of national difference between Hmong Viets and others. Firstly, the Hmong hailing from most of northern Vietnam eat with chopsticks excepting those from Dien Bien Province and parts of Son La who eat like their spoon wielding relatives across the Lao border. Similarly, the issue of taking food with a spoon from the center of the table is seen by many in the community as unclean and may contribute to the spreading of illness. In most cases, the Hmong at Pa Kluai will have a bowl of boiled mostly unsalted vegetables known as *zaub tsuag* (usually cabbage), unlike the Hmong of northern Thailand, who most often have a bowl of *zaub iab* (bitter vegetables) as a staple on the table. To the side, there is a small bowl of pepper mixed with fish sauce or MSG to dip the cabbage or pork in.

Another important difference in eating for Vietnamese Hmong hinges on their Christian faith and interpretations of gender equality. Non-Christian Hmong in villages of northern Thailand often allows men, boys, and guests to eat before women and girls.⁶⁶ Sometimes this means that the women who likely prepared the meal only get the last few morsels to eat. Only a few families in northern Thailand I came in contact with stressed having women and men eat

⁶⁵ The idea of boundary making hinges on the discovery of the constitutive outside in order to create boundaries. Chantal Mouffe (1994:263) explains that the:

“concept of the Constitutive outside' to which I have referred earlier is particularly helpful. As elaborated by Derrida, its aim is to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy; as between form and matter, black and white, man and woman, etc. Once we have understood that every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity, that is, the perception of something 'other' that will constitute its 'exterior', then we can begin to understand why such a relation may always become the breeding ground for antagonism.”

⁶⁶ Though it appears that in several Hmong CPT families there is more egalitarianism surrounding meals with women and men eating together.

together. On the other hand, Vietnamese Hmong women have looked to Christian conversion to bring gender equality (Ngo 2015: 287). As such, Hmong Viet Christians in Pa Kluai (and other immigrant communities in Bangkok) tend to push back at the traditional practices of Hmong men eating first. On a day to day basis, women always eat at the same time as men. Men and boys sometimes prepare meals. However, there are often dinner parties held for men where men form a broad oval on the floor of an apartment, leaving their wives and children at home, while the smaller number of women who prepared the meal eat in another room. I know of no similar dinner parties held for women. And though it is somewhat laudable that women eat simultaneously, mere separation has not ensured the equality of women in Pa Kluai's political life. The Women eating simultaneous with the men but are tucked away in another room cut off from the conversations being had by Pa Kluai's group of male leaders. To be sure, these events are the most public political event in Pa Kluai. Suggestions, plans, apologies, and arguments are had in these settings. Conversations are freewheeling, where participants jockey for position and engage in conversational one-ups-manship. However, those participants are invariably men.

Here the Hmong virtue of a man who *really can eat and really can speak* is expressed. For the Hmong, good leadership is evidenced by someone who eats well and speaks well, though one would hope it can apply to both men and women, this is a very masculinized concept. He eats well because it is his ingenuity (usually through skillful farming and hunting that provides plentiful meals). Furthermore, his ability to speak well is further evidence of his ability to inspire those who follow higher. As such, Hmong New Year or *noj tsiab peb caug* is a period of competing meals, each patriarch having planned on his own or with a group of friends to provide a meal for members of the community. At large meals like those held at New Years' time, which aligns with Chinese and Vietnamese New Year in February, political and social bonds are

formed. Before each meal, the host or *tswv cuab*, in a show of strength, makes a speech in which he blesses those in attendance, asking for a good new year. He might also thank the group, including anyone who paid supplemental expenses like soft drinks or napkins. The meal commences, and the host and others periodically approach guests with more rice in a practice known as *yuaaj mov*, where guests are challenged with more rice than can reasonably be eaten. Following the meal, one is beckoned away for another meal happening around the corner. The day is one long meal that one might more easily roll home from than walk. Toasts and speeches are certainly not limited to masculine displays. On this occasion, when participant thoughts turned to memories of home, their eyes become wet, and emotions are often heartfelt. Usual masculine banter is momentarily traded for vulnerable intersubjective displays of gratefulness and love to one's friends and neighbors. Men and women make these speeches. Overcome with the experience, even a temporary guest like myself could not hold back tears. With representatives from most families in the community engaging in this group affect, the event helps bond the community together.

Eating together also involves buying together. After my first meeting with Dao Hang in Thung Raab, he invited me to travel back to Bangkok to visit Pa Kluai for the first time. On the way out of Thung Raab, we stopped at the district center to board a van to Bangkok. The vans parked outside of a market in rows made it convenient for Dao to purchase three large bags of rice, each weighing as much as a small adult. They were piled on top of a seat, testing the vans shocks considerably. They paid for the rice with money pooled from the people at Pa Kluai. The rice would be brought back to Pa Kluai, where it, like other foodstuffs, communally purchased, would likely be divided and portioned to each family. Although buying rice so far from home in a rural area was quite inconvenient, requiring a heaving lugging in the van and hefting over

shoulders, it was an overall good plan because this rice was significantly cheaper per unit of weight than rice sold in the markets in Bangkok, Dao and Sia Sher were part of a facilitating process that would save money for all those that went in on the rice purchase. If they had not cooperated, the community would not have saved this money. The local Catholic priest Phor Thong told me that he gave this idea to the Hmong and encouraged them to help one another out in this way.

Because the singing practices were usually part of a more formalized event, this discussion of singing practices points toward the more formalized ways Pa Kluai residents became socially integrated and produced a community characterized by trust internal to the group. This trust help produce cohesive enough practices of policing conflict and the passing of information to the UN or Thai police. These formal practices revolve around the *Hmong Refugee Church of Bangkok*, established by Xf. Kong Meng and others in the community. These activities include church meetings, planning meetings for church auxiliaries, prayer meetings, baby naming's and blessings, and large church events like the annual Christmas celebration and Hmong New Year festivities. Even more frequently, though, the Pa Kluai Hmong organize child care and distribute food to the wider community through roughly the same networks of actors that execute church functions.

Hmong Immigrant Churches in Thailand

There are major differences between the *Hmong Refugee Church of Bangkok* at Pa Kluai and other churches attended by Hmong immigrants in Bangkok and Lopburi/Saraburi. Most of the Hmong in Bangkok outside of Pa Kluai attend the prison ministry lead by Pastor Sunthorn. A very small number in Khlong Bua meet in a smaller congregation led by someone named Steve,

a Singaporean minister. I have not visited this community, fearing that I might imbalance a precarious situation, as Steve is often described as a vindictive leader who jealously guards and manipulates his congregants. Lastly, a break-off group of the prison ministry led by another Singaporean named Albert Chen sends donations to the Hmong at Thung Raab and visits them periodically. Though meetings of his vibrant “*First Love church*” are dominated by a host of young beautiful Bangkok Thai who worship to well-performed Christian rock music in a high-end office building with a swimming pool on the roof, they share a ‘special’ relationship with the humble Hmong in Thung Raab, sometimes showing slideshows of their visits to Thung Raab in church. Though many of the Hmong in Thung Raab are Christian—especially the Hmong Viet—this group has no church to meet in since the only nearby protestant church decided it preferred not to have Hmong people meeting with its Thai Christians. Aside from these churches, some of the Hmong Christians likely form small house churches as they used in Vietnam. These are disconnected from these main churches.

So other Hmong groupings in Bangkok—like Khlong Bua or Tha In—are affiliated with a church, but they do not lead those churches and make decisions for them as a body like Xf. Kong Meng and his counselors do in Pa Kluai. Rather, decisions are left to their pastors who are Thai or Singaporean, but they often have Hmong assistants like Cha Thao, who act as liaisons to the Hmong community and are responsible for distributing food donations. So, although these churches often benefit their Hmong congregants, they have their own goals separate from the congregants. Though some of the Hmong in these congregations face similar problems to the Hmong at Pa Kluai, they do not have a leadership that understands what it is to live as an undocumented immigrant in a foreign country. Pa Kluai’s leadership is keen to protect their congregants from the prying eyes of authorities. However, I am uncertain whether the pastors at

these other churches have similar sensitivities. It seems safe to say these pastors do not intend or have the capability to counter the surveillance of the Thai State or the UN by organizing their community's affective relationships.

Influence of Foreign Missionaries on Church Structure

As discussed in chapter three on Hmong leaving Vietnam, the Christian Hmong began their journey into Christianity through a radio broadcast of the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) sermons by Pastor Vam Txoov Lis known in English as John Lee. They were not yet connected to any protestant institution. Before missionaries came to teach how to establish house churches, the Hmong improvised. A new arrival at Pa Kluai, who is now in his sixties, is one of the oldest in Pa Kluai remembers after reading chicken bones to decide to become Christian, had often gone into the forest to worship. He and his family would wake early in the morning and go into the forest. There, they would sing and pray together. As discussed in my chapter on life for Hmong in Vietnam, missionary efforts have been underway to integrate Hmong believers to protestant Christianity by house church organizations like the Inter-Evangelistic Movement (IEM). Reg Reimer, writing from the viewpoint of a missionary practitioner, claims that:

“The training of Hmong church leaders is a most critical need. Underground programs have long been the main means. They are still much needed even though since 2007 the ECVN(N) has been allowed to offer short trainings for leaders of the limited number of registered groups” (Reimer 2011: 83).

These “underground programs” used to train leaders and have worked in several ways. Besides receiving foreign and domestic missionaries, Hmong from Vietnam often traveled to Thailand to be trained in bible schools. Though informants told me they worked with underground missionaries who came to Vietnam, several informants told me how they had

traveled back and forth between Thailand and Vietnam to receive leadership training and bible study. One recent arrival to Pa Kluai, Yang Sao Lee, who is part of the IEM, described how he traveled between Vietnam and Thailand in two-month blocks. He would stay in Thailand until his Visa ran out, then go back to Vietnam for another two months before returning to Thailand. This alternating travel lasted from March 2014 until Feb of 2015. While in Thailand, he stayed in Chiang Mai and was trained by a prominent American missionary who speaks Hmong fluently. They also have worked together to translate the Bible into the Hmong Shoua (*Hmoob Sua*) dialect to help that group's conversion. There is another group of missionaries affiliated with C&MA. They run a bible school in Udonthani, in northeastern Thailand, not far from the border with Laos. They frequently have Vietnamese Hmong come to train at their facilities.

Key to the leadership training has been a focus on church planting of independent, self-sustaining indigenous units. C&MA's founding missionary's definitive statement on missionizing in Vietnam said:

“Institutional work should take its proper place, with primary emphasis on the planting and growth of indigenous churches. Direct evangelistic preaching of the gospel, translation of the Bible into the vernacular, the establishment of a Bible school to train native pastors and evangelists, should all be started and maintained. The publication of Christian literature should be emphasized.” (Reimer 2011: 26-27).

Because the Hmong of Vietnam were taught this church structure, it worked well for the Hmong at Pa Kluai. Unlike the other churches, Hmong attend in Bangkok, they have formed their own leadership structure.

Church Structure

This structure includes four main divisions with leaders in each. There are the elders' group (*Pab txwj laus*), the mothers' group (*pab niam tsev*), the young children (*Pab menyuam*

yaus), and the young women and men (*pab tub ntxhais hluas*) groups. The leaders of each of these groups have their own duties in the congregation. First, the elders (*txwj laus*) constitute the primary leadership. While I was there, Xf. Kong Meng acted as the head of the elders but had a few others who helped him, including Dao Hang's housemate Chu Vang. The elders take charge of organizing church services and events. They also network with the household heads (*hau tsev*) to ensure the community's welfare. The mother's group (*pab niam tsev*), has women in leadership. Though most of these women were very busy watching children and working, they also organized to take part in church activities, often taking responsibility for food preparation at events. Furthermore, they, like the elders, watched over their women congregants to ensure their welfare. The children's group is looked over by men and women. Their duties involve teaching the children and helping with the school during the week. And lastly, the young women and men group oversees teenaged boys and girls. They supervise activities, like soccer games or singing practices. Dao Hang, who was the leader of this group, often hosted the teenagers for singing lessons at his own house. Furthermore, they arrange and execute activities. Ger Ta was responsible for arranging and teaching English lessons on a weekly basis.

In this way, the church leadership organizes the church and the community simultaneously, especially since these two realms have very few areas where they do not overlap. This does not seem to be the case with other Hmong immigrant congregations. At the time Pa Kluai was smaller, with only seventeen families, the governing structure of Pa Kluai's refugee church, had used adult family members from most of the prominent families to fill roles in the church. Thus, most families were represented in the leadership of the church and the community. In that Pa Kluai has grown as of 2017 to around forty families, it remains to be seen what this growth does to the cohesiveness of the congregation. Relatedly, church leadership administers

the community because most members of the church live right around Pa Kluai. Other churches in Bangkok are often far from where their congregants live, though Steve's church is apparently among congregants in Khlong Bua, and a few Hmong have lived at the prison ministry.

Because there is this organization, which is formalized, given duties and jurisdictions, they are able to mobilize to make things in the community happen without much argument. This structure also acts as a web of communication; when one has a question about particular issues, they know who to call. Xf. Kong Meng is often answering early morning phone calls to help pay for the taxi fare to take someone's sick child to the hospital or to send his son down to answer the knocking on the steel roll-up door of his first floor. This structure makes sure news and information are disseminated, money and food donations are collected and distributed, church services and festivals are planned, meals are prepared, childcare is ensured, Sermons are delivered, English lessons are taught, and the community benefits.

Going to Church in Pa Kluai

The average church meeting in Pa Kluai is more evidence of how the church organization helps bring the community together. Admittedly, much of the service is similar to the prison ministry's service, but Pa Kluai's is created, executed, and presided over by Hmong in the community, while the prison ministry is presided over by Thai pastors. The common service at Pa Kluai takes place on Sunday afternoon. This schedule allows some who work in the morning to attend their Sunday church services. Furthermore, it allows some, especially youth, to attend other church services that happen in the morning, like the prison ministry. A few have also attended a nearby congregation of Mormons held in the morning. Most congregants arrive at Pa Kluai's church on foot, though a few ride bikes the short distance between home and the funeral

parlor of the Catholic church where church is held. A few of the elders and youth come early to arrange the light-colored chairs in the funeral parlor, which is a 60' x 40' rectangular room with windows lining its long sides and an entrance door and set of windows opposite the podium. They also set up audiovisual equipment and musical instruments around the podium that will be used for the services. These include microphones, a screen, and video projector, two or three guitars and amplifiers, and a drum box for percussion, which stand in front of a white background with a cross on the wall front and center of the room. The floor is flat; there is not a stage or risers. When congregants have arrived, a few will linger outside near the back where a door connects the room with an outside overhanging porch facing the soccer field. Sometimes the room is full, so a few will watch from outside through the window while ducking the sun under the porch.

Besides, obviously, the sermons and songs that will use a significant portion of the two hours or longer service, there are a few other regular portions of the service. These include announcements, community prayer, and the passing of the collection bag. The news and announcements time is a particularly helpful part of the meeting. Here leaders have the ear of the entire congregation to give important messages and keep people up on what is happening in the community. Here, I often learned who had sick family members or accidents. Also, it was during this portion that I learned that American ethnonationalists were actively trying to recruit people from Bangkok to their cause, so Pa Kluai residents should stay on their guard. The community prayer often dovetailed the announcements; those who were sick or in need of financial assistance were prayed for. This call for help in the prayer led naturally into the passing of a flannel bag with a cross appliqué on its front. As the collection bag was passed, a song was sung that reminded everyone of God's power. The money collected here would be taken by the elders

and put into a collective fund that pays for church and community costs and emergencies. Though the aforementioned observances happened weekly, the communion was less frequent. Its observance happened only once in all the meetings I attended. It involved Kong Meng's blessing, and of the passage of the last supper, bread and red Fanta soft drink were used to represent the body and blood of Christ.

Aside from these portions, the majority of the meeting is taken up by sermons, usually given by Xf. Kong Meng or some of the other leaders, including Sia Hang and a few others. When there are visiting pastors, they are often asked to give sermons. While I was there, several Hmong pastors visited. Sermons in the church are given fairly colloquial language. For some speakers, jokes are as common as scriptural references. The most common themes revolved around sacrificing oneself for the cause of Christ and staying true to one's beliefs and enduring persecution. Reasons for this are obvious, as the community is built on members who have left their home country mostly as a result of their religious affiliation.

Songs are interspersed through the service. During songs, congregants are asked to stand while the song is sung. Raising hands and clapping are not uncommon during the songs. Generally, the songs follow simple melodies played by one of the teenaged boys on guitar. The words are projected on the screen with a colorful background, which usually includes a picture of a cross, but many of the songs were known by heart. Most of the melodies were simple and lively and reflected a Hmong musical sensibility. It is easy to see that these usually reserved people deeply enjoy singing these songs. Often their eyes are closed as they rock back and forth singing at the top of their voice. Several songs are common among Hmong Christian congregations in Bangkok. However, a few were written by congregation members. Some of the more complicated songs were performed by teenagers who often worked long hours throughout

the week to practice them. Though beauty is in the eye of the beholder, some of the more touching performances for me included a performance by a popular young man with a mild form of cerebral palsy. Though singing is somewhat difficult for him, the congregation seemed to feel his effort. It should be no surprise that the songs and sermons encouraged cooperation and singleness of purpose.

Prayer Meetings

Aside from having weekly church meetings, Pa Kluai Hmong often invite community members for prayer meetings, devotionals, baby blessings, and naming ceremonies in their homes. A baby blessing was held for Dao Hang and his wife Mee's new son in their wide lower room. The ceremony involved a few short sermons and a prayer directed at blessing the life of this new family member. This allowed the entire community to participate in the meeting. Since the church was held in the same room that week, it was an easy transition to the baby blessing right afterward.

Also, during my first period of fieldwork in 2015, I attended several prayer meetings, with at least three preplanned intentionally for the community to participate in. These meetings were called by the household head of a family in need. In such a meeting, most household heads of the community would come in a show of support for the family in need. On such occasions, usually, male members of the community will gather with all the members of the family present. These gatherings usually take place at the home of the family calling the meeting; however, because families share apartments and row houses, the meeting might take place in the most convenient space nearby, usually the largest most convenient room of the row house. Such meetings seem arranged impromptu and communicated through messages sent on foot by

household head directly or indirectly by children or telephones. With all seated in a circle, the meeting begins with an explanation of why everyone was asked to gather for the prayer. This explanation usually addresses the needs of particular members. Most often, the individual was a child with injuries or illness. Sometimes the meeting was held for a family member still living in Vietnam. After the explanation, the most senior member of the community is asked to give a prayer of blessing to the individual. While I lived there, Xf. Kong Meng had not yet been ordained a Pastor, but he was usually asked to give the blessing. On one of these occasions, when Ger Ta was asking for a blessing, a Kinh Vietnamese pastor who lived for a while in the community was asked to pray because of his seniority. Though I do not speak Vietnamese, it was not difficult for me to register the seriousness of his prayer, judging by its volume. He became very animated. The solemnity of the occasion was corroborated by a few fervent Hallelujahs from other members. When the prayer was over, a meal was offered to those who attended.

A similar meeting was held for a family who was taking new names. Though taking a new name (*ti npe laus*) is common in Hmong culture when a man reaches maturity, usually after the birth of his second or third child, this meeting had a Christian bent to it. Houa Her's family had been released from the IDC then for about a year and was taking new names because they were hoping for a new chapter in their life. In the recent past, several of them had faced illness, and they wanted to be born again. What was particularly impressive about this meeting was that it took place during a day of torrential rain. All of the roads in Pa Kluai were flooded up to one's knees. However, rather than staying home, members of the community waded through the filthy water in the pouring rain to pray with Houa Her. He was touched by their faithfulness to him. Most explained that they knew he would do the same for them.

The community at Pa Kluai is governed by a group of elders who meet together at least once a month, at most three times a month. At the time I was there, the leading elders consisted of Xf. Kong Meng, Chu Vang, Fai Lor, and Sia Hang. However, most of the men in leadership came to the meeting, including leaders of other auxiliaries and a few others I do not believe had leadership positions. Their meetings are the most administrative of all the religious meetings. Although much discussion on administrative matters takes place in the evenings at Xf. Kong Meng's office, a few times a month, the elders get together in the second-floor classroom. During this meeting, tables with Doraemon table cloths and chairs are set up, although the room is usually empty. Participants bring their laptop computers from home, depriving their children of an evening's worth of viewing Hmong dubbed Chinese dramas or Hmong movies. Computers were usually used to create the Christmas program and plan for songs and sermons, but sometimes used to take notes, and write emails. The sessions of this meeting I attended usually revolved around preparing for the upcoming Christmas party, which was still months away. It was the intention of the leadership to draw as many guests from the Bangkok community as possible. This did not mean Hmong Viet people necessarily but had a strategic intention to attract people that can help the community in some way, such as NGO representatives, religious leaders, journalists, and researchers like me. Furthermore, the planning meetings discussed who they might be able to get donations from to assist in the festivities. A C&MA pastor had promised to help pay for meat. They hoped another source might help pay for some of the vegetables, etc. Furthermore, the meeting discussed possible dates for the Christmas party. As a group, the leadership was worried that their enemies might come to the party and try to embarrass their group in front of honored guests. So the date of the party kept changing. After the Christmas party was through and my fieldwork was near ending in January 2016, these

meetings turned more to preparing for the Hmong New Year festival season, though this is a more privately observed tradition. This effective organizing and discipline of execution is certainly evidence of territorial control and a strong territorial effect in Pa Kluai. Furthermore, the momentary staging of this specific Christmas party territoriality resembles the metaphor of gathering vines around the temporarily planted bean pole I have so often discussed.

Pa Kluai has no version of Sunday school akin to what is often held in western churches. Pa Kluai's congregants do not break off into their respective divisions of the elder's group, mother's group, young people's group, and children's group to be taught separately. Occasionally, however, Elder's group held a bible school, which I was able to attend during the week. In the sessions that I attended, the class had only men. It was held in the room to the side of Kong Meng's office, where nursery school-aged children's English classes are often taught during the week. The room has a whiteboard and is appropriate for teaching. In this setting, Elders sat in chairs bantering back and forth for several minutes before Xf. Kong Meng prodded them to begin, reminding them that they did not have much time. Thenceforward, the men looked at the whiteboard that instructor Ger Ta was teaching from. However, the banter continued through the lesson but was based on a mutual exchange of scriptural knowledge. Kong Meng was not the instructor, but he often made comments usually based on a bible verse, trying to keep the lesson on track.

Syncretism of Religious Beliefs

Though the final section of this chapter does not speak directly to how the Pa Kluai community organizes themselves to construct a counterlegible relationship with their governmental overseers, the religious life is important to understand an important part of life for

the Pa Kluai community. That is the topic of religious beliefs. To be sure, this topic alone could take an entire dissertation, but I will limit the discussion of key themes and innovations in the community.

Members of the Pa Kluai church have been missionized by a variety of denominations in Vietnam, including Baptists and Lutherans, though C&MA was most prevalent. However, in their Hmong Refugee Church of Bangkok, they practice a nondenominational mixture of these religions. You can see some evidence of this during songs. While some are staid and quiet, another portion like Xf. Kong Meng tends to dance and shout while they sing. Kong Meng explained this was because he had followed a more charismatic Pentecostal Christian group while in Vietnam. In terms of doctrine, there is a similar variety, but a constant effort to reflect the religious beliefs and practices rooted in the bible. Members of the community, especially men and young people, can be seen reading the bible often. There are bibles in every room. As mentioned, sermons often revolved around Christian sacrifice. However, there was also a strong emphasis on family cohesion. I can recall more than one sermon, which encouraged male congregants to treat their wives with respect and care.

For some in Pa Kluai, it was obvious that underlying their Christian beliefs was a very Hmong cosmology which created syncretic understandings of the world. One of the most salient examples of this combination was Kong Meng's belief that Hmong people are a lost tribe of Israel. He believes this for a few reasons. Most convincing to him is the evidence that Hmong people have traditionally done several things that coincide with what he views as Christian practices. Even before conversion, they have drawn crosses on the foreheads of their children, used crosses to mark sick households, painted blood on doorways, and eaten unleavened bread as the ancient Israelites did. To add to Kong Meng's investigations, some in the Hmong Thai pastors

who visited Pa Kluai taught a receptive audience that the Hmong are a part of the old testament tribe of Manasseh.

Regarding Geomancy, Xf. Kong Meng assured me that in Vietnam, a majority of elders and pastors believe in the traditional Hmong geomantic concept of *Looj mem*. As I discussed in the dissertation's introduction, the concept is an analog to Chinese Feng Shui. This belief and practice involve the reading of landscapes to predict the fortune of the people living in those landscapes. Of particular importance to one's fortune are the placing of one's house and the graves of one's forbearers. Kong Meng's father was an expert in looking at *looj mem*. He had studied it with a Hmong Chinese master as a young man. Kong Meng lamented to me that if his father had not died when he was fifteen, he too would be a master by the age of about 30. His belief in the validity of the practice is very matter of fact. He told me;

"The reason I think *Looj mem* exists is, for example, then your mother or father died, and you took and buried them. If someone came and dug them up, then your children would have problems. That is why I believe. Also, if you look, for example, when two people die. One of them hires someone to come and read the landscape of the place (*saib qhov chaw zoo*); they put them there. Then the other one is just buried wherever. Then their children turn out poor. That is why I think it exists."

Much of the traditional concepts of *looj mem* depend on positions of mountains and streams, so it is difficult to assess the *looj mem* of his current place, which is in flatland Bangkok. However, he still pays attention to those principals and has acknowledged that the *looj mem* of Pa Kluai must be good though he cannot see it.

Beyond geomancy, Pa Kluai's Hmong have somewhat syncretic views on the nature of human spirits. In a discussion about naming practices, Dao Hang explained to me that in the old days Hmong people gave their children bad names like "*dab*" (meaning ghost). He explained that this had to do with children dying in infancy. If a Hmong person had a child who died in

infancy and then had another with the same result, they would become suspicious that this is the same spirit being reincarnated in different bodies. This might be interpreted as a spirit entering the body or spirits attacking the spirit of the child, causing them to die. To test this problem, the parents might mark the body of the child that has passed. When the next child is born, they check to see if any of the markings have appeared. If no markings show, then this is a different spirit. In the end, many such parents began naming their child "*dab*" so that other spirits would hear the parents calling the child "ghost" and not give them any more trouble since there is already a ghost with them.

Dao's explication of this story was not to point out absurdity but to state a fact. He went on to say that "[people] who believe in Jesus do not really have this happen anymore, but the ones who do not still have this happen very often" In sum, he acknowledges that reincarnation happens, it isn't out of the question for reincarnated ghosts to be born even to Christian believers.

In another setting he discussed reincarnation,

“When I was in Đăk Lăk people asked me whether people can reincarnate and I told them no, people could not reincarnate. But I've thought about it now, and I think people can be reincarnated. Because there has been news that has come out. People have said they have been born before. Did you hear about that Hmong child in America that said she was born in Laos before? This little girl was watching TV and heard the voice of a man speaking on TV and said, that is my son.”

Furthermore, Dao Hang has a syncretic view of the soul. Speaking specifically of Hmong people, he said he believes people have two souls (*ob tug ntsuj plig*). One of these souls is the soul you are born with, which comes from heaven, and another is the soul that your parents call to you when you are three days old. This second spirit might be less pure spirit and has come from the *dab* spirits which roam the world. He told me

“There truly are *Dab*, as God is true. There are women in Vietnam who have been possessed. A *dab* was in her body, and he spoke through her. The spirit would say things

like. 'David Chambers is bad. He doesn't love his wife.' Even though no one there knows one knows your name 'David Chambers is bad, he goes and flirts with girls, then goes and worships God.' The spirit might say that. But if you are someone who believes in God very strongly, then he will be afraid of you. The ones who have God, then he is afraid of them."

Aside from the idea of a person having two souls, this idea of spirit possession fits very well with western understandings,

Though these unorthodox beliefs do not necessarily shape the religious life of the people, I have mentioned. They are evidence of the incorporation of Christian beliefs into their preexisting worldview. Some similar things are the continuing practice chicken food augury of some in the community, including Kong Meng. This practice involves the viewing of different parts of a boiled chicken in order to make predictions about interactions. One pays attention to the bending of the toes, the veins on a skull, and so forth. Kong Meng explained this practice, "So I have looked at Chickens feet, and it is good when doing business. If you look at it before you go do business and it looks strange, then you know you are going to be taken advantage of. So I have looked at it." He further elaborated:

"A Chinese teacher taught me to read chickens' feet. You have to look at the head, the tongue, eyes, and the wings the feet, and you take out the bones and see everything that appears on the feet. If you are going to get a wife for your son, you read chicken feet. If you are going to do business far away, you read bones. If you are driving a new vehicle, you read the bones."

Kong Meng explained by chicken's feet have so much to say.

"The teacher said that when God (*Yawm Saub*) or *Tswv ntuj* created chickens and people. He had a book that was sent to people to know about proper times and seasons, but the people had it, and when it rained, the book got wet. So the people left it out to dry, but the chicken scratched it and ripped it all up. So people do not have that knowledge. That is why if you need to know something about times and seasons, then you have to look at the chickens' feet because he had scratched it all. That is how history tells it."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed the primary ways that the Hmong people Pa Kluai community organize the internal workings of their community to promote an affect of trust. This organization of trust builds counter-legibility. In contrast to other groups in Bangkok and upcountry, Pa Kluai's Hmong have strong leadership and autonomy in their religious meetings to organize around their own purposes. This allows them to establish a set of pseudo-legal rules which encourage group harmony, and lastly, they use technology to expedite communication and foster transparency, engaging in formal and informal activities that allow for positive intersubjective exchanges. Not only do these acts foster transparency, but they often help to reinforce the territorial effect, by coding members of the group as members of the territorialization. All of these efforts benefit an overall cohesion, which encourages members of the group to rely on one another and solve conflicts internally, so as not to let problems spin out into the view of outside parties, such as the UN and the Thai government. This ensures counter-legibility and protects those who must remain subliminal to the gaze of Thai state officers. I turn in the next chapter to discuss how the community relates to external parties in order to ensure that Pa Kluai maintains its cohesion. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss some of the limitations of the connections with these external parties, the politics of Hmong communities and religious institutions in Thailand and elsewhere.

In chapter eight, I continue this conversation by discussing how the people at Pa Kluai organize themselves to interact with parties external to the Pa Kluai community. This also becomes a way of establishing a territorial effect. The primary methods of organizing and regulating themselves, which distinguish them from other groups of Hmong in Bangkok, are their strong leadership, their autonomous church congregation, their frequent meetings and

communications and adjudications, and their use of technology for self-policing. Their articulation with out-group parties also influences their social organizing for counter-legibility and includes collaborating with non-profit and nongovernmental aid organizations, seeking relations with beneficial individuals who are not necessarily affiliated with any organization and making connections with religious organizations. This also involves the policing of those external relationships to ensure that interactions with those parties are safe and beneficial for the Hmong at Pa Klui.

Chapter 8

The Mirror and the Camera: Pa Kluai Connecting to External Networks

Dao Hang once told me, “We Hmong [...] when we were in the mountains. We had no mirror. We had no mirror to look at. He said while holding out his hands and tracing the outline of a large imaginary of a large mirror with the gesture.

“What we had were just these little ones about this size [holding up his hands in a square shape]. We could only see our faces but not our bodies. So they say that your husband or your wife is your mirror, which you look at. So every time after you finish dressing, your wife should take a look at you (oh you ask your wife I see, your mom or your wife?). They check to see if there are any mistakes, the neck of your shirt or the buttons on your wrong collar buttons, some of them go up to teach the gospel, but their shirt one side is high, and the other side is low. You may make jokes, and they laugh, but they are actually just laughing at your shirt (collar). So when we Hmong leave our houses and walk outside and go to the market or go far away, you should groom yourself very well.”

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the territory effect can be facilitated through the organizing of a place’s internal relations and the coding of the actors within to be part of the territorial arrangement. This next chapter is more comparable to the aforementioned mirror analogy. This analogy points to having some external point of view, which reinforces a territorial arrangement. Just like the externalization of an image onto a mirror, the Hmong in Pa Kluai learn from others outside the community how they are coded and something about how their territorialization should function. Much of this external coding influences people in Pa Kluai to make themselves presentable to outside observers. Becoming presentable helps them to gain access to resources and allows them to exclude others from the community. With the camera, the people at Pa Kluai organize the distribution of food donations they receive from

external donors, especially Christian churches and aid agencies. However, this process has been a politically fraught process that has coded Pa Kluai as a particular territorialization.

Furthermore, the use of computers possibly facilitates the extension of Pa Kluai's relations and territorial prospects farther into more extensive topologies with outsiders in sites beyond the feasible limits of travel. This interaction too acts something like a mirror in that judgment of people in this digital and international telecommunications milieu matter to the Hmong at Pa Kluai. As such, while their acts of self-organization have their emic value in establishing convivial affects, they also serve an etic performative purpose for the consumption of outsiders and potential advocacy partners. The sum of these actions is vital to the establishment of Pa Kluai's territorialization. The sociotechnical practices established here constitute Pa Kluai's *territory effect* (Painter 2010). Thung Raab and other places do not create such an effect.

Beyond the organizing of internal community members at Pa Kluai, the community makes sure to connect with external actors in order to ensure the sustainability of the community and keep socially cohesive. These external actors are some of the people who help with material needs. They include individuals, aid agencies, civil society groups, and religious organizations.

Kong Meng is constantly trying to find new contacts that might help his community.

More, specifically, he is constantly thinking about:

“What will we do to make sure they keep sending us rice and do not stop sending it as they had? What will we do to make sure that people will keep sending us vegetables? And we think about what we will do in the future, so our children can study? If we ask for money, where will we ask for it? Now we must set goals that we can do. I have been thinking about these things. I am still thinking, in the long run, what can we do to become friends with the authorities that control this country to become their friends, become a person that is pure that they like. Do the things that they like. So that we can stay here in the future. I still think about this.”

Xf. Kong Meng makes this contact with the assumption that the interaction demands give and take. When he meets people, he usually gives them food and treats them well. He admitted, "This uses lots of money. If you want to make food for them or buy coffee for them." It appears that he sees that the cost of making these contacts is a long-term investment that may pay off later. As such, he is willing to expend resources beyond what he would spend on himself. And rather than always waiting for the donations they depend on to pay for things, he should be willing to make and use his own money. Of this, he said:

"Also, I thought that I do not always want to wait for them to help us with money. Do not always wait! Whether they help you or they do not help you, sometimes you just need to get out your own money and do it. Like now, Teacher Dwight was telling me that he is going to have some important teachers from overseas come and see the children on Saturday. He says he's going to have food. But what should I do? He said for me not to worry and to no prepare anything. But I prepared something. If I wait for Dwight to send money, that is not good. So, I prepared each person about 400 to 500 baht worth for a meal. That's what we do. So, if we do that, then [the foreign teachers] will not lose their strength. It's not right for them to only help us every time, and we do nothing to help them. So I tell the people not to be people that always sit back and wait. You should do it!"

This last sentiment seems to be his philosophy in matters beyond money. He jumps at chances to contact people. Whether they are possibly suspicious or not. He makes his evaluation of them rather quickly then decides whether he will deal with them or not. I was lucky that he accepted me into the community after an initial meal. Some are not so lucky. Pa Kluai is able to exclude some individuals within their ethnic group from the space, including people like Dr. Soua Her, Seng Xiong⁶⁷, and others involved with the "*Hmoob Teb chaws*" movement in the United States that came to visit. Rather he sought me out and brought me to the

⁶⁷ Although I was not quick enough on my feet to ask Kong Meng more about Seng Xiong's visit to Pa Kluai, he mentioned in an interview that Seng Xiong had visited Pa Kluai with a list of other people. It does not appear he has visited many times since Kong Meng has distanced himself from ethnonationalists and restricted them from visiting the area.

community. Kong Meng's ability to control those who come in and out of the community harkens back to Sack's (1986) ideas about territoriality being partly defined by a sovereign power making rules about how a space can be used. The exclusion of bad actors or the inclusion of acceptable actors in Pa Kluai shows that Kong Meng is becoming that rulemaking controller of territory.

Aside from the food assistance that usually comes from religious organizations, other aid is provided by non-governmental organizations. I will discuss food assistance in the next section, the primary agencies which work with the Hmong in Bangkok are the UNHCR and a number of others, including BPSOS, AAT, JRS, and the BRC. There are a number of others who also work with refugees, including Charitas, Life Raft, Forum Asia, Human Rights Defenders at a broader and possibly less involved level. In Bangkok, these organizations assist many of the 9,000 asylum seekers from countries all over the world. The four largest groups of refugees in Bangkok in 2015 were people from Pakistan, which included both Pakistani Christians and Ahmadi Muslims, Vietnamese—including mostly Montagnards, Kinh, and Hmong—Somalia, and Syria. At the time I interviewed, a representative from AAT was during the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, so Syrians were under expedited processing at the UNHCR. Although the Thai government does not technically recognize refugees and technically considers these migrants illegal, the UNHCR office is located in Bangkok, so there is at least some tacit recognition of their work with people they define as refugees. This has much to do with the fact the Thai government needs the help of the UNHCR to process the refugees that many of whom in Bangkok were smuggled and did not intend to come there in the first place.

The Hmong at Pa Kluai work closely with the UNHCR trying to do everything within the bounds set by the organization. UNHCR, as an agency, is the primary advocate and provider of

assistance for refugees in Thailand in general. It is the UNHCR's mandate to seek protection in their country of arrival for those who qualify as refugees under its requirements. However, this mandate is tempered by the UN's relationship with the Thai government. Generally, the situation for the UNHCR itself has been somewhat precarious in Thailand. It is generally understood that Thailand does not recognize refugees, even if they are given refugee status by the UNHCR. This means that sometimes UN decisions are not honored by Thailand, and the UN itself is subject to wholesale dismissal by the Thai state. Thailand has not signed onto the 1951 UN refugee convention, and following its 1979 immigration act, Thailand still considers asylum seekers 'illegal immigrants' (OHCHR 2015: 1). As such, the situation for refugees in Thailand is difficult. According to a document produced by Asylum Access Thailand, Boat People SOS, and the Conscience Foundation,

"Since Thailand does not accord any legal status to refugees, urban refugees do not enjoy the rights that derive from refugee status under international law, and under Thai law, most are considered illegal immigrants. Urban refugees are thus at constant risk of arrest and detention, regardless of their UNHCR certificates showing that they are refugees. Even refugees who voluntarily repatriate or who are approved for resettlement, if they are illegal immigrants under Thai law, must pay an overstay fine of up to 20,000 THB (about US\$500), or spend time in immigration detention. This creates a challenging operating environment for UNHCR and makes it very difficult for UNHCR to fulfill its "protection mandate" (AAT et al. 2009: 3).

Not only are refugees subject to fines and detention, in general, but it has also been difficult for the UNHCR to fulfill its protection mandate for international refugees, and its own place in Thailand is precarious. According to the UNHCR's general appeal for 2008-2009:

"Since mid-2006, the situation in Thailand has been characterized by a reduction of the protection space for all groups of concern. As a result, UNHCR is having difficulty in implementing its mandate. In April 2007, the Office was requested by the Thai authorities to stop its refugee status determination (RSD), pending consultation. Furthermore, it has become increasingly difficult to resettle urban refugees accepted for third-country

resettlement due to restrictions on exit visas. An equally significant problem is the difficulty of reaching refugees and asylum-seekers in detention centers (UNHCR 2007: 251).

Lawyers at AAT posit that this period in the 2000s when the Thai government requested the UNHCR stop its refugee status determination (RSD) was, in essence, a stopping of UNHCR's work in Thailand, since its primary mandate is the identification and protection of refugees. One AAT lawyer I spoke with characterized this as the UNHCR having to leave Thailand only to be invited back later. Which the Thai government, in her appraisal, called back the UN in order to process the people that were coming into Bangkok in large numbers. She stated that:

“The UN was closed down before. The UNHCR was asked to stop functioning a few years ago, and then they were allowed to open again. So, there was a recognition that people will always come to Thailand for many reasons. One is that there are many people who flee and use smugglers and have no idea where they're going to end up. And now there's about 8,000 9,000 asylum seekers here.⁶⁸ So, I think, for the time being, the government is going to allow UNHCR to stay and process them. Although there is a lot of misunderstanding about that.”

She noted progress in relations between the UNHCR and Thailand. During my research, it appeared that police usually honored UNHCR protection documents. This AAT lawyer recognized triumphs in relation to AAT's advocacy work with the Thai government in the last few years, including the ending of detention of child immigrants. However, during our interview in November 2015, she perceived that the tides were turning against asylum seekers as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) military Junta ruling Thailand at the time had installed a new, more hardline immigration commissioner. She shared that:

⁶⁸ Of those 8,000 to 9,000 people about 8% are Vietnamese Hmong. According to Kong Meng there are around 82 families composing about 700 people total Vietnamese Hmong immigrants in Bangkok.

“There is a new commissioner in the immigration bureau who started in September so under him there was a crackdown on overstayers, all overstayers. And there were 9,000 arrests nationally of overstayers. 80% who are border country nationalities were just bused back. So, I think things are set to stay bad for a while in terms of arrests, and they arrested a ten-month-old child. So, one step forward two steps back.”

This precarious position of the UNHCR in Thailand is further corroborated by my own interactions with the UNHCR. Although the UNHCR would not agree to a formal interview with me, they sent me an email that confirmed, in several ways, the institution’s precarious position in relation to the Thai government. The email read:

“Many thanks for your interest in and concern for urban refugees and asylum seekers in Thailand. As you may be aware, the Royal Thai Government does not currently have a domestic system for addressing the international protection needs of urban refugees and asylum seekers (although there is a system by way of Ministerial order addressing Myanmar refugees in the nine temporary shelters along the Thai/Myanmar border). As such, urban refugees and asylum seekers (who come from some 45 different countries) are considered “illegal aliens” if they do not possess a valid Thai form of a domestic protection framework. In such a sensitive context, we do not feel that now is the appropriate moment to highlight any specific groups or nationalities, which could be counter-productive in terms of their current situation. We appreciate your understanding and thank you again for your interest and concerns,
Best Regards,
UNHCR Representatio[sic] in Thailand.”

Later I was able to have a brief informal interview with the UNHCR’s senior protection officer. I met him on the front steps of the UNHCR. He had come outside to meet with an asylum seeker on the steps, but he shared a bit of time with me. In this short interview, I could easily see his conflicted position. He admitted that the UN Declaration on Human Rights is an aspirational document. He asserted that Thailand was not helpful with refugees. Furthermore, he ridiculed the idea that 10,000 urban refugees were an undue burden on Thailand. However, regarding his ability to grant refugee status to all asylum seekers is very unlikely. He explained

that the 1951 refugee convention stipulated that discrimination is not equivalent to persecution, so the UNHCR cannot declare everyone who has been discriminated against a refugee. He raised the example of Christians from Pakistan who are a large number of asylum seekers in Bangkok. Though he admitted he would not like to be a Christian in Pakistan, not everyone is running for their lives, and in essence, calling everyone a refugee is equivalent to calling no one a refugee. With that said, he admitted, “I spend a lot of my time feeling like the biggest asshole!” presumably because he is forced, in his view, to turn people away who really need help. The UN defends a refugee as:

“Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal, and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.” (UNHCR n.d.)

Since the definition of a refugee was set after WWII in the context of the aftermath of that particular conflict, which involved widespread warfare and obvious forms of violence and persecution, individuals from dissimilar contexts where violence and persecution are more imminent occurrences, they are less identifiable as refugees. As such many people he meets, despite being afraid to return their country, are not seen as easily identifiable refugees, possibly because there is no military conflict in their country of origin.

Having said all of this, the Pa Kluai residents do not always view the UNHCR as a solely benevolent agency. Rather, the agency can be thought of as somewhat capricious and mysterious. The Hmong understand that a requirement for refugee status is “Well-founded fear of persecution,” and they can point to their ethnicity, religion, and conflicts over land as bases for that persecution, and yet the UN often finds them short of evidence for this perceived fear. As such, the thrust of this entire chapter shows how Pa Kluai Hmong organize themselves to work

with the UNHCR in a way which maintains control of a portion of the information the UNHCR has about the community.

Pa Kluai has done well to work with BPSOS to receive various sorts of aid. Boat People SOS (BPSOS) is another important organization that works with the Hmong at Pa Kluai. Originally created to assist Vietnamese boat people, the organization has expanded to include people from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Hmong from Vietnam receive considerable assistance from BPSOS, and this assistance comes in many forms. Of primary importance is the legal assistance that BPSOS provides. There is a division of labor between BPSOS and Asylum Access Thailand (AAT), in which BPSOS primarily takes cases of people from Indochinese countries, and AAT will take other cases, especially Somali and Pakistani. Because BPSOS has only four lawyers, AAT helps and takes some of the Hmong cases, but since BPSOS has been working in the Indochinese field, they have contacts and skills which prepare them to take Indochinese clients.

Beyond legal assistance, BPSOS has helped to sponsor some individuals who have been persecuted for religious, political, or Human rights activities. Rather than doing the work themselves, they will pay the costs of other groups such as Forum Asia, or human rights defenders to help individuals to relocate to a third country. But BPSOS will help to fill out these applications to make the process happen. They have been quite successful in doing so. This comes in amounts of \$1,000 to \$3,000 in funds. However, BPSOS very rarely gives cash assistance. The Hmong leaders at Pa Kluai know that it is sometimes possible to receive cash assistance from BPSOS, but that this is a request of last resort and is not often granted. This would usually only happen in emergencies, such as evictions.

BPSOS's two-story office houses the four lawyers. One of them is Thai, and the three others are Westerners. Downstairs there is a Thai administrator who keeps track of the administration of the office. They also have two people who they call interns, and who come from refugee communities. One is an Ede from Vietnam, and the other is a Vietnamese Hmong at Khlong Bua. They help process applicants who come to the office and take notes when there are telephone calls. They also hope to have another intern who speaks Vietnamese. These interns fill translation duties as well.

The primary way that asylum seekers interact with BPSOS is through legal assistance. But this does not mean giving everyone who has come to Bangkok, a lawyer. Rather, that assistance begins with a one-day workshop. In the morning, asylum seekers meet with BPSOS to learn about Bangkok and about the refugee process. They explain some of the services available. They clue them into some of what they can expect of their experience in Thailand. This lasts for two or three hours in the morning. Then in the afternoon, there are one-on-one meetings with the lawyers. At this time, they give a little advice, and they help them write their first application UNHCR application.

When the results of this first application come, BPSOS is helpful, especially when they have been denied, and there is a need for asylum applicants to appeal. BPSOS must assess whether the appeal is worth the time and effort, so taking up the appeal process is conditioned on whether they think there is a decent chance to appeal the first decision. But when the case is closed, only when there is some new strong evidence, or it is clear the UNHCR has made a mistake, will BPSOS continue to push the case. However, that process is more complicated and can take a lot more effort, which BPSOS cannot feasibly expend.

Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) is not a primary means of support for the Hmong at Pa Kluai; however, several Hmong have received assistance from them at critical times. The office located near *Anusawari Chai Samolaphum* has offered monthly cash assistance to several families at Pa Kluai. This assistance is predicated on JRS's visits to assess the communities' needs. Their requirement, like other organizations, is that the applicant for assistance has a UN asylum NI number. In fact, assisting specifically asylum seekers rather than refugees seems to be their primary goal, since they feel there is a large gap in assisting those still seeking asylum. Applicants need not have refugee status to be given an NI number. The NI number is issued upon application for asylum. Those without NI numbers, like Hmong Lao, and others from Thailand's border countries, are ineligible for sustained support through JRS. Furthermore, JRS will not give assistance to single men. Also, families who have a job or source of income will not be given assistance. It appears that assistance from JRS could be rationed in a way that triages real from fake refugees. Dao Hang explained to me that,

“There was a Hmong Viet who was meeting with an organization over near *Anusawari*. He told them that if he had known how poor he would be when he came here, he would not have come. So, they said you had not been persecuted. You just came because you were poor. So, we will not help you. And they did not help him. He is one of our community members here.”

So, we can see that this sense of counter-legibility is also activated in interactions with aid agencies. It is telling that Dao Hang would not tell me who this individual was. His solidarity with the individual would not let him even appear less than genuine in an anecdote.

Pa Kluai residents also work with the Bangkok Refugee Center (BRC). Since the Bangkok Refugee Center works closely with the UNHCR, their policies reflect the stance of the UNHCR. As such, the BRC works mostly with asylum seekers and less so with those who were denied refugee status. Some of the most important ways the BRC helps is with cash assistance

and medical reimbursements. For example, the BRC reimburses for the medical costs of the first pregnancy in Thailand. Those who have not gained refugee status are not given cash assistance by the BRC. However, you or your children may have access to educational services, depending on the availability of classes. Once someone is denied refugee status, they are not given transportation assistance to come to the BRC. The BRC does community visits to understand some of the needs of refugee communities and will make special interventions in cases of domestic violence.

Unlike the other organizations mentioned—AAT, BPSOS, and JRS—the BRC is a rather large school like space. There are a few classrooms, offices, and there is a large sitting porch in the front, and the atmosphere was fairly relaxed. The space is inviting of refugees. As such, they hold fairly tight security. During my visit, I was asked by the guard, who was a muscular plainclothes Thai police officer, whether I was a journalist. If I was a journalist, he told me explicitly that I was not to report on the BRC or refugees. Furthermore, the guard explained that I was making some of the other refugees at the center nervous. Since I had been sitting with a few friends from Pa Kluai and the surrounding area speaking Hmong, the others were unsure of who I was and were understandably nervous. Not wanting to be a nuisance, I made this my last visit, but before I left, I was able to sit in a classroom with the refugees for a bit before they began an English lesson. This push by the BRC to keep refugee issues as quiet as possible falls in line with the UNHCR position to not aggravate the precarious balance of refugees in the eyes of the Thai state as bringing attention to them might.

Asylum Access Thailand (AAT) is an important source of assistance for the Hmong at Pa Kluai. The organization is funded by the US Office of Populations, Refugees, and Migrants. Although they are required to use American flags on letterhead and so forth, they are a largely

independent organization⁶⁹ that engages in legal assistance, and some outreach and advocacy to the Thai government on refugee issues. AAT is part of a larger organization that is headquartered in San Francisco. Aside from their operations in Thailand, where they fall under the Human Rights Development Foundation, they have branches in Ecuador, Tanzania, and Malaysia. Their purpose is to provide legal services to asylum seekers. They limit these services to those who are going to the UNHCR and have NI numbers. Thus, they do not help Lao immigrants or Hmong immigrants who have been denied asylum. Furthermore, they do not give cash assistance, but they have a small community outreach program. As mentioned, AAT and BPSOS have a division of labor with BPSOS taking as many clients from Vietnam and AAT taking Somali and Pakistani clients. In terms of advocacy, AAT has been involved in some successful efforts, including the ending of detention of children in Thailand. However, the Lawyer I spoke with was worried that some of those gains were under threat since the terrorist attacks at Erawan in 2015⁷⁰ and elsewhere in Thailand. Certainly, there have been news reports of the Thai government's crackdown on migrant workers in Thailand since 2015 (Lefevre and Panarat 2016).

AAT's office is inconspicuously based in a house in a residential enclave surrounded by one of the busiest parts in Bangkok. The white two-story home looks like most others from the outside. Entrants take off their shoes in the hall at the top of the stairs at the doors to the workspace. Inside is quiet and cool, and void of any unnecessary decoration. The rooms I

⁶⁹ According to the AAT representative I spoke with, AAT receives funding from the US office of populations, refugees, and migrants, as such they are required to have US insignia's on some of their letterhead. According to her, other than this they are independent.

⁷⁰ In 2015 a number of bombs attacks rocked Bangkok. In 2015, a bomb exploded at a BTS station outside paragon shopping center. Later on August 17, 2015 a bomb exploded at the Erawan shrine in the Ratchaprasong area. A second attack happened the next day. Twenty people died in the Erawan bombing. Although no one has claimed responsibility for the bombings, a few suspects have been attributed responsibility including members of a Turkic nationalist organization. It is believed the bombing was revenge for Thailand's deportation of a group of Uyghur's to China.

entered contained a desk, a few chairs, and files. The AAT is staffed by volunteer lawyers from several different countries, including western and eastern—notably Thailand; The organization's branch director is Thai. This is not an insignificant fact; however, the Hmong at Pa Kluai I know were often concerned as to who their lawyer would be and where they were from. As mentioned earlier, there is a common understanding that Thai lawyers are not as sympathetic as western Lawyers. This was a major concern since the Hmong at Pa Kluai and elsewhere viewed their lawyers' efforts as almost as important to the UN's opinion of them. If they believe that their lawyer is not convinced of their case, they might not present it correctly to the UNHCR and damage their chances for asylum. So, there was often an effort at AAT and BPSOS to get a western lawyer rather than a Thai. Furthermore, there is a significant language barrier for the lawyers at AAT. Considering the diverse community of refugees in Bangkok, AAT must have translators on call that speak a number of different languages. Hmong Viet are also, as mentioned earlier, often dissatisfied with Hmong Thai translators who often use Thai cognates in their speech, which many of the Hmong Viet are unfamiliar with.

Pa Kluai's cohesive social and spatial organization allows them to work with NGOs in ways some other communities cannot. In discussing with a BPSOS outreach worker named Patricio from Mexico, ways to reach the Hmong in Khlong Bua and Tha-In communities, Patricio admitted that he had not met with all the Hmong women he hoped to reach in his embroidery program, he admitted:

“See, that's the problem. I want to work with the women in the community. I do not think that the women from all the communities are coming here [to Pa Kluai]. So, I am pretty much working with the women from only [Pa Kluai] community.”

This was certainly a problem for his program. This deficiency evidenced a fatigue that is likely present in the aid organizations more broadly, especially at that time, with an increasing

number of immigrants coming to Bangkok from Syria. Though I began explaining the division between the communities, Patricio came back to the topic of leadership to explain his lack of interaction with the Hmong in Tha-In and Khlong Bua. Speaking specifically about those communities he has had trouble reaching, he opined: “The problem is that they do not have a leader. So that makes it more complicated for us to work with them.” Also, in his appraisal, the other communities were not gathered in the way that Pa Kluai is. When he went to Tha-In, women from only one or two families gathered to meet with him, whereas in Pa Kluai, a group of more than twenty women gathers to meet him when he comes. In conversation, I encouraged him to work hard at meeting with women from these other communities, but he relented, “I was thinking about it, but I do not have the money or the time because I am already spread out way too much.” Here is a clear instance where the organizing which Pa Kluai Hmong have done, both spatially and socially, has created a beneficial relationship with an external actor, which facilitates Pa Kluai’s own goals. If they had not organized, the interaction would be too difficult for the BPSOS representative. It is especially telling that although a young man from Tha-In works for BPSOS, it is Pa Kluai, which has received the lion’s share of BPSOS’s community outreach support to the Hmong. Furthermore, Pa Kluai’s territorial effect is enforced. The coding, which originally took place to establish community links, is used to make contact with an outside agent who again enforces the fact that Pa Kluai is indeed a territorial arrangement, which is treated in certain ways because of the effectiveness of its territorial control and organization.

BPSOS is not, however, able to work with all NGOs and organizations one might expect them to work with. Hmong organizations in Thailand seem closed off to them. External networking with Hmong organizations such as the Hmong Association of Thailand (HAT) (in

Thai *Samakhom Hmong Haeng Prathet Thai*) and Hmong Merchants Association of Thailand (HMAT) (in Thai *Samakhom Pho Kha Hmong haeng Prathet Thai*), Hmong Eighteen Clan Council of Thailand, have been very limited with the Hmong at Pa Kluai and the Vietnamese or Hmong Lao refugee community in general. These organizations function in northern Thailand, and most of the refugee community lives in Bangkok and central Thailand. However, the few refugees I have met in northern Thailand, as well as those in central Thailand, do not even attempt to contact the leaders of these organizations to ask for assistance. For the refugee Hmong, this seems to stem from the fear of spies among the ranks of these organizations. They believe that even some of the most prominent members are working with the Thai government and reporting on them. From the organization's side of the gulf, there is a view of the problem which sees it as a potential legal issue. The loss of image and legal repercussions could be in order for organizations or individuals who are caught assisting individuals seen as illegal immigrants. One leader of the Hmong Association of Thailand expressed his hesitation to deal with Hmong living in the Saraburi/Lopburi area because he was aware of some activities he perceived were human trafficking. Before I knew about this division, I would give the phone numbers of Hmong from these organizations to people I met in Thung Raab, asking for help only to be told by people from Thung Raab that they tried calling and received no help. In one specific case, the leadership of the newest of these organizations, the Hmong 18 Clan Council of Thailand, is made up of Hmong Thai Christians who likely know missionaries who have negative opinions of the Hmong at Pa Kluai. These negative opinions will be explained in a later section of this chapter on Christian organizations in Thailand. Another issue of potential concern is the possible involvement of refugees with ethnonationalist activities—with groups such as the Chao Fa or Hmong Teb Chaws. In brief, this predisposition to Pa Kluai by these Hmong leaders

likely prevented them from making contact and assisting that community. In that case, Pa Kluai is again coded by an outside actor, this time as a bad territorialization.

Another important actor in the network of external relations which aid the Hmong at Pa Kluai is an individual. Dwight, an American with a background in social media marketing from Atlanta, is a central patron of the community. He lives in Bangkok, so he visits Pa Kluai often, every few months. He is not necessarily important because of the quantity of aid that he gives but for the quality of that aid. Specifically, he helps to fund one of the primary gathering places for the community, Xf. Kong Meng's home. Though Dwight intends it to be an English school, Xf. Kong Meng's home acts as the important community center. Dwight also helps to pay for computers and other important supplies like cameras and scanners and printers useful for a school. These camera's scanners and printers facilitate the governmental threads which bind the community together and allow them to establish a counter-legibility as interactions are documented and transactions recorded. Simply by supplying this meeting space and these tools, Dwight's help is invaluable in facilitating a community affect of trust.

The Hmong at Pa Kluai are thankful for this assistance and are careful to show Dwight respect. Although Dwight is about the same age or younger than most members of the Pa Kluai community, he is referred to by them as Acharn Dwight. The Thai word "Acharn" is an honorific usually applied to teachers, including older, more venerated individuals who have held some sort of teaching position. Dwight does not teach English to the Pa Kluai in the classroom setting, but he teaches cooking to the young people. So, he has also technically earned the title. Dwight is not a traditional teacher. The Hmong at Pa Kluai owe him a great debt of gratitude for his assistance and care. If this relationship were considered patron-client, the only return the

Hmong clients would be able to return their patron is the respect they have for him. And possibly provide him the opportunity to earn the cache of being a do-gooder in an exotic land.

The study of English functions as a primary legitimation for Dwight's funding of the community center. As such, Xf. Kong Meng has done all he can to encourage the young members of the community to study as much English as possible. Dwight once lamented to me, however, that too much time is spent playing music rather than studying English at Pa Kluai. Still, the study of English grips the community. Besides the normal desire to learn English to get ahead in the world, many of the residents here obviously expect to move to an English-speaking third country. He makes no bones about telling his own sons that they need to be able to speak many languages. Although his English is wanting, Xf. Kong Meng speaks Hmong, Vietnamese, Thai, and Chinese. He has used these languages extensively in making contacts with parties that facilitate the goals of his community. He hopes that as soon as his sons make it to a developed country, "*tebchaws vam meej*," they will be prepared to be educated and continue to fight for justice for Hmong people in Vietnam. He has high hopes for his second oldest Chao, who seems to excel in school. That the boy seems especially good at English gives Xf. Kong Meng hopes that he will become a doctor, pharmacist, lawyer, business person, or another of the professions he assumes are best in the west. Furthermore, he has mentioned his hope that he could take his son with him to translate when he goes and speaks on behalf of persecuted Hmong in Vietnam.

On the subject of speaking and learning English, Kong Meng has encouraged English learning in Pa Kluai, but he doesn't speak it himself. However, two other members of the community speak English very well. Kong Meng's brother-in-law (*yawm yij*) Ger Ta in his mid-twenties has learned English through formal education. He has a strong grasp of English literacy, including grammatical principles. This helps him to teach English and acts as a

translator. Ger Ta is one of the most highly educated members of the community and learned English in school in Vietnam. He actually owes a large part of his coming to Thailand to a Vietnamese local official's denial of his permit to go to university (despite his high marks). This, he believes this was owed to his status as a Hmong Christian. As mentioned, Hmong (especially Christian Hmong) consistently report that despite their abilities, Vietnamese often refuse to recognize their achievements or allow access to government and other leadership positions. Another in the community speaks English well. After spending two years in the IDC, this father of four learned to speak English through interacting with other English-speaking inmates there. Although his fluency and knowledge of colloquialisms are greater than Ger Ta's, he lacks reading and writing skills and thus does not help to teach English in the community.

During the period of my fieldwork, Ger Ta taught English to teenagers and young adults twice a week in the evening. He also taught young children at the kindergarten/preschool run out of Kong Meng's four-story row house. This little school is attended by most children in the community from ages five to seven and is divided into as many rooms as teachers are present. Usually, the teachers come on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday through Dwight's organization. Dwight pays the rent for the school and helps to provide the necessary equipment and supplies. Teachers that come are ex-pat—usually American—volunteers and increasingly now interns teach English to the children present for two to three hours before feeding them a nutritious lunch. On Saturdays, school-aged children attend the morning school, and the most committed of the western volunteers come to teach. This puts Xf. Kong Meng and others in contact with possible contacts to assist with other aspects. During the period of my fieldwork, volunteers came from a number of places, including Canada, New Jersey, California, Minnesota. However,

the most frequent teacher was a young college graduate from New Jersey. After English lessons are finished, the class shifts to a cooking class.

Food Assistance

Besides the lunch, Dwight often brings donations of fresh fruits for families to take home. More often than not, parents and students are tasked with preparing the food. However, quite often, Dwight comes to visit for the post-English cooking lesson. An avid foodie and blogger, Dwight uses these meal preparations to teach children and teenaged Hmong at Pa Kluai how to enjoy preparing healthy food filled with vegetables, fruits, and protein. Dwight was aware of the need of several families in the community to scavenge for food in the dumpsters of the nearby market. And he became concerned for their health.

This all began when Dwight decided to begin hosting parties to raise money for his refugee friends. Although he later met the Hmong in Pa Kluai, he first became familiar with the urban refugee situation through contact with a young friend whose family had come to Thailand as refugees from China. After meeting more Lao and Hmong Viet immigrants in years past, he decided to host parties where he took donations for the refugees he knew in Bangkok. His organization revolves around his love of food, especially Thai food, and a belief in nutrition and cooking as an important and formative life-skill. This informal beginning has stayed somewhat informal. Until recently, Dwight has preferred to raise money through an unregistered organization. In his opinion, registering with the Thai government as an NGO is a tedious, complicated process. So, he opted to register in the US and take donations there. Though Dwight is smart to establish an English school, I do not believe Dwight realizes the collateral benefits of renting this house for Xf. Kong Meng. Furthermore, his material support, especially through supplying a printer, camera, and other tools, aid the goal of counter-legibility between

members of the community. Overall, the more or less constant support that Dwight gives to the Pa Kluai community is not a very large monetary value, but it is well placed.

As mentioned, those who have been officially recognized as refugees are given food and other assistance from the UNHCR. However, those still seeking asylum are not given that assistance. The basic model for food assistance for Bangkok's urban asylum seekers is from religious groups to provide that assistance. For the Hmong in Bangkok, Pastor Sunthorn's prison ministry is a primary source of rice. However, for other groups, assistance comes from Christian churches, Muslim Mosques, and Sikh temples. Other religious organizations—such as Veritas and a Catholic organization called Mary Knoll—also donate food to many groups of refugees. Pa Kluai as a group receives food assistance from three sources, Sunthorn provides the primary source of rice and vegetables, Dwight supplements with some fruits and vegetables, and Father Tong at the nearby Catholic church serves a supplementary function, supporting intermittent food purchases. Although this sounds rather straight forward, as I will explain the distribution of that food is a process fraught with politics. The relationship of a group or individual to the religious institution or members of that institution can influence whether food makes it to that individual or group of refugees.

Unfortunately for Hmong there, but Pa Kluai did not receive food assistance from Christian organizations before early 2015. Sia Hang recalls:

“We did not have any food at those times. Father Tong did not help us. Dwight did not help us. So, we did not have any rice to eat. So, we just went to work, and we bought food on our own. One would get it from the trash or buy rice. This was in 2013-2014, those two years. So, before the end of 2014, we did not get any food. [...] before [we] had these three sources; every single man had to go and work. Many went to Lopburi. They went wherever they could go. They would go work for a month, or ten days. We have to pay our rent and electricity and water costs. In one day, you can make 300 THB. Rent is 3000 THB, electricity and water are 2,500 THB. You are left with only a little bit to buy food and medicine for your kids. One did not have enough money.

Thus, you can see the importance of Pa Kluai's network of material propinquity, which positioned the Hmong close to employment and transpiration options, cheap housing, and sources of free food. This is not to say that all Hmong in Bangkok or Lopburi/Saraburi did not receive rice assistance until 2015, it seems to have only been Pa Kluai. According to the Hmong in Pa Kluai, other settlements, and prison ministry members themselves, Sunthorn has long been providing rice for the Hmong in Bangkok, certainly before 2015. Hmong in Lopburi, on the other hand, are supplied by Albert's break off ministry attached to First Love Church.

Accessing Food from the Prison Ministry

The following example shows clearly the spatial coding of Pa Kluai's territorialization by Hmong outside their community. After two rough years, Pastor Sunthorn and others began supplying Pa Kluai with food. The reason for this delay was not based on neglect by Sunthorn or some sense of antipathy for the Hmong at Pa Kluai. Rather, there was conflict in his chain of command. Although Pastor Sunthorn is the head of the ministry, he does not speak Hmong, so he uses two Hmong assistants to interface with the Hmong community. According to everyone I talked with at Pa Kluai, these two leaders (one in particular) felt at odds with the Pa Kluai leadership, so they did not bring food to the community. Sia Hang described for me how it was easy to see that these two purposefully neglected to bring rice to them. Sunthorn would send these two out with shipments of rice that they took to the Hmong immigrant communities in Bangkok. In each community, they would divide a portion of rice to the group's needs. However, Sia Hang noted that Rather than bringing rice for Pa Kluai, these two representatives, "when they send the rice out, they divide it up over in this place up here, and that place down

there. But we are over here, and they do not bring it to us. [...]If we tell them that, then they say, ‘oh, we forgot you’”.

However, according to Sia, this is not simply a case of forgetfulness; the deliveries actively skipped the Pa Kluai community. It was obvious to him and others since:

“We live on these streets (counting and drawing the streets) 1,2,3,4 four streets, [then across the main road] there are some other [Hmong refugees] are up there. The two [rice deliverers] have come and given the rice to all the people up here (across the street by the store) then they cross over and divide it up here [on our side](this is the first street in the area where Thai Hang lives (who is not our friend). So, they divide up the rice for all those people over there [just a street over], but they do not come to us. They say that they forgot us...hahaha. [From this], you begin to understand that they do not love [us], hahaha.”

This alleged oversight repeated consistently every month for two years, likely because Sunthorn’s two Hmong emissaries did not like Pa Kluai. It is important to note that the Hmong at Pa Kluai were aware that their close neighbors who went to the Prison ministry for church on Sundays were getting rice, and they were not. They connected this deprivation with their association with Kong Meng’s church and the Pa Kluai community. This was a clear reinforcement of Pa Kluai’s territory effect. Now it seems commonly known in Pa Kluai that there have been conflicts between Pa Kluai congregants and some affiliated with Sunthorn’s prison ministry. There is a clear divide. Multiple Pa Kluai sources told me that they heard Sunthorn’s ministry says negative things about them. When Her Chee, Pa Kluai’s only Hmong Lao resident, came to live at Pa Kluai, he likely knew very little about this conflict. However, he shared with me after attending church in the prison ministry that the leadership there criticizes (*cem cem*), Xf. Kong Meng. He even claimed that Pastor Sunthorn participated in these criticisms. Sia Hang understands that those leaders believe Pa Kluai and Xf. Kong Meng are bad people (*yog neeg phem*). This irks Sia deeply. He shared, “The fact that they do not give you

food, I say, oh well forget about it. But the fact that they say this group is bad, and that this group causes problems for other groups, this is the part [I am] not happy with.”

Sia reasoned that all those who moved away, as a rule, were betraying their guilt by leaving the community. Since Thai Hang, who clashed with Dao Hang (Sia’s older brother), turned away from the community after their conflict, Sia has held that acts like this belie Thai’s guilt. The same is true for others since the conflict was not with the community’s leader Xf. Kong Meng, what other motivation would cause Thai to completely leave the Pa Kluai church community and begin attending services exclusively with Sunthorn, other than the shame of his guilt. However, several other reasons are possible.

Putting all of this aside, Pa Kluai needed food. To stanch the conflict, Pa Kluai leadership bypassed these two Hmong representatives by writing a letter to Sunthorn, hoping to ease the burden that their lack of food placed on the community. They approached him diplomatically. “We decided that we should write a very clear letter to Sunthorn. We told him that we do not have any food. He responded that we *do* have food.” Perceiving the root of Sunthorn’s misunderstanding, they responded without mincing words this time.

“We wrote another letter and told him that we thought even though he loved us, the people that work for him do not love us. After that, they sent someone to bring rice to divide it up. We sent a thank you letter and bought a gift for him to show our happiness. We also took a picture of ourselves to send to him. Ever since then, he sends [rice] directly to us. So, since March or April of 2015, they send it to us. Sunthorn sends a teacher directly to us to sometimes give a sermon, and it is he who brings the food directly. This is Pastor Churaket. He is Thai. He comes once a month in the last week of the month.”

Now that there is a supply of food for the community brought monthly, there is a need to divide up the food properly. Though Pa Kluai’s residents needed to continue working for various reasons, they no longer needed to buy as much of their most important staples of food. The

shipment came once a month, and they divided the food up, but some were dishonest about their portion of the food. As Sia explained:

“In the past, we had conflicts, [...] speaking of foods like vegetables, fruits some would eat theirs already, then say they hadn't gotten any. I would say, what? Did I not send it directly to you? Then [the leadership] would ask me, did you take the vegetables to that person? I would say, ‘I’ve already taken it, on such and such a day. I already took it to you.’ [The complainer responds in feigned surprise] “Oh” but then that person loses face (*poob ntsej muag*), so he then says, ‘oh, I thought you were talking about another day, oh yes I got that.’”

The distrust surrounding food was bad enough that Xf. Kong Meng devised and instituted a transparency mechanism to solve this problem. They began taking pictures of the food as it is being apportioned. Sia explained how this was done, “If they divide up some for us, then we must take a picture. We take the picture to see how many of the families came, and we see that this family took theirs, that family took theirs.” He later added:

“Now, if we do any[apportioning], we take pictures, no matter if you got something large or small, we still take a picture. We know there will be problems, so we take pictures. Our camera has the date and the time [on the picture] [...] so, no one can do anything wrong. Ever since we have proceeded in this way, now if there is any conflict and, if we did not take a picture, there is really nothing we can do if there are accusations. But we have someone who claims to have not received the food that was divided up, then we open up our phones and take a look at our cameras. We see their picture. So, no one wants to do that anymore.”

Inserting this technology seems to have facilitated the hint of transparency that people in a resource-scarce community like Pa Klui need to maintain trust in one another. Through this method, members of the community trust that they will get rice when they need it. So, they tend not to hoard their rice supply and only take what they need when they need it. The logic of the system as it was presented to me is that since there is a record of when a family has taken rice and other foodstuffs from the collective supply, there is less worry that someone will take more

than their fair share. Sia gave me an example from his life that usually, after the shipment from Sunthorn comes his family takes ten kilos of rice.

“Today they divided ten kilograms to me. But if tomorrow Father Tong helps by giving some more rice and it is divided up, five kilograms for each family, I still have not finished eating my 10 kilograms from before. So, I just leave [the five new kilograms from Father Tong] here. If there are lots of people and someone finishes their rice, then they can come and get some more.

Members of the community are well aware of differences in need. Sia compared how the needs of Houa Her’s large family are met in this system in comparison with his own small family.

“Some families have lots of people. For example, Houa Her’s family has ten people. He gets 15 kilograms, but he eats it in only two weeks. But for me, I still have not eaten my ten kilograms of rice in a whole month. So, since he does not have food yet, and I left my extra five kilograms. He finished his rice already, so he comes and takes [the rice I did not need]. So, we do it like this, where we consistently leave the rice we do not need.”

When I first began meeting with Hmong from Pa Kluai, I assumed that the connections between the Hmong Viet and Thai Christian Hmong would be strong. I knew that Hmong in Thung Raab received some assistance from Christian congregations since I watched a pastor from Bangkok send representatives with food donations. However, what I did not realize was that this congregation was led by a Singaporean minister rather than a Hmong. I found the others were more often Sino-Thai Christians and were not ostensibly affiliated with the Hmong Christian organizations in Thailand. Hmong, for me as an outside observer, I intuitively assumed that Hmong Christians from Vietnam would be supported by the Christian groups that missionized them in Vietnam.

Pa Kluai New Hmong Viet and Other Hmong Protestants

This last section reengages the theme of political cleavages in the Hmong community in Thailand and the suspicion of New Hmong Viet being involved in unsavory activities. Though their offense seems somewhat unclear, it has marked them in the eyes of Hmong Thai Christian pastors and organizations.

First of all, although Sunthorn is an important source of food for Pa Kluai now, the community's relationship to the Sunthorn's congregation has been shaky, and they have been looked at with suspicion by the Hmong Thai protestant community in Thailand. Although Pa Kluai's Hmong are exclusively protestant Christian except for one convert to Mormonism, the community receives much of its help from people outside of the protestant community, including the Catholic church, and people like Dwight. Speaking of Pa Kluai's Protestant Christian contacts, it would be good for Pa Kluai to have a wider set of contacts with the protestant Hmong networks in Thailand, since the Hmong in Thailand are quite connected in a network of missionaries and congregations lead by a few organizations. Benefits from association with these actors likely multiply with the number of connections and inversely decreases with their dearth. Pa Kluai's lack of contact seems to be related to conflicts Kong Meng had with protestant Hmong leaders in Vietnam.

I was first made aware of this when people at Pa Kluai told me that they received very little help from C&MA. I assumed there would be connections between the Vietnamese Hmong and those who missionized them in Vietnam, especially C&MA. I was told that C&MA had missionary efforts in Vietnam before I ever visited Pa Kluai. Furthermore, not only did C&MA not help the Pa Kluai residents very much, but the Hmong Thai Christians feared or disliked the Pa Kluai Hmong. This antipathy was first exemplified for me by a story told me by Dao Hang.

In his efforts to connect with people on Facebook, he was once insulted by a pastor from the northern part of Thailand. According to Dao, this pastor had asked him frankly if Dao was part of those fake Christians who lived at Pa Kluai. Although he had never visited, this missionary from the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) had been told negative things about the Pa Kluai community. Since this initial offense, this pastor's position on Pa Kluai has softened. He has even worked on a translation project with Yang Sao Lee, who recently came to live at Pa Kluai, but there is no substantive connection formed between this missionary and the community as a whole.

There seem to be a few reasons that have combined to keep Hmong protestant pastors away from Pa Kluai, though none are definitive. One important factor is the sheer distance of Pa Kluai from most of these other pastors who live in northern Thailand. Another is the bad publicity that has been created by some Hmong Viet enemies of specific members of the Pa Kluai community. These enemies share what Pa Kluai views as lies with pastors elsewhere. Second, Kong Meng has a problematic relationship with some C&MA pastors. Some of this is rooted in his direct relations with those pastors while living in Vietnam, and some is rooted in the suspicion of Pa Kluai member's involvement in ethnonationalist activities. Regardless of the nature of stories hurting Pa Kluai's reputation, those stories are apparently spread through a network of Hmong pastors and missionaries who have served in Vietnam but are based in Thailand. So, antipathies developed in Vietnam that have followed Pa Kluai members to Thailand and vice versa.

In Thailand, the network of Hmong protestant organizations is dominated by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF). What had originally been the China Inland Mission (CIM) eventually became the OMF in 1964? As western missionaries left China in the early

1950s, they intensified missionary work in Southeast Asia following the communist revolution in China and the publishing of the Christian Manifesto⁷¹ (Keating 2012), which effectively ended Christian missionization in China. From a new headquarters in Singapore, Christian missionaries were sent to Thailand's upland regions. The OMF as the CIM focused on inland and neglected rural populations.

One prominent Hmong Thai pastor is Somsak Hang. He explained the history of connections between religious and missionary organizations of Hmong Christian groups in Southeast Asia, especially those Hmong Protestant groups in Thailand. He began by explaining the OMF history of the proselytization of Hmong people in Thailand. Hmong Protestantism in Thailand effectively began in the 1950s, first among the Green Hmong in Huainam Luang, Tak Province, in a Hmong village called Hav Plooj. There was also work in Nan in Maw Kalambai where missionary T.T. Donald opened a dormitory for Hmong children to come and study. This dormitory provided food, lodging, and religious education to the children functioned until 1975. Nascent efforts to build a group of Hmong Christians began producing some fruit by the late 1970s. Until finally, in the late 1970s, missionary leaders began meeting in alternating locations—Chiang Mai, then in Nan, then Chiang Mai again in 1980—until in 1983, they established an organization called *Sib Koom Tes* (meaning *Joining Hands*). Most members know this organization for short as SKT. It has become the primary Hmong Thai organization. Hmong are also affiliated with some other organizations, including the Sapha Kritsachak (Christian Council), Sahakid (united work), and C&MA, largely through a larger umbrella organization known as the *Kritsachak Sampan* (Christian Church Relations). Although those under the

71. The Christian Manifesto was a document developed by Leftist Christians at the request of Zhou En Lai which declared foreign missionary work a form of imperialism and prepared for Christian churches to fall under PRC government control.

Kritsachak Samphan are technically separate organizations, the pastors knew one another, and they often assisted one another's efforts. For example, according to Somsak, although the C&MA has only a few congregations in Thailand, in the United States and Laos, their presence is stronger.⁷² As such, the C&MA, which is based in the United States, have established a strong relationship with SKT, usually connecting with SKT while in Thailand and supporting them from the home front in America. Speaking of C&MA missionaries, Somsak said:

“They came and saw SKT. They saw that SKT was made by Hmong. There are no other groups or ethnicities that support it. So, they thought OK we who are in America when we come back to Thailand we will support SKT because SKT is growing and does the work of the Lord all over Thailand. So, when they come back, and since they want to be involved in studies, they usually go with SKT.”

This goes beyond just missionary work but influences the field of training protestant leadership. C&MA helps to support the pastoral training of young Hmong members of SKT as well as those educated at Phayap University, BBC, and other bible schools in Thailand. Somsak explained that they have only remained a separate organization because some prominent SKT leaders were unable to meet the requirements of C&MA leadership, which included being free of marital problems. Hmong protestants are linked together through these organizations and various Hmong associations, including the Hmong Merchant's Society and the Hmong 18 Clan Council of Thailand. Somsak is a leader in Khritsachak Samphan's Foundation. This foundation is known as the *Munithi Phatthana Khunaphaap Chiwit Hmong* (Foundation for the Development of the Quality of Hmong Lives) and has supported dormitories for students who are coming to study the Bible in Chiang Khong. Furthermore, under the auspices of the foundation, Somsak travels to Chiang Khong and Nong Khai once each month. He also takes

72. Laos' protestant Hmong belonged largely to C&MA before the organization was absorbed into the LEC (Laos Evangelical Church)

trips to Laos and Vietnam to teach. He began making these trips in 2000 and did so until 2010. In the beginning, he often traveled to Vietnam and Laos and less to Burma. In Vietnam, he went mostly to areas around Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. He admitted going to the Central Highlands to teach the Hmong there. Although he said it was a good experience, he was afraid, stating that,

“I was afraid somewhat. When I was in Ho Chi Minh, I was afraid because I was in the area where the Hmong were. [...]They escaped to that area. But they are not in Ho Chi Minh. They are in Đăk Lăk. It takes you one day to get there from Ho Chi Minh. So, in Đăk Lăk there are many Hmong now probably about 30-40 Hmong villages there now.”

Somsak was loath to describe his activities and experiences in South Vietnam, but his story illustrates how the network of Hmong Thai and Hmong American Pastors are connected with many communities of Hmong Viet Christians in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The multiple organizations and networks of faithful Christians would likely find connections to the vulnerable Hmong community in Pa Kluai to minister to and fellowship.

But those connections are blocked by Hmong Thai and foreign pastors' fear of Pa Kluai. According to Pa Kluai residents, part of the fear that foreign pastors have of the Hmong at Pa Kluai is related to the bad name that a group of disaffected Pa Kluai residents are giving Pa Kluai. Some are still living in Bangkok, and others have gone upcountry. The contingent still living in Bangkok are the family of Dao Hang's wife. They left the community after conflicts over leadership and immigration assistance. Although no Hmong in other areas outside of Pa Kluai shared any negative stories about Pa Kluai with me, Kong Meng assured me that,

“If you go over to Khlong Bua and Ban Phloi, you will hear some things that are not good about us. [...] If you go there, then you will immediately hear them criticize us. They are not telling the truth. They just say that this group is bad...bad...bad. But if you ask them how we are bad, they will not have anything to answer. They will just make sure that you are afraid of us.”

This strategy has apparently worked. I never saw any foreign pastors from protestant denominations come to visit Pa Kluai. It apparently does not happen often, but Xf. Kong Meng assured me that tensions were thawing. In his reckoning:

“The pastors are far, and they do not know the truth [about us]. The pastors want to come and see us, but there are some people who broadcast around that our group is bad. They tell the pastors not to come to see us, and if anyone does, then they will have problems. The pastors do not know better, so they are afraid. But since the pastors have begun learning the truth, we have had pastors from France, America, Canada, Australia, and Thailand. They have started to seek us out, and now they know us. So, they do not believe those words that were said about us. The people that had said [the words] they did not have a source. They are just angry with us.”

These tensions have not only affected the Hmong at Pa Kluai, but those who have come from Vietnam to visit family members at Pa Kluai have often faced police questioning when they return home from their trips. Pa Kluai residents are convinced that those disaffected former residents are responsible for reporting their visiting relatives to Vietnamese authorities.⁷³

“When we have a family member come and visit us here when they get back to Vietnam, every single one of them when they get back to Vietnam, the police call them to the district, and they abuse them there. In the end, they argue and argue, and when [the police] take out the paper which accuses them, we find out that the person who is helping to accuse our relatives are [the relatives of those disaffected former residents of Pa Kluai] living in Vietnam. So, we tell our relatives there that if the police are harsh with you. You tell us, and we will help you.”

It stands to reason that the accusing group has more basis for their accusations than Xf. Kong Meng lets on. It is known by people at Pa Kluai that the accusations surround Kong Meng himself, regarding his involvement in ethnonationalist activities. Speaking of Xf. Kong Meng’s duties while living in Vietnam before coming to Thailand, Tou Ger explained to me that:

⁷³ To illustrate a problem with an ontology which sees the world in hierarchically nested scales, I would ask the question of what type of interaction is this. Were the visiting relatives of enemies in Thailand who have reported on family members of Pa Kluai’s people in Vietnam acting as local actors or global actors. Or were they simply horizontally as they would in flat site ontology.

“Kong Meng was a person that represented everyone in that area, and he was a leader that tried to get everyone to cooperate, he did not take any bribes, and everyone was taking him to court, especially some Hmong who were involved with the government. The accusations against him were that they had made friends with people who were foreigners.”

This accusation has some truth. Xf. Kong Meng acknowledged having some contact with Dr. Soua Her and other ethnonationalist leaders, including Seng Xiong of the recently charged “Hmong Teb Chaws” movement. However, Kong Meng’s characterization of this contact was more adversarial than cooperative. Dr. Soua Her approached Xf. Kong Meng around 2007 and presented himself as a King of the Hmong that was going to reestablish a Hmong kingdom. Kong Meng recalls him to be a bit fatter than himself with a balding head. He came with Va Chao Thao and Va Yee (two other ethnonationalist leaders). When Kong Meng called a friend in the US to check on his visitors’ backgrounds, this friend said that Va Yee and Va Chao had been divorced and were likely easing their anger with this ethnonationalist project. Suspecting their unpreparedness for such a task, Kong Meng asked them a series of questions to gauge their preparedness. They were as follows:

“If today you were to walk to Laos, how many hours would it take? One soldier should carry how much rice to eat? In one hour, how far will they walk? If we go, how many roads do we have to cross? How many rivers would we have to cross? Which rivers? To get where we need to go? Which group of soldiers would need to go first, and who is leading the civilians for doing gardening and taking care of housing? What country is helping you with food? Which country is helping with weapons?”

Kong Meng claims his visitors were unable to answer any of his questions. Though Dr. Soua Her called himself Doctor, Kong Meng had little confidence in the Doctor’s abilities since Kong Meng himself was able to think of the questions with very little education on his part. The extent of Kong Meng’s education at the time was what he had gathered from the legal books he bought and read while living in Vietnam.

Another interaction between Kong Meng and Dr. Soua Her, the US representative of the Chao Fa Democratic Party (but not the leader of the Chao Fa), was Kong Meng's final answer regarding the efficaciousness of this supposed Hmong King. Dr. Soua Her informed Kong Meng that he would be meeting with some Chinese authorities to seek help for his ethnonationalist project.

“I went on my own, but I spoke with them. I even have pictures of it. I took pictures. Hahaha. [...] Soua Her, Seng Xiong, who is now talking about Hmong Teb Chaws (you know with Steve Moua) that group, [all went to the meeting]. And Lao Lee Hmong. They went, and they spoke. They rented a very big room [...] they did not invite me, but I was investigating to see if all [what they said] was truly happening. If it was true, then I pondered whether I would join in. But when I saw everything and saw that it was all false, I took pictures, and they were so scared. They bowed to me and said, “Why are you taking pictures?” I told them. Let me tell you all something, you all have gone and studied, and you think you can come and teach us. But you haven't done anything. I am taking your picture. I will not do anything with it if you succeed. But if you fail, I am going to send your picture to Vang Pao. Around that time, Vang Pao had been arrested in America. So, they were very scared.”

Though contacting known ethnonationalists might be considered ill-advised by the UN, Law enforcement, or the Vietnamese. He maintains that he did not join in. As someone who has similarly met with some ethnonationalists myself, I hope one is not guilty by association.

It seems likely that foreign Hmong missionaries and pastors in Vietnam know something about this interaction. Beyond this, Xf. Kong Meng has had a conflict with a Hmong American pastor named Brian collaborating with the Vietnamese government. As previously described, a large group of Hmong left Vietnam to come to the China-Burma border area after the Mùòng Nhé event. Pastor Brian apparently sent reports about this group to the Vietnamese government. Members of the Pa Kluai community are unsure how long this was happening, but they learned of his reporting when one of his communications was intercepted. Speaking of Pastor Brian, Xf. Kong Meng explained:

That man [...] worked with the government—a minister of Vietnam—he helped that minister send documents about the Hmong who left for Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand. That document I read it with my own eyes. I even called him on the phone about it, and he was afraid, so he hung up the phone. He knew it was me.”

Though this document was not sent to the Hmong, it was intercepted somehow by a group of Hmong. Because they could not read Vietnamese, Kong Meng arrived and helped the Hmong there read it.

“This paper...they used a few Hmong people to send it. It was sent to the [government’s] place of reception. But when it got there, we had already come directly there as well. I was there. The Hmong there opened it up and looked at the Vietnamese writing in it. Most of these Hmong, however, did not know how to read it. They opened it up and looked at it. The note inside indicated that they intended to apprehend any of the Hmong that left Vietnam.

Kong Meng confronted Pastor Brian involving communications with the government over the phone. As Kong Meng’ sees it, reporting to the government is evidence that Pastor Brian is a fake pastor or state enterprise pastor, who benefits from government connections rather than really supporting faithful Christians. Though I was unable to interview Pastor Brian, it seems likely and understandable that he was reported because he feared being associated with illegal immigration and ethnonationalist activities. Now it appears that Pastor Brian and others are afraid of Kong Meng. According to Kong Meng, Pastor Brian and a few others took this accusation as a threat to their lives. This severed communications between these groups. Despite his apparent communications with the Vietnamese government, Xf. Kong Meng does not seem afraid of Pastor Brian. Actually, Kong Meng and others in the community seem to take pride in the fact that this particular pastor fears Xf. Kong Meng, several have gleefully chuckled that he is afraid of Kong Meng and will not even answer his phone calls or visit despite being associated with two pastors who have visited Pa Kluai, Ger Hou Vang, and Nhia Lor based in

Udornthani. This owes somewhat to Pa Kluai's UN protection. Kong Meng seems to believe that mixing his American citizenship with his assistance to a foreign government makes him reportable to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). And although I am unsure of the weight of such a claim, Kong Meng plans to leverage this against him if they ever come in conflict.

This conflict affects the connections between Hmong Thai Christians and Pa Kluai Hmong because the Christian Hmong community of pastoral and missionary leadership seems to share close connections. Not only does news travel quickly via telephone and social media in Hmong communities through clan networks of communication, but the specificity of Hmong Christian leadership networks also expedites this communication even more. So even though Pa Kluai's bad reputation could have started simply from a disaffected member's gossip, the negative assumptions are solidified when reports of conflict or suspicion come from one of the pastors themselves, like Brian. When one pastor has a negative opinion about someone, they spread that news to other pastors in the network of Hmong churches.

Though I expected Hmong Thai pastors to be sympathetic to the plight of the Hmong from Vietnam, Hmong pastors rarely came to visit the Hmong in Pa Kluai while I was there. A trend confirmed to me by the Hmong there, so I was excited when Hmong Thai pastors came to speak in Pa Kluai's church service. Two pastors came to speak for Sunday services. Ger Hou Vang Xiong and Nhia Lor Yang, who are affiliated with Pastor Brian mentioned before. The soft-spoken Nhia Lor left the speaking to Ger Hou Vang. This was exciting for the audience since Ger Hou Vang has earned fame as a Christian Hmong singer. He sang songs and joked throughout his talk and presented a general affect of gaiety. The subject of his sermon began with him finding common ground with the Hmong in the audience. He asked a question with an

obvious answer, “Is anyone in the audience rich?” From his point of view, all Hmong know there is no one poorer than Hmong people. But there is a bright side to Hmong people’s poverty. He believed it evidenced God’s love for them. Mentioning the difficulty for the wealthy to go to heaven because of worldly distractions, he transitioned into a playful song consisting of a series of questions, answers, and a final commandment. He sang and asked the congregation to sing along and answer the questions. The song went:

“Ger Hou Vang: What are you looking for in this world?

Audience: (Silver!!)

Ger Hou Vang: What are you looking for in this world

Audience: (Gold!!)

Ger Hou Vang: Your spirit will be destroyed. Quickly go and repent and seek out Jesus, the one who loves you.”

He then shared how Solomon’s riches sent the king down the wrong path. Poor people he often asserted have no country. Hmong people similarly often have no country and should seek out God’s country. In a joking tone, he began explaining that God taught that rather than seeking riches, one should seek for God’s Kingdom or God’s country (*Vaj Tswv lub teb chaws*). Referencing New Testament’s Matthew 6:33, he read the verse, “You should first seek God’s country and follow God’s desire first, then God will give you more.”⁷⁴ He then added, “What it did not say was, ‘you should seek for a HMONG country first.’” Continuing Ger Hou Vang offered that, “Some people are looking for a Hmong land the most. But God said to not go searching for the Hmong's land. You should look for God’s country.” This reference may or may not have been directed at the Hmong in the audience, whom some believe have been involved in Ethnonationalist politics. But Ger Hou Vang could have just been speaking generally. However, he went on to encourage the Hmong people in the audience (every single

74. In Hmong he said “*Tabsis mej yuavtsum xub nrhav Vajtsv lub tebchaws, hab ua lawv le Vajtsv lub sab nyam tsaiv, Vajtsv maam le muab tej nuav ntxiv rua mej.*”

one of which was an immigrant from Vietnam intending to go to a third country) that should stay in their country of origin or the country they presently occupy.

“You should have hope for this country. [...] Whatever country you are in is your country. You should be happy that since you are in Thailand, this is our country, this is my country!” I will try to become an important person in this country. If you are in Vietnam, you should be satisfied, that this is my country if you are in America, do not sit looking out the window thinking of your old valley. You must decide now that you will not miss your old valley and mountain. If I am in this country, this is my country. I will improve this country, love this country. Your life should be as a person in that country, but every country in this world we only go live there for one small moment. After that, where will we go? God's land.”

And the way to enter this country, one must carry the passport of a soft heart after being born again through accepting Jesus as one's savior. The general theme of these and other statements were woven throughout the sermon, and it seemed Ger Hou Vang was generally trying to discourage the audience from hoping to go to a third country. He even made jokes disparaging Hmong Americans. Not only were they characterized as stupid, but they were also out of touch with the realities of poverty and thus more distanced from God than the poor Hmong of Asia.

I was initially unsure how the Hmong in Pa Kluai took this sermon. During the sermon, there was an atmosphere of gaiety and laughter. Ger Hou Vang is a skillful speaker, and it did not appear that the audience took the message harshly. However, just after the sermon, Ger Hou Vang and Nhia Lor were invited to the community center for dinner. There, community elders tested them on biblical knowledge. I sensed a tension in the conversation. The next day, I questioned a few of the community leaders about Ger Hou Vang's sermon. First, Dao Hang admitted that he thinks Hmong Thai pastors do not want Hmong people to leave Vietnam. This was a sentiment expressed independently by Kong Meng and others at a later meeting. When I

posited what I suspected were Ger Hou Vang's intentions, Kong Meng quickly asserted that "He was intentionally criticizing us (*Nws txhob txhwm hais peb*). [...] [Pastor Ger Hou Vang] said this on purpose to us." In fact, Kong Meng and Dao Hang gave the same reasoning for why a Hmong Thai pastor would want to keep Vietnamese Hmong from going on to a third country. They assured me this had to do with controlling the bible and leadership training for Vietnamese Hmong. As I mentioned earlier, Somsak explained that Hmong from northern Thailand come to study the bible in Thailand. Kong Meng's explanation must have been common knowledge or often discussed in their household because his wife preemptively began explaining Chue Hmong's purported rationale before Kong Meng could "These teachers in Thailand they always teach and teach." Kong Meng explained further that "he purposefully said this because he wants the Hmong Viet to be [in Vietnam] so he can go there to do business. He goes and teaches scriptures, and he gets the money. [...] He doesn't want anyone to go abroad." This is not because he's worried the pool of interested congregants will all flee to foreign fields rather: those who leave might return to their home country after being fully trained and thereby dominate the bible school and leadership training fields in Vietnam's enormous market of Hmong protestants. An educated member of the Hmong Viet community would be able, knowing the politics and culture of Vietnam's Hmong Christians better than the Hmong Thai or Hmong American missionary will be more believable and able to pull the pool of possible congregants and students away from bible academies in Thailand. These students and congregants act as a justification for their support of Christian communities in Thailand and the United States. Kong Meng explained that:

"They have researched the world and found that there is no country where there are more Hmong Christians than Vietnam. They do not want anyone to run away [...]. The believers will become smarter. So, the reason is that they do not want them to leave and become educated."

This assumption rankles the Hmong of Pa Kluai. They were sure to explain the difference between salary and living costs. Dao Hang knew that Hmong American pastors living in Thailand were paid the same rates as pastors in America. He reasoned that living in Thailand on a US salary is a coveted position, one which is guarded carefully.

After I came to understand this sentiment, other members of the community gave me feedback that they have been frustrated with the same dynamic in other ways. For example, Pao Her expressed that he feels like the C&MA taught him to judge other denominations and religions harshly while he lived in Vietnam. Since he had no way of meeting with people of those denominations, he simply believed the visiting pastors. Meeting people of various denominations and religions since coming to Thailand has changed his view and clued him in about C&MA pastors' tendency to encourage Hmong to stay in Vietnam.

Kong Meng and others told me that the C&MA have very little contact with Pa Kluai now that they have come to Thailand. Except for the single oft-visiting Hmong C&MA pastor Chang Fong Yang, most other C&MA pastors rarely visit and are viewed with suspicion by leaders of the community. When I asked Xf. Kong Meng his opinion on C&MA, he replied, "I do not really like them because C&MA works with the government. If the believers are persecuted, they take the government's side." As such, Xf. Kong Meng received his pastoral training from another denomination. Xf. Kong Meng received his pastoral ordination through a Pentecostal organization that issues certificates through the internet. His explicit purpose was to ensure that when he went abroad, he would have some means of making a living. Xf. Kong Meng did not become a pastor until after my first year of fieldwork was complete, but after tossing around a couple of other ideas—lawyer being his top dream—during my first year of fieldwork that he planned to complete pastoral education. He explained:

“So now I am studying Pentecostalism in one year, and six months I can become a Pastor. I learn online on the Internet. Then they send me a certificate. So, I am thinking I am going to study and become a pastor. So, when I go abroad, I will have employment.” Upon my return to Thailand in 2017, Xf. Kong Meng was officially a pastor and was no longer called elder (*Txwj Laus*) or leader (*thawj coj*), but pastor (*xib fwb*). It appears that Xf. Kong Meng is exactly becoming what he believes the Hmong Thai pastorate fear he will become, a charismatic Hmong Viet who could possibly gain legitimate passage to a third country and gain mobility through citizenship or formal residency in a third country before returning to Vietnam to access their current pool of congregants and students.

Conclusion

This chapter does a few things. First, it explores the influence of external actors and processes have in reinforcing Pa Kluai’s territory effect. Just as the Hmong themselves challenge and reinforce the Thai state’s state effect, outsiders simultaneously challenge and affirm Pa Kluai’s territory effect. They do so by being included or excluded by Pa Kluai’s leader, giving him an opportunity to show his leadership of the territorialization. Furthermore, they do this by engaging in the networks of donation to Pa Kluai. The Hmong messengers and delivery people from Sunthorn’s church showed their coding of Pa Kluai’s as a territorialization which was unworthy of rice donations. This is similar to the sociotechnical practice mentioned in the previous chapter, which involved the coding of individual families into the network of Pa Kluai families by emailing each of them the photographs of food donations.

Secondly, this chapter shows how the political cleavage discussed in chapter one affects the New Hmong Viet in Pa Kluai. Despite the unfortunate mutually shared suspicion between Pa Kluai’s leadership and Hmong Thai Christian networks, Kong Meng has reported hopefully that there has been some thawing in relations between these two sides. Kong Meng continues,

however, to present a hand of fellowship to anyone, all including his aforementioned enemies. There is likely a note of Christian altruism in this approach. However, as I showed previously, it serves Kong Meng's purposes to maintain relations of goodwill with other individuals and communities that might otherwise cause trouble through filing false reports to the UN. Keeping the appearance of tranquility in the eyes of the UN maintains Pa Kluai's counter-legible position. This counter-legible position keeps Pa Kluai a refugized place. A refugized Pa Kluai helps give those undocumented and unprotected immigrants among the group peace of mind while dealing with life as they blend in with those who have been given asylum and refugee protection.

This negative coding of Pa Kluai's territorialization seems to have had another less discussed effect on The community in that it has encouraged the Hmong there to behave in a manner opposite the negative expectations placed upon them. In this chapter, I explain how Kong Meng sees his community as a model for other Viet Hmong communities in Bangkok. He once recounted to me that the effective cooperation of his community members allowed them to host strategic events like the Christmas party, which attracted possibly new connections to add to their topological network of support.

Similar to the chapter preceding it, this chapter continues with the theme of refining organization among the various sites in its network topology in order to create positive affects. The increase of material support helps both to increase security but affords more intersubjective meetings that involve large portions of the community. The help received from a few donors helped to pay for some of the Hmong New Year's and Christmas dinners. I assert that these were important events for building affective ties between community members.

Part IV

Conclusion

A central question asked throughout this dissertation is whether the Hmong in my subject communities—especially Pa Kluai, but also Thung Raab, Khlong Bua, Tha-In and others—had established political spatialities similar to territories?

Answering this question involved many components. In my introduction, I examined the language we use to describe political spatiality. I charted various ideas from territory as Westphalian power containers to more topological and networked political spatialities. Then I explored some important aspects of geographic and historical context that framed the lives of my Hmong subject community. I explore some understandings of Hmong territoriality in Chapter Two. Wherein, I describe three instances—which include Koom Haum Ban Vinai, Vaj Loog Teeb Keeb in Chiang Rai, and Mùòng Nhé in Vietnam—in which Hmong people have attempted territorial constructions which were all ultimately extinguished. The last of these territorialities formed at Mùòng Nhé Vietnam initiated a migration of thousands of Hmong people from Vietnam. Using those contexts as a jumping-off point, I dug deeper into the contexts of Vietnamese Hmong lives in Vietnam, which influenced them to migrate to Thailand. Upon arrival in Thailand, these Hmong found themselves in new spaces of power. Unfortunately, they are usually unable in this freshly arrived condition to establish anything resembling a territory. There are instances, however, where they sometimes establish some connections with those around them. These affective connections based to some degree on sympathy and mimesis sometimes challenge Thailand's "state effect" and provide reprieve and security for precarious

Hmong I describe in my dissertation. From there, I shift my attention specifically to analyzing the Hmong Viet community in Pa Kluai Bangkok. Although it is obvious that Hmong people in other places have established similar villages, Pa Kluai stands out as different from its peers of Hmong immigrant groups. The community members draw on the materialities that surround them to make place even though many of them do not legitimately occupy Thai state space. Furthermore, they organize their internal relations and their connections to community outsiders to create an affect of trust and mutual aid. In this condition, their group affect is characterized by trust and conviviality, allowing them to combat the tendency to splinter and melt away as most other Hmong groupings in Bangkok have done. They remain in place and use practices that more permanently code their territory in the minds of their territorialization's inhabitants (Painter 2010).

So, the answer to my dissertation research's initial question on whether Hmong immigrants have a distinct territoriality is Yes. With Pa Kluai as an example, I can say that Hmong immigrants have territoriality and are actively territorializing. However, I would not call the results of this territorialization a complete territory. Territory requires widely recognized sovereignty, but recognition of Pa Kluai's sovereignty is confined to Hmong endosocialities. Furthermore, Pa Kluai is a group of Hmong immigrants who have established a territorialization based on the metaphor about the bean pole. Though varying from the Westphalian understanding of the concept of territoriality, the Hmong in Pa Kluai knit together an extraordinary network of connections that resembles a topological territory or place, more akin to the territorial constructions of theorists like John Allen (2004) or Joe Painter (2010). This territoriality was not dependent on some predetermined scale it was ontologically determined to fill; rather, the territory resembles a topological network of power, which expands or contracts based on the

actors involved in the network. I show in Chapters 4 through 8 that these various actors interact with their center and each other through a variety of power relations, including persuasion, domination, discipline at a multiplicity of frequency and rates. This territory can weaken or strengthen based on the decisions of people

Fruits of the Vine

As I have described, the territory resembles a bean pole territoriality like the idea described by eminent Hmong culture expert and artist Lee Zai when he spoke about writing. Just as he noticed that bean vines gather around the trellis pole and produce fruit (pulses to be more exact), the territorial place established in Pa Kluai has allowed for the people there to gather and produce a social benefit. The assemblage of people and things gathered there at the time of my research has afforded a general affect of conviviality and security. But this can change, the territory is not permanent, and its dynamic of security and positive affect is ephemeral based on the winds of history blowing on social interaction. As of yet, I have not said much on this topic, aside from stressing the emotional benefits of living in a trustful space dominated by an affect of conviviality.

The fruits of this territory go beyond the increased in security and conviviality of the territory's residents. As I have argued in my dissertation, Hmong people as a subordinated minority have often greeted new spaces of power with a feeling of insecurity. The state's legal frameworks did not often see them or protect them. The pervasion of endosocial relations among Hmong groups seems a long-standing adjustment to this common state. However, Pa Kluai's people depend on their territory to keep them secure. Pa Kluai is a refugized place, where the reputation of legitimacy proceeds its members, whether they have proper documentation or not. Furthermore, this territory provides security from some predatory actors. The territory keeps

unwanted elements out. Because there is tension with ethnonationalist influence in the Hmong Diaspora community Pa Kluai seems to be in many ways to actively prevent ethnonationalism from taking root in the community. Despite ongoing outsider suspicion of ethnonationalist links with some Pa Kluai residents, it seems for the time being would-be visits from ethnonationalist recruiters have been cut short by the command of the community leader.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Pa Kluai is a refugized place; people who go there without documentation can blend into a group of mostly documented asylum seekers. The visibility of their legitimate claims protects Hmong bodies from the prying eyes of the police.

Another benefit is the enhanced ability to organize. This organization happens at the local level in the form of everyday activities but extends to international connections, which now influence the lives of Hmong people inside and outside of Vietnam. However, the continuing ability to make connections with outsiders and build political coalitions continues. During my fieldwork I was asked by Kong Meng to translate a few lines from Hmong to English, the results were the following

“My friend Cheng Nou Vang has already been killed by Vietnamese police. So, I have come to Thailand to ask assistance to help me escape from the threat of death at the hands of Vietnamese police. I cannot return to Vietnam, or I will be killed like my friend.”

A few days later, I took a walking interview trip to the UNHCR with Dao Hang. I noticed someone sitting on the front steps quietly sitting as a family. This family sat behind a large plastic well-made sign with the following words written on it,

“My friend Cheng Nou Vang has already been killed by Vietnamese police. So, I have come to Thailand to ask assistance to help me escape from the threat of death at the hands of Vietnamese police. I cannot return to Vietnam, or I will be killed like my friend.”

⁷⁵ Though he had admitted to meeting with some ethnonationalist leaders and expressing some interest to test the viability of their movement. Still, he patently denies having participated in the movement.

It should have occurred to me that this translation might be used for some special purpose since I had also translated the heading, “UNHCR Please defend my life.” However, I had unwittingly assisted in a protest of Fai Lor’s application termination. He had recently been denied asylum for the second time and would no longer have another chance. Though his claim seems strong, he was denied because of his lack of evidence. Unlike some of my Hmong Lao friends who bounced around frantically from place to place in such an unsettling situation, Fai seemed somewhat serene. Not only had he used his Pa Kluai connections to translate and make his protest sign (Kong Meng had spearheaded the effort)

Similarly, Pa Kluai was now acting as a staging ground for projects to assist Hmong people in Vietnam with meaningful connections to report human rights abuses. Xf. Kong Meng’s new education in human rights allowed him to give credible advice to Hmong, still living in Vietnam through the internet. From the staging ground in Pa Kluai, Kong Meng would translate documents, transcribe videos, and write letters to appropriate aid and governmental agencies. In a way, the particular positioning of Pa Kluai was allowing the Hmong there to establish a territory and create a political fortune for their members and some outside the community. Pa Kluai is a good place and a good territory. It has served its people.

To remind the reader, the Hmong realize that in some ways, this understanding of space and politics is exemplified by a dream that the leader of my primary research community shared with me. Describing the internationally recognized Hmong leader General Vang Pao, Kong Meng recounts that the leader told him to come to Pa Kluai to take care of his people and that the geomantic flows of looj mem are good in Pa Kluai. Using Mai Na lee’s (2015) distinction between the two political archetypes—millenarian prophet king and state broker—often found in as a heuristic for understanding Pa Kluai, I can now consider Kong Meng’s position as leader of

the community. I ask whether he is a broker between his people and the state, or is he more similar to a messianic prophet who resists state purposes. Approaching from outside, one sees the trappings of a state broker who works to ensure the welfare of his people against the backdrop of a looming state. At the same time, however, this negotiation is not simplistic and secular. Kong Meng does not only stand as a representative between his people and the Thai state. He negotiates with the UNHCR, whom the Thai state shares some of its sovereign decision-making power (in regulating the circulation of asylum seekers and refugees through Thai state space). Conversely, he helped establish his own territory that cuts against the legibility of the UN for his peoples' own purposes. But his territory resembles the temporary bean pole rather than the permanent state structure set on overturning the current political order. From this you can see he is neither someone concerned with overturning the state nor fully blending in with its purposes. But he does this through the territorialization he works to establish. Like the beanpole this territorialization walks the middle line. Kong Meng himself is not the bean pole. Just like Lee Zai's understanding of the bean pole, as something external to the leader, Kong Meng would not see himself as the beanpole. Rather the social relations he has worked to establish exist outside of Kong Meng. The relations Hmong social development in Pa Kluai embodied in the territorialization of the community itself is the beanpole. Kong Meng simply sought to externalize the ideas and institutions which have helped his community come together and help each other out.

Contributions

This dissertation makes a few contributions to geographical study and Hmong studies. In terms of Geographical study, this dissertation helps to bring geography farther out of the territorial trap. It does this in a few ways. Firstly, leaning on the nonfoundationalist thesis that

the state is part of society—rather than a separate sphere—and is simply produced by discursive and material effects (Mitchell 1999) by everyday prosaic activities (Painter 2006). I spend Part two of my dissertation untangling the network of sociotechnical practices—I focused on food distribution technologies in chapter eight to illustrate this particular point. The creation of the territorial effect in Pa Kluai is similar to the process of creating the territory of a state. This leads me to take a topological approach to territory. States are thus not power containers but are the product of an effect constituted both by the social and spatial.

As much of the language regarding territoriality and territory are focused on the state and its ‘scalar’ properties. New language must be developed to describe territorialization in smaller sites. Brenner suggests in *New State spaces*, the goal of

“overcoming of state-centrism requires a comprehensive reconceptualization of entrenched understandings of space as a fixed, pre-given container or platform for social relations. Despite the persistent efforts of critical human geographers in recent decades to unsettle such assumptions, the conception of space as a realm of stasis, fixity, and stability—which contains but is not substantively modified by social action—is still surprisingly pervasive throughout the social sciences.” (Brenner 2004:29)

I note the need to step out of the state-centric model but hesitate to commit to a “rescaling” as the solution to the problem. In stressing topological relations, My ethnography questions the notion of hierarchical scale and opts for more of a site ontology. Despite the debate (Marston et al. 2005; Hoefle 2006; Collinge 2006; Jonas 2006; Escobar 2007; Leitner and Miller 2007; Jones et al. 2007), My understanding of social relations in and across geographical space resembles the ontology presented by Sallie Marston, John Paul Jones and Keith Woodward’s (2005) essay “Human Geography without scale,” in that social and political relations are not in an ontological sense bound in hierarchical scales but are an ever reconfiguring set of topological relations best viewed on a horizontal or flat ontology.⁷⁶ Linkages between sites in this topological ontology

⁷⁶ Marston et al quote Helga Leitner’s (2004: 237) effort to reconcile scale and network.

are constructed by the flow or access between sites rather than an ontological difference between scalar categories, such as global or local.

My contribution to this discussion is to give ethnographic flesh to theories of site ontology and networks espoused by an increasing number of geographers in their challenge to Eurocentric state-centered understandings of political geography. As explained by Jones et al.:

“We opt, instead, for a ‘flat ontology,’ largely based on the work of Deleuze, DeLanda, and Schatzki. In it, we conceptualize ‘sites’ as immanent (self-organizing) event-spaces dynamically composed of bodies, doings and sayings. Sites are differentiated and differentiating, unfolding singularities that are not only dynamic, but also ‘hang together’ through the congealments and blockages of force relations. The ‘actuality’ of any site is always poised for compositional variation – subject to reorganizations and disorganizations – as its inexhaustible ‘virtuality’ or potential continually rearticulates itself (Deleuze 1994).” (Jones et al 2007:265)

Throughout the dissertation, I have shown how those networked linkages are not nested in hierarchical scales. This is fairly clear to see when I acknowledge that unassuming Hmong people living in Thung Raab or Wat Tham Krabok, have in the past, had a fairly direct connection to Thai military elites. Furthermore, though I often deal with a small village which is located in Thailand, I depend on the “state effect” theory to show, for example, that small villages in Thung Raab are not at the “local scale” and military Generals in the army are not at the “state scale.” Of course, they ‘perform’ their respective scales (see Kaiser and Nikkiforova 2008) but meet at a site. There is no ontological difference in their agency. They simply marshal a different, perhaps more extensive, network of social relations.⁷⁷ This is evidenced by the

“transnational networks represent new modes of coordination and governance, a new politics of horizontal relations that also has a distinct spatiality. Whereas the spatiality of a politics of scale is associated with vertical relations among nested territorially defined political entities, by contrast, networks span space rather than covering it, transgressing the boundaries that separate and define these political entities.

Then they follow this quote with a decisive statement on hierarchal scale

“We agree with Leitner that horizontally networked relations contrast with the vertical hierarchies of scale theory. For reasons that we explain in detail further on, however, we reject recent attempts to produce hybrid, both/and solutions that link hierarchical with network conceptualizations of sociospatial.” (2005: 417)

⁷⁷ The language of National scale is a difficult representation to escape since it is thoroughly embedded in language and social science research. However, I try wherever possible to avoid giving agency of ‘national scale,’ by implicating the specific actors who constitute the site. For example in Chapter one, I use Chamroon Parnchand as a

ability of what would otherwise be considered ‘local’ Pa Kluai’s nascent territory effect can challenge the longer established Thai territory effect through its establishment of a network of social relations rather than facing no chance because of its qualitatively different position. The same goes for interactions across national borders. The territory of Pa Kluai is as much constituted by interactions of sites which are across the border. These interactions involve the movement of bodies and communications between sites in a way that is does not change in quality when they interact with Pa Kluai—because this is not the meeting of the ‘local’ with the supraceding category of the ‘national’—it is simply the interacting of two sites in this ontology. I am keen to recognize the stickiness of spaces of sites in new spaces of power and to not view people as occupying “spaces of flows” (Castells 1989; Amin 2002; Jones et al 2007:265). Rather, there are “blockages coagulations and assemblages” (Marston et al. 2005: 423). For example, there are the hang-ups at the border and difficulties of physical travel for Hmong migrants (by taxi across Cambodia, or slowly migrating across Laos). Also, my concept of Cryptoformality also questions the state scale as it shows that the state is not a single actor and thus has no solidified tendencies which could even begin to imitate an ontological category. Cryptoformality is afforded by the conflict of actors in the government to agree and act with a single purpose or motivation. Rather they must secretly deal with the Hmong immigrants and give them a formality only recognized in some quarters but not all. I also try to chart some new geographies of visibility and legibility. Concepts like subliminality, counter-legibility, and refugized place, are helpful for my study, and with the current wave of refugees, I hope my study will preemptively contribute to refugee studies in the future.

linkage to the Hmong and I demystify possible agency attributed to “the state” in influencing the immigration status of Hmong at Tham Krabok Speaking of changes to.

Contribution to Hmong studies

I make a few contributions to Hmong studies. In choosing to write a political geography of Hmong people in Thailand, I hoped to flesh out the differences between Hmong people from different positionalities. This is the first ethnography of Hmong Viet living in Thailand. Also, to my knowledge, my dissertation is the first urban ethnography about Hmong people anywhere. Looking at Hmong in another context other than the “Hmong Mountains” helps to denaturalize some of the assumptions surrounding Hmong people generally. Naturalization and essentialization are common in many ethnic communities and can have stifling results. I also propose some possible geographic underpinnings for a few Hmong cultural institutions. Though institutions like endosociality, looj mem, augury, pheej hmoo have a life of their own, they seem to fill the needs of Hmong people—especially migrants—in recurring situations throughout history.

Beyond my contribution to Hmong studies, I hope to have made some contributions to Hmong migrants themselves. With the presently bleak prospects of international migration for Hmong and other migrants, Pa Kluai’s experience has given me a bit of understanding and hope that communities of precarious migrants can hold together and better their lives while they are stuck in various locations. Perhaps my highlighting of Pa Kluai as an example community can serve as something of a model for the future constructions of communities of solidarity, similar to those of Koopman’s various alter-geopolitical understandings. After first meeting the panicked faces of Hmong people in Thung Raab in 2012, I have wanted to find some way to ease their burdens. As a young graduate student, I was certainly without material means to help, but perhaps this story might do something to help understand their situation in an effort to solve it. And though my efforts are feeble, I hope they do some good. I certainly hope they do no harm.

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