

# Contesting Memories in the Hmong Thai Community: A Study of the “Red Meo” at Doi Yao-Phamon in Northern Thailand

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## Abstract

The body of literature on leftist movements in Thailand contains only limited information about the Hmong as an active political group in the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) from the 1960s to the 1980s. Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, there has been no study that explores the so-called “Red Meo” despite the fact that the Thai government has put a great effort into development programs for this ethnic group. The present study focuses on the more recent “Red Meo” response of constructing a counter-memorial in honor of their own people who sacrificed their lives at the former battlefield, Doi Yao-Phamon, in northern Thailand. Data were collected primarily through ethnographic fieldwork from 2013 to 2015 along with secondary sources. The “Red Meo” are reinterpreting their involvement with the CPT as stemming from majority Thai and state oppression, hence, seeing their own struggle as a heroic fight against social injustice. This paper also examines how Doi Yao-Phamon has become a landscape of contested memories between the “Red Meo” and government officials. The paper argues that the emergence of a contested memory in this Hmong community is a form of soft fighting between the dominant majority Thai as presented by the Thai government and a dominated minority, the Hmong.

**Keywords:** Cold War, contesting memories, Doi Yao-Phamon, “Red Meo”, Hmong, rights and dignity

## Introduction

“*Chaokhao ko kan rai, ying chaonathi tai, tosu du dueat, chap khon Thai pen chaloei*” (Hilltribe rebels shoot and kill authorities, fight fiercely, seize Thai people as captives).

Above is a headline about the “Red Meo” or the Hmong who joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) during the Cold War era taken from the *Khon Muang* newspaper (1967: 6). The Hmong were the principal vehicle of the communists’ attack on north Thailand security forces starting from 1963-64, when the communists took knowledgeable Hmong men to receive training in Laos and North Vietnam and brought them back to their villages in 1965 (Marks, 1973).

This involvement of the Hmong should have been seen as a response to two important policies of the government: 1) the banning of opium production in 1958, and 2) the promoting of forestation in regard to the National Forest Park Act 2504 B.E. (1961) and the National Reserved Forest Act 2507 B.E. (1964). The Hmong, as a major opium producer in the Golden Triangle who also practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, were consequently targeted by the government. Local villagers experienced having to pay fines for growing opium and practicing shifting agriculture, which gradually led to land conflicts between the local Hmong and the authorities, including the lowland Thai people. At the same time, the government started to mistrust the Hmong, whom they feared might have contacted the CPT—the number one enemy of the Thai state—already in the jungles. Under these circumstances, the government began its operation against the Hmong. According to Gua (1975), the combined actions of the Thai army and police force led to the bombing of at least 100 dissident villages by high explosives and napalm attacks in Chiang Rai, Nan, Tak, Petchabun, Loei and Phitsanulok in 1967. These operations resulted in the enormous loss of lives, villages and property, leaving the Hmong in an uncertain living situation, which Tapp (1989) defines as a dilemma during the Cold War era where there was no other choice for the Hmong other than

force.<sup>1</sup> In other words, such incidents greatly threatened the Hmong's livelihood security and hence a number of them finally became part of the CPT, struggling for their rights and dignity in their mountain homes (Mho Dang [Pseudonym], 2014). It should be noted that among the "hilltribes," the Hmong were the main supporters of the CPT in the North (Wanlayangkul, 2003).

Significantly, it was this reliance upon military methods to solve such socio-economic problems that led the dissident Hmong to find spaces and opportunities to learn and experience new things, as young men and women were taken by the CPT to North Vietnam, Laos, and China to study communism, military combat and Chinese medicine. Moreover, media, including radio programs (part of the "Voice of Thai People" radio station broadcast from southern China), were also established to reach the Hmong population in Indo-China (Rueng [Pseudonym], 2015). It was this radio program that prompted the government to immediately establish a "tribal radio program" in Chiang Mai province to communicate with the highlanders in the North, including the Hmong. Moreover, the government also recruited a number of Hmong and other minorities (Lisu, Lahu, Akha, and the Kuomintang's 93rd Division) to fight against the "Red Meo" (Prakatwuttisan, 1994). These anti-communist groups, in their loss and pain, gained citizenship, land settlements and social status in Thai society as the "co-fighters" of the Thai nation for Thai national security.

The war continued ceaselessly until the early 1980s, when the political sphere on the international stage changed. China, which had backed the CPT, stopped supplying weapons and assistance to them. The Thai government used this opportunity to issue amnesty policy "66/23"<sup>2</sup> in 1980 to include communist agents. Hence, the early 1980s

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here also that other minorities who joined the communists, like the Lua in Nan province and the Karen in Tak province, did not face such oppression before joining the CPT.

<sup>2</sup> The Order of the Office of the Prime Minister No. 66/2523, often known simply as Order 66/2523 or Order 66/23, was a directive of the Thai government outlining key policies in the fight against the communist insurgency towards the end of the Cold War. It was issued on April 23m 1980 (BE 2523) by then-Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda. The order formalized a shift in policy from the hardline military stance practiced by the rightist government of Thanin Kraivichien (in power from 1976 to 1977) towards a more moderate approach which prioritized political measures over military action (Bunbongkarn, 2004).

saw a wave of “city people” withdrawing from the jungles to towns, who were re-identified as “Thai National Co-developers” (TNCD)<sup>3</sup>, an ironic new term replacing the label, “communist insurgents.” This left the Hmong remaining in the mountains for some time before their needs were recognized by the government. “We did not surrender at all to the officials until our needs had been recognized. We wanted to live here in our community and be treated like the others,” said Moh Dang [Pseudonym], (2015).

According to the agreement made by Hmong communist leaders and Thai authorities, the former Hmong communists could still live in their own communities, but only under the control of the army and they would be offered 15 rai of land. Therefore, as soon as they gave up their arms to military officers in 1982, they became “Thai National Co-developers” (TNCD), for which I will use the term, “Hmong-Thai National Co-developers” (HTNCD), when referring to them. This point was the beginning of a new era in which the state initiated its development programs, starting with the introduction of the Thai nation’s three pillars, Nation, Religion, and Monarchy. King Bhumipol visited the area and had his footprint printed in there, Thai monks arrived in the community with Buddha statues and relics, and construction projects were begun, while government forces came to control the community.

However, after thirty-five years of development, the HTNCD still find themselves marginalized by state practices. Negative identities such as “Red Meo” or “communist insurgents” are still reproduced publicly nowadays. In other words, the narrative of history written by the state on the “Red Meo” has not yet changed. The HTNCD are still viewed as former “insurgents” in the eyes of state authorities (Tiapan, 1989). Moreover, development programs politically diminish local people’s rights to land and dignity in society by changing the landscape of these former “Red areas.” As a result, these former Hmong communities as well as former CPT bases have now been made into homes for former anti-communist groups as well as highly promoted

<sup>3</sup> In Thai: Phu ruam pattana chat thai

destinations for travelers. Such programs have made the area overpopulated and caused other problems over land. Land for making a living of the HTNCD has become limited since most of the land has been given to newcomers and become reserved as national forest areas. Conflicts and quarrels over land have often occurred. This contestation over the area is different from the conflict during the Cold War. The HTNCD were not given full rights to live permanently on their ancestors' land. They are worried that in the future their lands might be taken.

Moreover, in terms of identity, the descendants of the HTNCD are unsure of what identity they should present – the “descendants of Red Meo”/“sons of communist terrorists” or the “descendants of the People’s Liberation Army of Thailand” (PLAT). Some simply do not want to appear as Hmong or keep their own history and traditions because such identities often limit their rights, legitimacy and dignity in society.

Therefore, what the Hmong TNCD (HTNCD) are able to do is to recall their memories and construct a memorial to remember the Hmong community as well as to call for their own rights and restore their identity and dignity, which is the focus of this paper. Not only can state officials write or commemorate memories by situating themselves as heroes, but local people can also negotiate being heroes by commemorating their heroic experiences, although contrary to the official ones.

I argue that the emergence of contested memories in this Hmong community is a form of soft fighting between the dominant majority Thais as presented by the Thai government and a dominated minority, the Hmong. These contested memories are remnants of an unending war between minorities and the Thai state. Whereas before, state authorities and minorities such as the Hmong used weapons to compete with one other, now both use memories and memorials to impose their own versions of history. For the Hmong, the memories are those of using the CPT as a vehicle by which to struggle against social injustice, in the same way as in the past when they relied on the CPT.

This article concerns mainly a Hmong community, “Doi Yao-Phamon,” one of the former “red areas” in eastern Chiang Rai province. The article explores two issues. First, it explores how state officials attack local memories through development programs. Second, it emphasizes the recent “Red Meo” responses of constructing a counter-monument to restore their rights and dignity.

### **Negotiating Memory Construction in Doi Yao-Phamon**

During the Cold War era, the Thai government used mainly military weapons to compete with the communists. It was only in 1980s that the government began to use soft political weapons like development programs and commemorative practices to dominate “the other within.” While provision of infrastructure, schools, and roads are strategies to control people in the former “red areas,” memorials and memories are also constructed to situate the former Red Meos’ place in society. I propose that the following development programs are effective tools of the state authorities used to assert the nation-state’s legitimacy over the people and the area which I will discuss in detail below.

### **Diluting the Former “Red Community” through Village Construction**

As soon as the Hmong communists began to give up their armed uprising against the government in the early 1980s, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC)<sup>4</sup> or the Communist Suppression Command, attempted to launch development programs in the area. One of the programs was the setting up of new villages in the area for newcomers (Center for Maintaining and Protecting the Area Development in Doi Yao, Doi Phamon, and Doi Phachi, 2009). It should be noted that some currently existing villages along two “strategic roads”<sup>5</sup> were built in order to dominate the HTNCD, in particular.

<sup>4</sup> Its former name was Communist Suppression Command and it was founded on December 17, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> The Hmong called these the “Death Roads” because many people died during their construction, including CPT fighters and government workers.

The first project launched at least ten new villages in an area along strategic road number 1155, from Thoeng district to Chiang Khong district. A later project included a total of eleven villages, selectively built along a second strategic road, number 1093, near the Thailand-Laos border. The sole purpose of bringing outsiders into the area was to control or overwhelm the former Hmong communists. The locations of new villages for outsiders were carefully selected and designed to meet the basic needs of the new residents. A one-story wooden house with 2.9 acres of land was offered to attract newcomers. However, not everyone was eligible for this offer. Applicants had to be former anti-communist agents. Therefore, only former Kuomintang soldiers and members of other ethnic groups like the Mein (Yao), Akha, Khon Muang, and even Lao Hmong refugees were brought in to resettle the HTNCD area. This project resulted in the establishment of over thirty villages in Doi Yao-Phamon which have endured to the present time.

Significantly, both the old and the new villages were all named or renamed based on the state's concept of "Thai nationhood." This occurred in the case of a village named Baan Raj Pak Di. According to native Hmong in the area, this village was formerly an important landmark of the Hmong before being turned into a military unit of the CPT and finally just a village formed by the state authorities. The table below shows how the names and meanings of particular spots were changed in each period of time.

**Table 1** An example of the changes of a village name and its meaning over time

Pre-Cold War Era	Cold War Era	Post-Cold War
<b><i>Aung Lia (Av Liab):</i></b> This was originally the name of a landmark surrounded by red colored soil. The Hmong used this area to travel between two mountain ranges, Doi Yao and Phamon. The older residents recalled that Doi Phamon was colder than Doi Yao. Doi Yao was used for resettlement and cultivation of rice and corn, while Doi Phamon was used for opium cultivation.	<b><i>Company 85:</i></b> As the Aung Lia landmark was in a valley between two mountain ranges, it was selected as a location for a company of the CPT. The number 85 was used in order to commemorate the first resistance of the Hmong in the area on May 8, 1967.	<b><i>Baan Raj Phak Di:</i></b> Once the Hmong reported to the government authorities and decided to resettle the former company, a new name, Raj Phak Di, was given. “Raj Phak Di” literally means “loyal citizens.” Although this is the official name, villagers today tend to use the former Hmong name, “Zos Av Liab.” However, since the number of households in the village has rapidly increased during the last two decades, local authorities decided to establish another new community called “Pracha Phak Di.” This name has the same meaning as Raj Phak Di.

Another example of a village name change is Baan Loa-oo. This village was named after a charismatic Hmong man named Lao-oo living in the 1960s. In the 1980s, it was renamed Baan Rom Pho Thai, which means “village under the realm of Thai patronage.” Another village, Baan Lao Jaw (also based on the name of the past village head), was renamed Baan Rom Pho Thong (“village under the golden land”). Below is a list of other villages with names implying similar meanings.

**Table 2** Examples of new village names promoting loyalty to the nation and monarchy

Village Name	Meaning
Baan Rak Thin Thai	love Thailand village
Phitak Thai	protect Thailand village
Baan Thai Samakkhi	united Thai village
Baan Pracha Phak Di	royal citizen village
Baan Rom Fa Luang	village under the king's patronage
Baan Rom Fa Siam	village under Siam patronage

Obviously, the renaming of villages was done to promote national security. While the anti-communists were integrated with the HTNCD and their descendants, the intent of village name changes was to make local people aware of the state's sovereignty over their resettlements. The aim was to show them that they should be united, and should love, protect and be loyal to the nation and the monarchy. Similarly, a later project promoting this former battlefield as a tourist attraction also reshaped the meaning of the area.

### Promoting the Former Battlefield a Tourist Attraction

In 1988, the government adopted the well-known policy of turning Indochina “from a battlefield into a marketplace.” General Chatchai Choonhawan and the local officials supporting the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) succeeded in implementing this policy on this former battlefield. After investigating the area, they found three fascinating sites which they were able to turn into tourist attractions. The local officials named each of the sites based on its physical appearance rather than its significance to the villagers. A high rocky cliff which was situated right on the border of Thailand and Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) was named Phu Chi Fa, “the Roof of Siam.” For the Hmong, this location is not the roof of Siam but a place where their

great-grandfather, Faah Paya,<sup>6</sup> punished his community members by killing them and throwing them off the cliff.

The next site is called Pha Thang—the Door to Lao PDR. It refers to a landscape of giant rocks situated on the border of Thailand and Laos. The Hmong remember that their resettlements and poppy fields were located around this area before it was occupied by Kuomintang families and became one of the famous scenic tourist attractions in northern Thailand.

The last site is Phu Long Thang—the Dragon Pool.<sup>7</sup> A pool with an artificial dragon was constructed in a Hmong village in accordance with the KMT’s belief that a dragon existed near the village. The village’s original name is Paya Pipak (the name of a respected Hmong elder from the area). Because of the pool and dragon, people can hardly recall this village’s original Hmong name instead of the recently invented one, which is devoid of any evidence of Hmong presence in the area.

To connect these three sites in one Doi Yao-Phamon tour package, the slogan, “Travel to Three Mountain Tops in One Day,”<sup>8</sup> has been used. Gradually, this area has become one of the most attractive destinations in Thailand, and thousands of tourists have come to the area. Some villagers, including HTNCD who live near these sites, started new businesses including shops, resorts and guesthouses. I found that most of the villagers who own guesthouses are reservists, retired teachers and business investors who are ethnic Khon Muang. The Royal Forest Department has also moved to the area and opened offices, establishing two forest parks, Phu Chi Fa in 1998 and Phu Long Thang in 1999. These two sites are surrounded by majority HTNCD villages. Interestingly, Pha Thang, which is part of an area populated by former 93<sup>rd</sup> KMT soldiers, has not been made into a forest park.

<sup>6</sup> The word *paya* is from a Northern Thai dialect and refers to elders or community heads. In the Central Thai dialect, it becomes *phu yai baan*. The word *faah* signified that the *paya* belonged to the Faah clan. Descendants of this *paya* are now third and fourth generation and still live in the area.

<sup>7</sup> In Thai: *Phu Chi Fa langkha Siam, Phu Pha Tang-pratu su Laos, Phu Long Thang Sa Mangkon*

<sup>8</sup> In Thai: *Thiao sam phu nai nueng wan*

After almost three decades of promoting these three beautiful scenic spots, this formerly communist area has become widely known as a tourist destination. According to data collected by the Phu Chi Fa Forest Park, the number of tourists, including international visitors, has steadily increased. Visitors come to the area to experience the height of the mountains, observe the beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and enjoy lovely scenes of fog- covered villages, trees and rivers in the distance. As a result, the original name of the area, Doi Yao-Phamon has gradually faded from use. Therefore, it is rare for visitors or even insiders, particularly the younger generations, to be aware of the former name and its historical importance. This suggests that the government has succeeded to a certain extent in dominating the HTNCD, certainly affecting their dignity and legitimacy of being indigenous in the area and having rights over their land and community. It is for this reason that the HTNCD feel that they need to find a way to commemorate their past in order to locate their rights and situate their place in society in the midst of mainstream memory.

### **Restoring Rights and Dignity through the Construction of Memory and Memorials**

“If we don’t build this [memorial], we will be seen only as terrorists, antagonists, and trouble makers.” (Dang Noi [Pseudonym], 2013)

In order to restore their identity and call for rights, legitimacy and dignity in the present, the Hmong have been trying to construct a memorial to honor their people’s deaths during the Cold War, reinterpreting their involvement with the CPT as stemming from the oppression by the Thai state and the majority Thais, and seeing their own struggle as a heroic fight against social injustice. However, unlike the memorials of the Kuomintang 93<sup>rd</sup> Division’s former veterans, the HTNCD’s memorial has not yet been built. Only a groundbreaking ceremony was held several years ago to guarantee the possibility of the memorial’s existence in the

future. The memory and memorial are being built to endorse the HTNCD’s version of Doi Yao-Phamon’s history. For the HTNCD, that memory is one of using the memory of the CPT as a vehicle for struggling against current social injustice. In the following section, I will explore two aspects: 1) the memorial project plan and the version of memory constructed by the HTNCD, and 2) the groundbreaking ceremony.

## **From a Veteran’s Memorial to a Center for Tribal Culture and History**

The intention of constructing a veteran’s memorial was initiated by the HTNCD, particularly Mho Dang, Dang Noi and their community leaders in 1991, according to Kankum (2007), a comrade from the city. However, it still has not been built although there is a plan. According to the first meeting among the comrades both from the cities and from the area of Doi Yao-Phamon on the celebration of the successful construction of a veteran’s memorial in Phayao province, the plan is a little different from the present one as shown in the names. As a matter of fact, several versions of memorial project plans were submitted to different authorities and somehow the names have been changed. The name of the plan given in the first meeting could give us an idea of how the memorial was perceived in the first version.

On the top of the meeting agendas, “The Project of Building a Park of Doi Yao-Phamon History,”<sup>9</sup> shows the original idea of the memorial. This original project appeared to cover a large area that would be a memorial since the idea of a park was used. The idea of a Hmong comrade, Dang Noi (2011) further provides a clearer picture of the original idea, as he stated that the memorial would include all historical places in Doi Yao-Phamon. This means that the history of the HTNCD would be presented according to the places where historical events occurred. The old military base known as “Company 85,” the communist villages, bunkers, a cave where weapons were stored, a hospital, political and military training schools, along with narratives of struggles in the battlefield would be reconstructed to present the history of the HTNCD

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<sup>9</sup> In Thai: *Khrongkan sang anusonathan utthayan prawattisat Doi Yao-Phamon*

in Doi Yao-Phamon during the Cold War. In addition to his idea, Dang Noi felt it was the armed fight in the Cold War that brought them a better life today.

Prior to our armed fight, they did not count us as their citizens. It was only after having battles with them that we were given spaces and stages. The comforts today at this highland community are found everywhere because of our peoples' blood and lives. They sacrificed their lives in exchange for land for us to live on today, but no one knows and appreciates them. We will build a memorial and collect the names of our comrades who sacrificed their lives to be written on the memorial. Our side lost roughly 300 people. They should be called 'the real heroes.' It was our cooperation in giving up our arms against the government in accordance with policies 66/23 and 66/25 that enabled the government to successfully declare its victory over the CPT in 1982 at this area. But it is a pity that people today live '*sabai sabai*',<sup>10</sup> here without recognizing our roles and our painful past. We, who are survivors of the war, would like others to recognize the good things about communism that contribute to society today. (Dang Noi [Pseudonym], 2013)

However, this idea did not appear in the later plan. With difficulties in getting permission for the construction site of the memorial, a later plan was adapted to focus more on both Hmong culture and history as seen through its names and contents in the plan. At least four different names were used on different occasions, all of which focused on culture.<sup>11</sup> My exploration over the site of construction with Dr. Prasit Leepreecha<sup>12</sup> in November, 2012, added more information on the later plan and the history presented at the groundbreaking

<sup>10</sup> Live life in comfort without any worries.

<sup>11</sup> The names were "The Center for Tribal Culture in Two Sub-districts", "The Center for Tribal Culture, Phu Chi Fa, Doi Yao-Phamon, Chiang Rai Province", "Center for Culture and History of the Hmong, Doi Yao- Phu Chi Fa-Phamon-Pha Tang", and "The Center for Tribal Culture and History, Doi Yao-Phamon."

<sup>12</sup> He was the advisor for my master's thesis which this paper is a part of it. The construction of memory in this area was initially introduced to me by him.

ceremony. One of the vinyl banners placed in the construction site presents this information:

This center covers 15 rai of land, cost 60,151,307 baht, took six years to complete (May 2012-2016) and consists of two Hmong house style buildings. The first is called “the historical museum” which will contain two types of information: 1) Hmong culture and Hmong history, and 2) stories about the Thai King, Bhumipol Adulyadej. The other is “the reconciliation hall” with facilities for conferences and meetings. (Phu Chi Fa-Doi Yao-Phamon Cultural Conservation Network, 2011)

It was this project plan that enabled the HTNCD to successfully hold the groundbreaking ceremony for constructing the memorial in the future on a hillock named “Noen 824.”

### **Ensuring the Memorial’s Existence through a Groundbreaking Ceremony**

No matter what the versions and names of the memorial were, the construction process is not yet finished. The latest project description above might have been written just to ask for the construction site and a launch of the groundbreaking ceremony to guarantee the construction of the memorial in the future. No one knows.

The groundbreaking ceremony took place on May 26, 2011 on the hillock mentioned above, which is the ideal location of the memorial. Geographically, it is located between the mountains of Doi Yao and Phamon, just a few kilometers from the tourist spots (Phu Chi Fa and Phu Long Thang). Significantly, the groundbreaking ceremony was not simply a religious ritual, but truly a political negotiation of space for building a memorial, as stated by a comrade<sup>13</sup> or TNCD who lives in the city,

<sup>13</sup> The author prefers to use the term “comrade” (Thai “*sahai*”) to mean those former Thai communists who are neither farmers nor villagers because it is observed that the term “TNCD” has not been used by them and in fact it is meaningless to them compared with the term “*sahai*.” But for former communists who are now villagers or farmers, the term “TNCD” is often used to claim for rights. Thus, I prefer to differentiate the terms according to the usage or preference of the people.

Dear comrades, ...the memorial of the CPT's former operational area No. 8 will be appearing in reality. Its name is 'The Center of Tribal Culture and History of Two Sub-districts.' Even though there isn't any written confirmation proof, a word of promise for funding support from above would possibly guarantee the project. To make sure, Mho Dang with our Hmong brotherhood suddenly held a groundbreaking ceremony right after they received a reply from the ISOC. For a comparison, the ceremony itself is a contract like one for constructing a house in which the contract is made before the construction. (Duang, n.d.: 12)

At the same time, the groundbreaking itself was a commemorative practice. May 26, 2011 is remembered as a historical event for the comrades at Zone 8. The ceremony was not only a celebration of their successful negotiation of space, but also a time of commemoration of their past, before the local state officials. A comrade joyfully described it:

The event went on hilariously. The Chiang Rai provincial governor was the chair, VIP guests were invited, i.e. the Phayao military district commanding officer, district governors from Theong, Wiang Kaen, and Khun Tan; a chief executive of the SAO whose appointed name was 'Sahai Amnat'; and a sub-district headman or Laowue, our *sahai*. Many are from Bangkok: Sahai Laoteng, Namchai and Bun; from Chiang Mai: Pa-wi, Lung-pan, Hnan, Ded, Diao and Laoyee; from Chiang Rai: Kru-Lio, Sin (Tu) and countless numbers of people arrived in two vans from Pan District, including Sahai Tan or Pobchai. Part of them were *sahais* from Zone 7. Sahai Chalong and Sahai Singnoi also attended to cheer things up, too. Even though the photos shown here scattered, they could provide you a picture of how hilarious the event was. Children of Hmong came to dance (Ib, Ob, Peb, Paub);<sup>14</sup> initially they wore Hmong-style hats but later put on caps with a red star."<sup>15</sup> (Chip, n.d.: 13)

<sup>14</sup> It is in Hmong language, means one, two, three and four.

<sup>15</sup> The five-pointed red star (★), since about 1917 has often served as a symbol of communism.

The state officials were regarded important as key persons in the groundbreaking ceremony as well as for the future construction of the memorial, as Moh Dang, a team leader of the ceremony narrated to me frankly at his acupuncture office,

Since the whole area of Doi Yao-Phamon is reserved as a national forest area, we can't simply do any construction without permission from the relevant authorities. These people are important keys to the construction of the memorial. Before we arrived at this stage, I sent countless letters asking permission from them to allocate a piece of land for building such a center to keep our traditions, wisdom and history, but they never replied to me until we got a reply from the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). They accepted the project and a letter was sent by General Surayud Chulanont,<sup>16</sup> stating that the plan had been identified and sent to the Ministry of Culture for consideration of funding support. With these letters, I handed again a letter to them, the local authorities. I know they hardly agree with us, but what to do; they finally made an effort to join the ceremony with us reluctantly, particularly the military district commanding officer. I could observe his unhappy face. This empty seat was actually arranged for him but he didn't sit on it beside me, so only I sat with the chair. We chose to have a Thai ceremony for our groundbreaking ceremony because we want to make a deal with them. We want them to understand us. If we used our Hmong ritual, they would not understand and might not care and keep the promise, launching the project. Therefore, we invited several Thai monks nearby to do the ritual for us. (Moh Dang [Pseudonym], 2015)

Therefore, the significance of this groundbreaking ceremony was not only to acknowledge or invite dignitaries to join, but the

<sup>16</sup> Thai Army Commander (1998-2003), Supreme Commander, and a privy counselor, whose father was “Sahai Kamtan” or General Phayom Chulanont, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Thailand and Chief of Staff of the People’s Liberation Army of Thailand from the 1950s to the 1980s.

ceremony itself was also a political weapon to make sure that the war memorial of the HTNCD will be built in the future.

However, it is already more than six years since the ceremony took place and on a recent trip to the area in 2018, I found that there are still no signs of the memorial being constructed, except a tree planted by the chair of the groundbreaking ceremony growing up in the midst of the weeds. Part of the area was being used temporarily by a maize company to process maize after buying it from the village. I was curious as to why the memorial has not been built yet and soon I received a reply from a comrade. He expressed his viewpoint strongly to me,

We now can't build it because democracy in Thai society is still limited. They don't give us space, but it's okay. Our generation can do only this much, it's good enough. Let it be that much for now. The children are growing up and they will continue. There will be a generation that preserves our intentions later on. Your generation will continue. If we try to do it too fast now, we will hardly live along with the society. We should not neglect politics. We have to play politics. We use our knowledge as a means of class struggle. You people go on learning. It takes time to change. We have to do it thoughtfully. You see that now, our clothes get washed by washing powder, our dishes by Sunlight,<sup>17</sup> and if we want it brighter, we use Haiteur.<sup>18</sup> Before we had all these, we used natural substances. It is not like we grow this year and harvest all next year. If so, we would hardly survive. We must learn to live and handle along with others. We no longer use weapons to seek democracy. Nowadays, we use knowledge and letters instead. So, it is a must for you people to make your best efforts to acquire knowledge. Whatever knife is good, use it in accordance to its capacity. Of course, there is a good knife. If we are in a hurry to finish it without foreseeing the future effects, it means that we create ourselves an enemy and that we will not find a solution to the matter." (Nhotua [Pseudonym], 2013)

<sup>17</sup> The brand name of a dishwashing liquid widely known in Thailand

<sup>18</sup> A well-known bleach product in Thailand

The viewpoint of this comrade reflects well the fact that the struggle of the HTNCD has not yet ended and only the form of struggle may differ at each particular time, depending on the context.

However, inside the temporary memorial house, there is a history of the HTNCD, where the facts of being involved with the CPT are written,

... the Hmong throughout the mountains of Doi Yao, Phamon, and Pha Thang in Thoeng, Khun Tan and Wiang Kaen districts, Chiang Rai province had been taxed unfairly and they had been culturally exploited by local government authorities. This became a legendary fighting of the Hmong people toward such injustice. After heavy taxes were imposed several times, conflicts arose that became more and more intense until 1963, when the CPT came into the area with help and political education. The Hmong people around this area in Chiang Rai province thus joined the CPT and courageously and successfully worked together in building this area to be one of the most well-known communist bases in Thailand. Many of the Hmong were educated to become qualified military and political leaders, doctors, nurses and teachers. Moreover, the very strong kinship system of the Hmong helped spread the idea of communism and expand communist bases into other Hmong communities in northern Thailand, for instance, the Hmong in provinces like Phayao, Tak, Phetchabun, etc. (Association for the Creation of Life and Environment, 2011)

This version of history seems to have been passed on to the public by means of television, social media and the internet. As a result, some young Hmong people have recognized their identity, and readily negotiated their memories with others and understood their parents' negotiations. For example, a television program, *Pan Sang Rung* (2012), organized a telecast research project, encouraging young Hmong at Doi Yao-Phamon to interview their parents to learn about their history and past conflicts. The following shows how they viewed themselves and their community after completing the research project.

Virut reflected, “The history here and the one they talk about are different. They say we are sons of the communists. Yes, we are. But before that, what did you do to us?” Similarly, Ya Jindaprapaporn, a Hmong from Chiang Mai who married a daughter of the one of the HTNCD, said, “The history and the struggle here, I haven’t heard about them from anyone before. It is important, we will have to learn more about it. Anucha Sirinapawong also responded, “I always thought that my parents were controlled by the CPT and used by the CPT to fight against the government. But after I learned more deeply from our parents, I find that our parents joined the CPT to struggle for their lives and their rights.” (Pan Sang Rung, 2012)

To sum up, although the memory and memorial construction of the Hmong have not yet been successfully completed, they are visible to enough to point out that this is a reflexive practice of the Hmong after they were placed in a crisis of identity where their self-identification has not only been discarded through development programs, but also stereotyped in the mainstream memory discourse. Moreover, while state officials were able to secure the nation’s security through development programs, the Hmong find themselves living in an uncertain situation in their community, which has been designated as a national forest. Moreover, they settle there in fear of losing their land since the records of their land are written as “a record of land allocation for temporary resettlement and for making a living.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined why and how Doi Yao-Phamon has become a landscape of contested memories between the HTNCD or “Red Meo” and the government. I argue that the emergence of a contested memory in this Hmong community is a form of soft fighting between the dominant majority Thai as represented by the Thai government and

<sup>19</sup> In Thai: *nangsue anuyat hai chai thi din chua khrao puea yuasai lae chai tham kin*

a dominated minority, the Hmong. These contested memories are remnants of an unending war between minorities and the Thai state. Whereas before, state authorities and minorities such as the Hmong used weapons to compete with one other, now both use memories and memorials to impose their own versions of history.

The study reveals that the Thai government (through state officials) has attempted to marginalize the memories of the HTNCD by launching development projects to discard other counter-memories. This is a soft weapon of limiting local people's rights and legitimacy while enriching the state's sovereignty to extend control over the space and people. However, the HTNCD, whose past and identity were stereotyped and made forgotten from the memory scape of Doi Yao-Phamon today, are struggling to build a veterans' memorial to constitute their unwritten past – a contested one to the mainstream written past. It is the contents of the past that are contested and as a result, the HTNCD's memorial has not been built yet. However, according to leaders of the HTNCD, the memorial construction project is still in an ongoing process of negotiations. Thus, nobody can know what the memorial will be like in the future and when it would be constructed. It might take a generation to continue it.

It is this struggle over memories between the state officials and the TNDC (Hmong) that confirms Seksan Prasertkul's notion of the unending Cold War fight between the Leftists and the Rightists as he writes, “The War has not ended yet..., it's only the fields of fighting that have changed”<sup>20</sup> (Prasertkul, 2016: 56). I propose that memory and memorial construction and development programs are such new forms of fighting between the Thai authorities and the HTNCD.

<sup>20</sup> In Thai: *songkhram yang mai chop...sanam rop thao nan thi plian pai*

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