

# Heroes of the Plain of Jars: Hmong Monuments and Social Memory in Laos and America

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## Abstract

Political conflict in Laos during the Cold War or Vietnam War, from the late 1950s to 1975, involved two opposite political sides, the communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao government. As a major ethnic group inhabiting the battle area, leaders of ethnic Hmong in Laos were divided and joined both sides. During the Cold War, Thotou Yaxaichu was a prominent military leader with the Pathet Lao who passed away in 1961, while Vang Pao served the royal government and the United States Central Intelligence Agency. After the Pathet Lao took over the country in 1975, Faidang Lobliayao, who fought side by side with the Pathet Lao, became a key person in the new Lao government and died in 1986. Meanwhile, Vang Pao, who was a Hmong military leader under the royal government, fled to America and died in 2011. Recently, monuments of the three leaders were formally erected in Xieng Khouang in Laos and in California in the United States, respectively. The main objective of this article is to understand the social meaning of the establishment of monuments of the three former ethnic Hmong leaders in the two different countries. The author investigates the history of those leaders and relevant contexts. Concerning methodology, information was mainly taken from existing documents, media, and interviews. Based on the result of research, it is my finding that, internally, the building of monuments of former Hmong leaders in both countries has become a modern means of conveying social memory to younger Hmong generations on opposite sides of politics. Externally, the monuments express Hmong ethnic identity and create social space in the context of national ethnicity, in both countries.

**Keywords:** monument, social memory, social space, ethnicity, Hmong

## Introduction

“War creates heroes” is a famous Thai saying. Among the Hmong leaders in Laos, two decades of fighting between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government (RLG) from the late 1950s to 1975 involved Hmong “heroes” on both sides. Although after 1975 Hmong leaders on the two sides ended up living in different countries, Laos and the United States of America and eventually passed away, in the early 2010s, monuments honoring Hmong heroes were erected in both countries. For the Hmong ethnic group in Southeast Asia and western countries, building a monument is an entirely new symbol through which younger generations learn about and memorialize their former leaders. To me, monument building for former Hmong leaders in Laos and America is an effective means of reproducing social memory and creating ethnic space in the two countries.

Hmong people originally migrated from southwestern China to upper mainland Southeast Asia between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Culas and Michaud, 2004). In Laos, during the French colonial period and the Cold War, which together occurred in Laos over eight decades, from 1893 to 1975, a schism occurred between Hmong leaders on the opposing political sides, the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government (RLG). Since 1975, when Laos was finally taken over by the Pathet Lao, many Hmong leaders and citizens who fought side by side with the Royal Lao Government, supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States, became refugees in Thailand and were later resettled in western countries, mainly the United States (Quincy, 1988; Yang, 2004). Among the overseas Hmong, Vang Pao, the former prominent Hmong and RLG military commander who was supported by the CIA, was their hero, since he was not only an ethnic Hmong military leader in Laos but also a Hmong leader in the United States. Furthermore, during the past few decades of adjustment to American society, he played an essential role in various aspects of life among the Hmong until he passed away in early 2011 (Vang, 2011). During that same year, several Hmong communities in

California initiated General Vang Pao monument-building projects. Up to 2016, monuments honoring Vang Pao have been erected in three Hmong communities in California.

In Laos, not only was the Royal Lao government overthrown in 1975, but the communist Lao government also attempted to expunge the history of the country which occurred during the periods of French and American domination and to construct a new history and social memory. In making the new national history, in addition to the historiography of key leaders, monument building by Lao People's Revolutionary Party leaders became an essential part of the plan. Moreover, Kaysone Phomvihane, the former prime minister who fought against French colonialism, battled CIA-supported forces during the Secret War in Laos, and eventually overthrew the Royal Lao government, as well as other former heroes who had worked closely with him, have been honored as national heroes (Evans, 1998). In 2014, monuments of seven former national heroes were sculpted and transported to be set up in different provinces in Laos. Among those seven national heroes, two are ethnic Hmong: Thotou Yaxaichu and Faidang Lobliayao. Their monuments were built in Mouang Paek or Phonsavan and Nong Het of Xieng Khouang province, respectively.

Traditionally, in western countries, social memory of a local or national hero is reproduced for remembrance through various means, including publications, monuments, architecture, media, oral histories, etc., while Asians mainly rely on rituals, shrines, oral histories, etc. Robin Jeffrey (1980) pointed out that before the coming of the British, there were no statues in Southeast Asia of mortals. Because of colonialization, modern monuments of great heroes in Southeast Asia, either national or local, have been influenced by western culture and architecture and now include sculptures and statues (Evans, 1998). For the Hmong ethnic group in Southeast Asia and America, monument construction of Hmong heroes was not done until the early 2010s, because of the lack of knowledge or skill as well as the previous context of the Hmong community in Southeast Asia often moving around.

Monuments symbolize the memory of a deceased hero or an important earlier incident. Memory is the way in which people retain their past experiences. Memory can be both individual and collective. Any definition of "memory," according to Gedi and Elam (1996: 43), must revolve around the ability to retrieve some impression of some past experience or past event that has had some impact on our minds. In the twentieth century, when the idea of memory gained interest, memory was no longer about data and story storage, but was recognized as being complex and continuously being produced and reproduced. It is complex because memory is selective, added on to, and reconstructed at both the individual and collective levels (Jedlowski, 2001: 29-44). At the individual level, talking about past memory involves explaining present perceptions and the potential of oneself. The perception of an individual, therefore, is essential, since it allows each person to access one's past truth and identity, which differs from that of others (Connerton, 1989). Maurice Halbwachs (1992) pointed out that memory not only reflects past stories but also connects the past to the present and the future. Therefore, how and when each person chooses to tell his or her story depends on whether that person uses or does not use such memory. The selected memory of each person or society may be done either consciously or not consciously, and can be done for different purposes.

As for collective memory, it is shared and constructed by members of a society. Although remembering is an individual matter, social groups, such as families and ethnic groups, determine what is memorable and how it should be remembered. Social memory could account for the sense of pride, pain, or the shame we sometimes experience with regard to events that happened involving groups and communities to which we belong (Zerubavel, 1996: 209). Therefore, memory persists within social contexts. However, only some of them were chosen to be remembered, while some were intentionally forgotten. Those selected memories have been utilized for particular purposes (Hutton, 1993). Hence, memory is culturally constructed and is linked with emotion, which affects the construction of meanings, especially when people in a society face a crisis (Tanabe and Keyes, 2002).

As an ethnic minority group in both Laos and the United States, the Hmong people faced a crisis not only in maintaining Hmong ethnic identity but also in being accepted by mainstream society, since they are often perceived and treated as minorities and marginalized people. In Laos, the Lao Issara (Free Lao) adopted a policy, beginning in the 1950s and later after taking over the country in 1975, of categorizing the population as Lao Loum or lowland Lao, Lao Theung or midland or upland Lao, and Lao Soung or Lao of the highlands or mountain tops. People were broadly defined into these categories. For example, the term Lao Soung generally refers to the Tibeto-Burman and Hmong-Mien speaking groups. Those include the Hmong, Mien, Akha, Lisu, Lahu, Lolo, and others in the far northwest of Laos (Evans, 1999; Lobliayao, 2017). However, in 2002 the Lao government, represented by the National Front for Reconstruction, officially declared that there are 49 recognized ethnic groups in the country. In the meantime, the government has officially rejected the idea of three main categories of Lao Loum, Lao Theung, and Lao Soung, and suggested using ethnic groups within the majority population and the ethnic groups within the minority population, instead of majority and minority ethnic groups (Sounkang Neolao Sangxad, 2009: 12). Although Hmong leaders have sided with the Lao Issara or Free Lao, which later became the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, ever since 1950 some Hmong have become leaders with high positions in the central government. However, Hmong in Laos are still perceived by mainstream Lao society as recent immigrants, minority groups, and highland people. In addition, some of them still maintain close relationships with relatives who settled abroad and are believed by the government to be a threat to national security. Therefore, the ethnic Hmong in Laos are still a minority and a marginal group. They are still struggling to become more politically, socially, and culturally accepted into Lao society. Repeatedly, Hmong in Laos are creating more social space within the country.

In the United States, Hmong were originally political refugees from the Vietnam War and principally the Secret War in Laos, beginning with the fall of Laos in 1975. When the Hmong were first

being settled in the United States, the majority of Americans did not understand their background, especially their involvement in the Secret War in Laos. Some questioned why there were Hmong in the United States. They also questioned why there were other groups of refugees from Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Many Hmong faced problems of discrimination by some Americans. Problems of adapting to American society, such as Hmong involvement in gangs, hunting conflicts, and political movements linked to the homeland in Laos, caused tensions with American people in general. From time to time, Hmong have had to explain, in various forms, why they had to leave their home country in Laos for America. Many young Hmong also questioned when they could refer to themselves, and be referred to by others, as "American," instead of simply "refugees." Although Hmong have successfully established good relationships with many government officials and ordinary American people, at a certain level after four decades of living in the United States, many are still struggling to create more social space there.

In addition to physical and mental space, social space is a concept that many social scientists focus on. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1985: 723-724), "the social world can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring strength, power within that universe, on their holder. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space." Furthermore, social space is constructed or could be produced by agents. Therefore, for Henri Lefebvre (1984), space is social. It is related to the social relations of human beings. Social space, hence, is always a product of society, because of activities operated by agents. He also identifies three 'moments' in the production of space, which serve as his conceptual tools. These include spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation. Such prominent evidence of monument erection in Laos and the United States becomes representative of space and also the space of representation of present groups of leaders in producing social space for ethnic Hmong in the two countries.

## Historical Background

In order to understand the recent construction of monuments of former Hmong heroes, it is useful for us to know the historical background of those three leaders, especially the context in which outside political influences divided the Hmong in Laos into political opponents during the years between the 1930s and 1975.

According to Yang Dao (1972, 1975), cited in Lee (2004) and Culas and Michaud (2004), historically, Hmong began moving into Laos between the 1810s and the 1820s. Mai Na Lee (2015) pointed out that the Hmong migrated from Tonkin (northern Vietnam) to modern-day Laos during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. She also stated that large numbers of Hmong arrived in Xieng Khouang in the 1850s (Lee, 2015: 80-81). Similarly, Culas and Michaud (2004) estimated that large numbers of Hmong people migrated into Laos during 1860s to 1870s. Although Hmong people settled in various places in what is now northern Laos, Nong Het of Xieng Khouang province became a key place for the Hmong, because of the essential roles played by Hmong leaders in warfare and politics during the French colonial period and the Cold War.

After the French occupied Laos in 1893, the French colonial regime gradually infiltrated different areas at diverse levels. In Nong Het of Xieng Khouang province, according to Khammee Naotouayang (2014), the French representative first appointed Chongyia Yajxingxong to be *kiatong* or head of a sub-district there. After having been *kiatong* for three years, Chongyia was not satisfied with his position under the French colonial government, and so he left for a mountain village in 1906, without even notifying the French representative of the area he was responsible for. Later that year, Kaxeng Moua was appointed by the French representative to be *kiatong* in Nong Het. It should be noted that the uprising of Hmong leader Vue Pachai against the French colony's heavy taxation occurred along the border area of Laos and Vietnam from 1918 to 1922. According to Gedi and Elam (1996: 43), Vue Pachai, known also Chao Fa Pachai, was arrested by the French

colonial military and beheaded, while his secretary, Lo Xongze was put into prison where he eventually died. After Kaxeng Moua died in 1913, Lo Bliayao replaced him. As stated by Mai Na Lee (2015), Lo Bliayao held the *kiatong* position until he passed away in 1935. Ly Fong replaced him, and later Touby Lyfong, the son of Ly Fong, became the leader of Nong Het from 1945 to 1961.

As a result of the political context of French colonialism, the Japanese invasion during the Second World War, and later the Cold War conflict, Hmong leaders in Laos were divided into opposing sides, mainly led by the Lo and Lee clans. Prominently, Faidang Lobliayao joined the Lao Issara or Pathet Lao side, led by Chao Souphannouvong, and Thotou Yaxaichu became a bold military leader on the communist side between the mid-1950s and early 1960s (Naotouayang, 2014). On the opposite side, was Touby Lyfong, the Hmong political leader, while Vang Pao was a key military commander supported by the French and later by the United States CIA from the late 1940s to 1975 (Vang, 2011). The civil war in Laos persisted relentlessly during the Cold War. Finally, in 1975, the Pathet Lao took over the country, and Faidang Lobliayao became a key person in the new government. On the opposite side, Touby Lyfong was arrested by the Pathet Lao and sent away for re-education in Houaphanh province, where he was eventually put to death. Vang Pao, however, fled the country and eventually settled in the United States. Although there were many Hmong leaders on both sides of the conflict involved in political conflicts and wars between the 1940s and 1975, I would like to focus on the historical background of the three leaders whose statues have recently been erected in Laos and the United States. They are Thotou Yaxaichu, Faidang Lobliayao, and Vang Pao.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although their Hmong names are *Thojtub Yajxaivtsu*, *Faivntaj Laujnliajyob*, and *Vaj Pov*, using Hmong RPA, their names are spelled differently, such as *Thojtub Yajxaivtsu*, which may also appear as *Thojtub Yaj* (Taotu Ya or Thotou Ya) or *Tubyaj Xaivtsu* (Touya Xaichu), etc. However, in this chapter, I use "Thotou Yaxaichu," as written in Lao by Naotouayang (2014). For Faidang, some writers may use the spelling, "Faydang."



**Thotou Yaxaichu**

Thotou Yaxaichu (*Thojtub Yajxaivtsu*) was born in 1916 in Nong Sam Jae village, Nong Het, Xieng Khouang province. Thotou and his wife had six children. Panee Yathotou, the current speaker of the National Assembly in Laos, is the third child. According to Naotouayang (2014), Thotou grew up amidst the domination of French colonialism in Laos. He absorbed French ideas of domination by learning from his parents and relatives. Because of his personality, he became a security guard for the office of French Laos in Nong Het. In this position, he saw the oppression of French colonialism, especially heavy taxation on opium among the Hmong.

In 1940, Thotou Yaxaichu and four friends decided to leave their guard positions to join the anti-French movement, as Vue Pachai and Lo Xongze had done during the period 1918 to 1922. The anti-French movement in Laos was part of the Indochina movement against France and covered Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In Laos, the movement was based in Houaphanh province and part of Xieng Khouang province. It was there that Thotou Yaxaichu met key leaders of the Lao Issara, such as Nouhak Phoumsavanh, Souphannouvong, Kaysone Phomvihane, and others. Through the bold fighting of the Batu company led by Thotou Yaxaichu, in 1946 Nouhak Phoumsavanh, the president of the Committee on Anti-French in the East, took the company to join the joint Lao-Vietnamese military forces in this region. Later that year, the Batu Hmong troop was named the Chao Fa Pachai battalion in Xieng Khouang, while other troops based in other areas fought against the French.

As stated by Naotouayang (2014), the Chao Fa Pachai battalion, led by Thotou Yaxaichu, completely controlled Xieng Khouang province in 1953. Later that the year, Thotou Yaxaichu led his troops to join other Free Laos-Lao Issara troops, together with Vietnamese military, fighting against the French at Dien Bien Phu. The defeat of the French marked the end of French colonialism in Indochina. Laos, however, continued to face civil war and entered the Cold War. Therefore,

between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s, Lieutenant Colonel Thotou Yaxaichu led the Chao Fa Pachai battalion, which fought against the Royal Lao Army, including Major Vang Pao, who was based in Xieng Khouang province. The battle areas included the Plain of Jars and Nong Het. According to Naotouayang (2014), the Chao Fa Pachai battalion, together with the Vietnamese or Vietminh troops, defeated the troops of the Royal Lao Army many times, and Thotou Yaxaichu became the Hmong chief commander in the Plain of Jars. Meanwhile, Lee (2015) stated that Vang Pao set his military base in Long Tieng and frequently sent his soldiers to fight against the Communist Pathet Lao and Viet Minh on the Plain of Jars.

However, Thotou Yaxaichu passed away on January 13, 1961, at the age of 45. He died in a vehicle crash on the road between Tha Thom and Tha Vieng, in what is now Saisomboun province while travelling to check the battlefield. His body was carried by helicopter from Khankhai in Laos and then to Moung Ving of Nghe An province in Vietnam, for examination. It was then driven along Road Number 7, from Nghe An province of Vietnam to Xieng Khouang province of Laos, to Nam Kang village, Nong Het district. The funeral was performed over a period of three days, following Hmong tradition (Naotouayang, 2014). Because of his reputation for bravery in fighting against the French and CIA-supported troops, even only for a short period, Thotou Yaxaichu was named one of the seven national heroes of Laos. The monument named after him was officially erected on February 26, 2015 (Hmongtv Lao, 2015).

**Faidang Lobliayao**

Faidang Lobliayao was born on April 5, 1910 in Pha Khao village, Kaeng Kwai sub-district, Nong Het District, Xieng Khouang province. He was the second son of Lo Bliayao, the *kiatong* or head of Nong Het between 1913 and 1935. The conflict between the Lo and Ly clans, especially Lo Bliayao against Ly Fong, resulted in the clash between Faidang Lobliayao and Touby Lyfong, from the 1940s until 1975. Externally, this conflict was also influenced by larger political contexts related to

the French colonial regime, the Japanese invasion during the Second World War, and, later the Cold War (Lee, 2015 and Lobliayao, 2017).

Between 1946 and 1950, because of the context of national political separation, Faidang created the Hmong Resistance League. He became a key Hmong person among the Lao Issara leaders who joined the communists in the jungles of Houaphanh province in northeastern Laos, sided with the Viet Minh, and were backed up by the Soviet Union. In opposition to the Lao Issara was the Royal Lao government, which was based in the towns, especially Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Touby Lyfong, the Hmong leader in Nong Het district, allied with the Royal Lao government, which was still being backed by French colonial power, although it was in its very last days (Lyfong, 1996; Lobliayao, 2017 and Vang, 2011).

Working closely with leaders of the Lao Issara, led by Prince Souphannouvong in the liberated zone in Houaphanh province, Faidang became one of seven anti-government or Lao Issara leaders, and one of the eight central committee members of the Lao Issara appointed in 1950. Ethnically, he represented the Lao Soung ethnic groups, while Sithon Kommadam represented the Lao Theung because one of the six articles of the first resolution stated that “ethnic groups in Laos are the Lao Loum nation, the Lao Theung nation, and the Lao Soung nation” (Lobliayao, 2017: 70). As a Hmong, he dressed proudly in Hmong costume for official photos with other leaders of the Lao Issara, even after the latter (also known as the Pathet Lao, which became the Neo Lao Haksat in 1965) and the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) in 1972, took over the country in 1975.

The Lao Issara became the Neo Lao Haksat during a national convention organized in January 1956, in Houaphanh province. Later conventions were held in April and June, 1964. Based on those conventions, Faidang Lobliayao was appointed vice president of the Lao Issara and the Neo Lao Haksat. After the revolution that resulted in the communist Pathet Lao taking power in 1975, he became a deputy chair of the High Civil Council of Laos. In 1979, the Neo Lao Haksat became Neo Lao Sangxat or Lao Front for National

Reconstruction. Faidang Lobliayao’s second position was as deputy chair of the Neo Lao Sangxat until his death on July 12, 1986, at the age of 76 (Lee, 2015 and Lobliayao, 2017).

Since Faidang Lobliayao was one of the seven key leaders of the anti-Royal Lao government movement, and later, the Pathet Lao or the communist government, between 1950 and 1986, he was honored as one of the seven national heroes of Laos. This honor came about through the resolutions of the National Central Party in 2002 and the announcement of the Office of the Central Party in 2014 on the construction of monuments for pioneer leaders of the Lao revolution. The 3.5 meter-high statue of Faidang Lobliayao was officially erected as a monument and celebrated in Thamsai village, Nong Het district of Xieng Khouang province on February 26, 2015 (Hmongtv Lao, 2015 and Lobliayao, 2017).

### **Vang Pao**

Vang Pao was born on December 8, 1929, in Houei Khi Thao village, Nong Het, Xieng Khouang province, to Phutong Neng Chu Vang and Song Thao. His father was a local official in his highland village. Vang Pao finished the third grade of Lao education in his home town, then worked as a courier for the Hmong leader Touby Lyfong, the Phouan Royal Prince Saykham Sobsaysana, and the French (Vang, 2011).

Vang Pao grew up during the French colonial period in Laos. He experienced two generations of political tensions between the Lo and the Ly clans, Kiatong Lo Bliayao and Ly Xia Fong, during the 1920s to 1930s, and also the rivalry between Touby Lyfong and Faidang Lobliayao from the 1940s to 1975. Vang Pao sided with Touby Lyfong, who was supported by the French and, later, the CIA.

Vang Pao’s military leadership potential was recognized by French Captains Bichelot and Fret when he attended military training school in 1946. He stood out among his classmates for his courage and tactical ability. A few years later he was chosen to enroll in schools in Luang Prabang and Vientiane to advance his military skills. Based in Nong Het and the Plain of Jars, he was sent to attack enemies in Sam

Neua and near the border with Vietnam many times. Later, he was known for fighting bravely against the Viet Minh and the Pathet Lao communists. In 1951, Vang Pao was promoted to lieutenant (Vang, 2011).

Although the French regime in Laos, which had begun in 1893, came to an end in 1954, the conflict between the two political sides in Laos continued because of influences associated with the Cold War, from the late 1950s to 1975. On the Royal Lao government side, which was supported by the CIA, the key Hmong political leader in Luang Prabang and Vientiane was Touby Lyfoung, while Vang Pao played the important role of the key Hmong military leader. On the other side, the Pathet Lao or the Lao communists were supported by the North Vietnamese and the Soviet Union. The key Hmong political leader was Faidang Lobliayao, while a prominent military leader was Thotou Yaxaichu, who died in 1961. The headquarters of the Pathet Lao side was in Sam Neua district, Houaphanh province, while military bases and movements were scattered along the border between Laos and Vietnam. Fighting between Hmong troops of both sides took place in Xieng Khouang province, especially the Plain of Jars and nearby areas.

Just a few years after Laos had become independent from French colonialism in 1954, the United States gained considerable influence in the politics of Laos, because of its concern about the advancement of communism in Southeast Asia, based on the domino theory. Beginning in 1955, the United States launched its military and economic assistance program in the region, including Laos. The CIA provided military training and support for the Royal Lao government, especially in Military Region #2, which included Xieng Khouang province. Military conflict was fierce in this area, especially against North Vietnamese communist troops.

In 1961, the CIA and Thailand's Border Patrol Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) fully supported Vang Pao and his troops. Vang Pao was promoted to the rank of full colonel that year and the Royal Lao Army gave him command of Military Region #2, which was comprised of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. In 1962, he was promoted to brigadier general in the Royal Lao Army. A year later, with

the support of the United States and Thailand, Vang Pao's headquarters was established in Long Tieng. In 1964, he was promoted to major general in the Royal Lao Army by Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma. Because of his close relationships with the United States and Thailand, in the early 1970s, he sent several Hmong younger people, including his sons, to study in Missoula, Montana. He made several visits to the United States and Thailand before 1975 (Vang, 2011).

Under pressure from the United States, a peace agreement between the warring sides was signed in early 1973. A coalition government was formed, but in early 1975, military-political tensions rose, and in mid-May 1975 General Vang Pao's top soldiers and their families were airlifted out of Long Tieng to the Thai military base in Nam Phong, Thailand. Over the next several years, other Hmong followed him to Thailand. As for General Vang Pao, under pressure from the Thai government several days after he arrived in Thailand, his family went to France. In early July 1975, he arrived in the United States, first in Washington, DC. Later he settled in Victor, Montana, since his sons and other Hmong children were there. In addition, he had a close relationship with the CIA operative Jerry Daniels, who was from Montana. In 1984, he moved to Santa Ana, California, and later on to Fresno. General Vang Pao was popular among the exiled Hmong, especially in America. He set up many organizations for educating Hmong and people from other ethnic groups from Laos who had become exiled in America. He passed away on January 6, 2011, at the age of 81 (Vang, 2011).

As narrated above, these three Hmong leaders were born, grew up, and were involved in political conflicts and wars in the same area, Nong Het district of Xieng Khouang province in northeastern Laos. The area is well known as the Plain of Jars, which has now become a popular tourism site in Laos. However, these Hmong leaders were allied with different political groups, namely the Royal Lao government and the Pathet Lao. Thotou Yaxaichu died in 1961, six years after the Pathet Lao took control of Laos in 1975, the same year that Faidang Lobliayao joined the new government. At this time, both Faidang

Lobliayao and Vang Pao and have passed away. Coincidentally, during the first half of the 2010s, monuments of the three former Hmong leaders were erected in both the United States and in Laos, based on former political affiliations. To me, the interesting issue is the social significance of the monument building of these three Hmong heroes in both countries.

### Monument Building of Hmong Heroes

Paul Connerton (1989: 2) argued,

We may note that our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is casually connected with past events and objects, and hence with reference to events and objects which we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present. And we will experience our present differently in accordance with the various pasts to which we are able to connect with the present. It is my argument that the setup of Hmong heroes' monuments in both countries is not only for young Hmong generations to have social memory of their former leaders but also to create social space amidst mainstream societies of Laos and America as well.

Despite the political conflict and civil war that continued in some remote areas after 1975, current key leaders of both sides have attempted to pass along their histories to younger generations. Younger Hmong people in Laos and in the United States have grown up and learned different versions of history, depending on oral accounts, as well as on texts and objects pertaining to former heroes and histories, as observed by Grant Evans (1998). As a collective memory, history is selective for remembrance. According to Zerubaval (1996: 286), "remembering, after all, is more than just a spontaneous personal act. It was also regulated by unmistakably social rules of remembrance that tell us quite specifically what we should remember and what we can or must forget." Specific peoples and histories were chosen to remember,

despite there being various possible people and stories that could have been emphasized. Practically, relevant means for honoring and remembering former leaders or events could be done in the form of publications, media, museums, and monuments. National monument building often involves governments. Monuments are built to remember the virtue of an individual who has contributed by devoting him or herself, or even his or her life, to a country or a particular cause. Moreover, an individual monument may be built to remind people of essential previous events, such as wars, disasters, etc. Monuments become prominent symbols for later generations to learn the history of an incident or an individual, particularly national or local heroes or heroines.

Concerning social space in the two countries, Hmong in both countries have received government permission to build monuments to former Hmong heroes. In the case of Laos, Hmong leaders were part of a national project to extol the contributions of national heroes. Among the seven national heroes, Thotou Yaxaichu and Faidang Lobliayo are the two former Hmong leaders who were honored by the national government. Meanwhile, in the United States, Vang Pao has been honored through monuments by Hmong communities, in cooperation with local state authorities. These monuments promote the construction of social memory for both Hmong and non-Hmong people in the two countries. My concerns include who the key groups or agencies were, why those monuments were built, and what the processes of monument building were. Specifically, I would like to examine the social meaning of monument building.

### The Lao Government and Monument Building Projects

In order to praise heroes who fought against the enemy, the Pathet Lao, just a few years after its establishment, initiated a meeting titled, "Heroes and Competition Fighters throughout the Country" ("*Vilaxon Le Naklop Khengkhanh Thoua Pathet*" in Lao). The meeting, which occurred between January 15 and 21, 1956 at Dan village, Mouang Soui, Houaphanh province, was the first time that the national heroes of the



Lao Issara or Pathet Lao side were honored, even though their headquarters was still located in the jungle, and fighting against the Royal Lao government side had increased, just as had the conflict in Vietnam because of the Cold War. Twelve comrades who were officials, soldiers, and civilians had been chosen to be national heroes and competitive fighters. Comrade Noulue, a Hmong from the Pachai military unit, was awarded the Medal of Freedom 3<sup>rd</sup> Class. However, after the communists took over the country, at the party meeting in Nongbon, Mouang Xaisettha in Vientiane in 1979, the Lao government differentiated the term “national hero” (“*Vilaxon Haeng Xat*” in Lao) from the term “national competition fighters” (Mattariganond, 2014).

In 1996, the Ministry of Press and Culture set up a team of scholars to examine and explore monument building for the national heroes, so that people in the country would remember their bravery and respect their contributions to the country. Three former kings were selected, including King Fa Ngum, King Xaisetthathirat, and King Anouvong. The monument of King Fa Ngum was completed in January 2003, on the occasion of the 650<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lan Xang kingdom, while the monument of King Anouvong was set up in 2010, on the occasion of the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vientiane capital (Chinnasaeng, 2015). As pointed out by Zerubaval (1996), remembrance is about what we should remember and what we can or must forget.<sup>2</sup> Jumping from the past time to the recent period of the communist revolution, leaders of the Pathet Lao were named in monument building, in order to promote the public image of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party and the government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

Erecting statues as national monuments aims to emphasize social memory for later generations. In addition, I would argue that erecting monuments of Hmong ethnic leaders is the creation of social space in the Lao nation-state. One of the means of creating modern

<sup>2</sup> In making the history of Laos, the exiled Laotian leaders praise the former Royal Lao government leaders, such as the late King Savang Wattana, Prince Boon Oum, Prince Suvannaphuma, and General Vang Pao, etc., while the Pathet Lao leaders try to forget this since they opposed the revolution.

national history that benefits the Lao government is by building monuments to remember earlier national heroes who fought or worked on their side of previous conflicts. It could be said that the cases of former Chairman Mao Zedong in China and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam influenced the Lao government’s decision to create a national hero through promoting Kaysone Phomvihane, the first prime minister and secretary of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (Evans, 1998). An initiative to build half-size statues of Kaysone Phomvihane and put them up in every district and provincial center of the country began in 1995, three years after he died. In addition, full standing statues of Kaysone, five meters high, were sculpted in China and transported to be set up in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Houaphanh, and Luang Prabang provinces between the years 2000 and 2002 (Chinnasaeng, 2015). Later, a statue of Nouthak Phounsavanh was also set up in Savannakhet province, and one of Sithone Kommadam was established in Paksong district of Champasak province. In 2014, five additional statues of national heroes were molded in China and transported to Laos to be erected in various provinces. These efforts are all part of the national agenda for honoring these leaders and conveying national memory to the public.

On February 23, 2014, in front of the Kaysone Phomvihane Museum, in the capital city of Vientiane, Ms. Panee Yathotou, the speaker of the National Assembly and Mr. Thongloun Sisoulit, the deputy prime minister, chaired a ceremony to send statues of five national heroes to be set up in different provinces. Those included Phoumi Vongvichit and Touya Xaichou (Thotou Yaxaichu) in Moung Paek or Phonsavan district of Xieng Khouang province, Faidang Lobliayo in Nong Het district of Xieng Khouang province, Sisomphon Lowanxai in Paksanh district of Bolikhamxai Province, and Phoun Sipaseut in Kaysone Phomvihane district of Savannakhet province. These people were pioneering leaders who staged a revolution to overthrow the old Royal Lao regime in 1975. The project was intended to set up statues of key national heroes by the end of 2015, in order to celebrate two historical anniversaries, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

foundation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. An additional aim was to celebrate the upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in early 2016. Still another was to encourage people to learn more about and pay respect to places of importance to the national revolution, the work of national heroes, and the national history tourism sites (<http://www.pasaxon.org.la/Index/24-2-15/Content3.html>). The politics of selecting these heroes, events, and sites, Oliver Tappe (2017: 58) argues, is intended by the party-state "to further shape Lao national identity and build national statehood legitimacy," and to create a new national "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). Also, it is about the politics of representation (Tappe, 2011). Importantly, and as already mentioned, some of the pioneering leaders chosen were Hmong: Thotou Yaxaichu and Faidang Lobliayao.

In order to praise the virtue of national heroes for public acknowledgement, the ceremony of sending statues of Thotou Yaxaichu, Faidang Laobliayao, and three other Lao heroes was performed in front of the Kaysone Phomvihane Museum in Vientiane on February 23, 2014. A procession of vehicles accompanied those carrying the statues of the five heroes when they left Vientiane in the morning. In Xieng Khouang province, the monument of Faidang Laobliayao was officially set up on February 26, in Nong Het district, while the one of Thotou Yaxaichu was put up on the following day in Phonsavan district. High-ranking government representatives, who were Hmong and Lao, and came from both the national and local levels, attended the setting up of events in Xieng Khouang province. In both places, Ms. Panee Yathotou,<sup>3</sup> the speaker of the National Assembly, was the chair of the ceremony. Mr. Jaleon Yiapaoher, the chair of the National Social Science Institute who is also Hmong, co-chaired. The other officials on the committee were provincial governors and heads of districts.



**Figure 1** The monument of Thotou Yaxaichu in Mouang Paek or Phonsavan town  
(Photographer: Souknida Sautouky)



**Figure 2** The monument of Faidang Laobliayao, facing Nong Het town  
(Photographer: Souknida Sautouky)

<sup>3</sup> Ms. Panee Yathotou is the daughter of Thotou Yaxaichu, one of the two Hmong heroes.



**Figure 3** Front view of monument of Faidang Laobliayao, full Hmong dress  
(Photographer: Souknida Sautouky)

Regarding Hmong ethnic identity, though the bronze statue of Thotou Yaxaichu is in military uniform, the one of Faidang Laobliayao is in Hmong dress, which he often proudly wore at official events. The participants of the two monument-erection events, Hmong people in both towns and nearby areas, attended the events proudly dressed in colorful Hmong costumes,<sup>4</sup> while the two Hmong chairs wore Lao clothing, as both styles officially represented the Lao government at the events. The ritual ceremony was mainly performed following Lao tradition, which did not feel like a major contradiction for the Hmong participants who attended.

<sup>4</sup> Nong Het and Phonesavan were known as “Hmong towns,” due to the density of the Hmong population in the two districts.

A Hmong television program of Lao National TV broadcast both events. In addition to providing a brief history of the contributions of the two Hmong heroes, the program also interviewed Hmong political leaders and participants who were closely related to both heroes. The government officials emphasized the contributions of those heroes to the country’s revolution and nation building. Therefore, the aims of building the monuments included honoring those national heroes so that later generations would remember their great contributions, as well as promoting tourism. Hmong villagers, according to the interviews, were very proud that the national government had decided to set up statues of their relatives. Some felt that the government had awoken their father or grandfather from the grave and put him in a standing position to govern the town and take care of everyone. Furthermore, the setting up of monuments also recalled memories of those heroes and will serve to educate the younger generations regarding the contributions of the two heroes and Hmong history in the area (Hmongtv Lao, 2015).

For social memory consequences, I had the opportunity to interview Lee Yang (2016), a Hmong man in Vientiane. He proudly said that the building of two former Hmong leaders’ monuments in Laos was a source of pride for the Hmong people in Laos. The monuments served to acknowledge that Hmong people are part of the country and that they, not only the former leaders but also young generations, are willing to fight against the enemy and die for the country. Furthermore, the building of two monuments of Hmong heroes by the state government signifies the recognition of the existence and roles of Hmong people in the national revolution that took place from the 1950s to 1975. The unveiling of those two Hmong monuments to the public would enable people to learn and understand more about Hmong contributions to the country. Indeed, the setting up of those statues, the broadcast on national television channels and radio stations, and details appearing in newspapers would certainly change the perception of some of the Lao majority toward Hmong people, since they are different from the negative stereotypes of the Hmong that appeared in the past (Yang, 2016) (Baird, 2010).



However, while some of those former political and military leaders were honored by the setting up of statues, other pioneers and key leaders were not chosen to receive such an honor. Questions among civilians and soldiers who fought side by side with those heroes were concerned why those people were not also honored through the national monument construction project. Interestingly, many biographies of former soldiers and leaders have been published by their descendants, as surveyed by Mattariganond (2014). Yet, the national government also has policies and projects to survey and honor revolutionaries throughout the country. Many have been presented with medals of different ranks. In addition, the national Lao Revolutionary Cemetery (“*Sousan Nakhop Pativat Lao*” in Lao) was constructed at Kilometer 24 of Road Number 13 going south, on the occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of commemorating national revolutionaries between 1946 and 2016. A small stupa was provided for each revolutionary, and ashes enclosed in them and their photos put on them, following Lao tradition. Though the cemetery is “to honor revolutionaries with various ethnic backgrounds,” some Hmong people wonder why the space chosen was not considered suitable for the Hmong tradition of burial. Indeed, the bodies of some high-ranking Hmong officials were not allowed to be buried at this site over the last few years. Therefore, national memory statues and sites for honoring national revolutionaries are still selected depending on power negotiations and the political roles of the descendants of those being honored. Although ethnic Hmong in Laos have successfully created social spaces at the national level, a gap between ethnic minorities and mainstream groups still exists.

### **Hmong Communities and Monument Building in America**

In a free society like the United States, monuments of both national and local heroes, or even groups of people who died during a particular event, can be built in order for people to remember them. Monuments can be built by state governments, local governments, or local communities. If the monument is going to be built in a local place, however, it is usually necessary to get approval from administrative leaders at the city or county level. Coincidentally, monument building for

the two Hmong heroes in Laos took place around the same time as monument building dedicated to Vang Pao in the United States. It began just a few years after he passed away and before the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the time when he led Hmong people from Laos to reside in the United States. In California, three monuments of General Vang Pao have so far been built, in Fresno, Chico, and Stockton.

In Fresno, according to Pao Fang (2013), chair of the General Vang Pao Monument Project, after General Vang Pao died in early 2011, Hmong communities in Fresno had the idea of building a monument for him. Initially, they planned to have only a stone plaque, but later they decided to construct a monument. The aim was to complete the monument in time to celebrate the Hmong New Year in Fresno in late December 2011, since it is a major event that attracts Hmong people from throughout the country. Two months before the New Year, two teams worked together, one making the sculpture and the other working on the landscape for building the Long Tieng village and the Plain of Jars, so that those items could be put together to symbolize the legacy of General Vang Pao as the hero of the Plain of Jars. Subsequently, after the unveiling of General Vang Pao’s sculpture, there were many complaints from Hmong people that it was too small and not very detailed or exquisite. Therefore, the committee worked again to plan, design, and set up a replacement. The new one, which is 10 feet tall, is three times larger and is made of cement and fiberglass. It was placed at the Fresno Fairgrounds, where the Hmong people throughout America annually gather for New Year celebrations. After the new monument was set up and decorated with jars, the place was named in Hmong, *Tiaj Rhawv Zeb, tebchaws Asmesliska* or the “Plain of Jars in America.”

During an interview with Pao Fang, he explained that Hmong people were persuaded, both in Fresno and by visitors to Fresno, to visit and pay respects to General Vang Pao, in order to memorialize him and learn about his great contribution (“*nco txog nws txiajntsim*” in Hmong) to the Hmong people and the world. Regarding the issue of building many monuments in Fresno, Chico and Stockton, Pao Fang



said, “America is a free country. Each city and county has its own policy and decision-making process. Moreover, Hmong people live in different places throughout the country, so it is impossible to be limited to only one monument of General Vang Pao” (Fang, 2013).

In Chico in northern California, the first statue of General Vang Pao was completed on December 8, 2012. However, on October 2, 2014, it was vandalized by somebody who didn’t agree with the local authorities who granted permission for Hmong people to set up the monument in front of city hall. The Hmong leaders in Chico went to talk with city administrators and they agreed to help build a new one. The new statue, made of bronze, is 5.6 feet tall, and the base is 2.5 feet wide. The objective is first to remember General Vang Pao’s contribution; the second, to remember Hmong soldiers’ contributions, and finally to help American people know about and understand why the Hmong people came to America. It was set up in front of the Chico city hall, where the only other monument is that of General Vang Pao. According to Ray Thao (2015), the Americans agreed to allow the monument to be set up because the Hmong are good friends with the American people and are well known them. The present monument was unveiled on September 12, 2015.

In Stockton, the monument of General Vang Pao was built by Lao Family Community Empowerment Inc. Planning began in 2011 and it was completed in March 2016. Dr. Chouyengther Xiong, was the chair of the Central California General Vang Pao Monument Project. According to him, since General Vang Pao used to be invited to open the Hmong New Year celebration each year when he was alive, and since he often met with local government authorities, after he died, leaders of the Lao Family Community Empowerment Inc. agreed to build a monument for him. Hmong community leaders in Stockton consulted with local authorities at San Joaquin County and they agreed on this project since were impressed with General Vang Pao when he visited Stockton. Subsequently, a committee was formed for fund raising, consulting with General Vang Pao’s family, and contacting relevant government agencies.

The objective of building General Vang Pao’s monument is to keep his history or legend and the Hmong legend alive among future generations so that the Hmong people would have dignity and be liked and protected by others (Xiong, 2016).



**Figure 4** A statue of General Vang Pao unveiled at the San Joaquin County Fairgrounds, Stockton, California on March 28, 2016  
(Source: Suab Hmong News, April 18, 2016)

The bronze sculpture of General Vang Pao in Stockton is 10 feet tall and the base is 6 feet wide. At the base, there are three panels, the first one is about his legacy in Laos, with photos and stories about Hmong and American soldiers. The second panel is about his Hmong life, including his contributions to the Hmong people, with photos in Hmong dress. The last one is about western life, with photos of him in a western suit. The left hand of the statue holds a book, symbolizing his support for education and development while the right hand reaches out in front of him, symbolizing his love for his people. On the front of the book, it is written, “Knowledge is power, education is the key.”

After taking five years to prepare, the monument of General Vang Pao in Stockton was finally unveiled on March 28, 2016. The cost of the project was around US\$300,000. According to Xiong, the more

monuments Hmong people build, the better, since when he was alive he visited and loved many Hmong communities. Therefore, after he passed away, monuments for him should be built in many Hmong communities so that Hmong elders would be able to see and pay respect to him at each place.

I had an opportunity to interview some Hmong Americans regarding the building of Vang Pao's monuments. A young student from Chico said that he is very proud that a monument of Vang Pao was built there, even though the Hmong population there is not large compared to that of other cities in California. The building of the monument in front of Chico city hall has made young Hmong people in America interested in learning about their own history and Vang Pao's contribution to Hmong people and to America in general (Lor, 2017). Similarly, a Hmong female student from Chico University stated, "I have never visited the monument, but my parents have. What we are told is that General Vang Pao was a great leader who led Hmong people to America. My parent's generation holds him in great esteem, but not our young generation. Nowadays, we learn about his virtues from the internet and publications rather than from his statue" (Her, 2017). Among the generation who had worked closely with Vang Pao in Laos and later settled in the United States, things are different. I talked with a Hmong man in Sacramento who said that wherever a monument of Vang Pao is built, it is good for both Hmong and non-Hmong people to remember his great leadership, both in Laos and America. One of many Hmong Christians, he said, "If I get a chance to visit the monument, I will pray for God to help him, even after his death, and his family members, since he fought side by side with the CIA and finally took Hmong people to live in the great country of America" (Vang, 2016). Thus, it can be said that among the heterogeneous Hmong American population, there are diverse points of view toward the construction of Vang Pao's monuments. Not everyone pays serious attention to the monument, although community leaders worked hard to set it up, with the intention of enabling younger generations to learn, remember, and honor their late leader.

With regard to the negotiation for social space of ethnic Hmong in America, Hmong community leaders in these three cities became quite accomplished at dealing with local state officials, especially those who were authorized to allow them to build a Vang Pao monument in public places. However, this has not happened at the national level. During Vang Pao's funeral in Fresno in January 2011, his family and key Hmong leaders asked for permission from the US government to bury him at Arlington National Cemetery in the state of Virginia, but their request was eventually rejected. Yet, some Hmong leaders still aim to have a monument honoring him in the US capital so that more American people would see and recognize him as a national hero. According to Pa Ma Thao, a former soldier from Minnesota who attended the opening ceremony for setting up Vang Pao's monument in Chico,

There are already three monuments of General Vang Pao. We, the Hmong people, should have only one. Other people will look down on us if we have too many. Indeed, my thought is that it will be very good if we have only one monument of General Vang Pao in Washington, DC (Thao, 2015).

But as of now, Hmong leaders in America have not succeeded in making Vang Pao a national hero, nor have they been able to introduce Hmong ethnic identity to non-Hmong people. Among non-Hmong people in Chico, I was able to interview an American student from that town who spent her semester in Chiang Mai. She said that American people in that town do not know much about Hmong people, since the Hmong population in Chico is not large. Most Americans do not know who General Vang Pao is or why his statue was set up in the compound of the Chico city hall office. That is the reason that someone vandalized the first statue, after which the Hmong community leaders built the second one (Malcom, 2017).

## Conclusion

The Plain of Jars is a well-known tourism site in Phonsavan district of Xieng Khouang province, Laos. Previously, it was the battlefield where

Hmong soldiers of the two political sides of the Secret War in Laos fought between the late 1940s and 1975. 1975 was the turning point for the communist Pathet Lao, as they were able to take over the country, while leaders of the Royal Lao government and many civilians fled to Thailand and were eventually resettled, mainly in third countries in the west. The United States is the country where the majority of Hmong refugees from Laos settled. During the past four decades, Hmong leaders who formerly played essential roles fighting on both sides of the conflict have gradually passed away. Their contributions to the countries of Laos and the United States and to Hmong people in both countries have been officially praised by national and local authorities. In the early 2010s, monuments of Thotou Yaxaichu and Faidang Laobliayao were established in Xieng Khouang province. Meanwhile, monuments of Vang Pao were put up in three cities in California. The initiative in Laos is part of the national party-state agenda, while in the US, it is a civil affair. However, I found common social meanings in both countries. That is, both relate strongly to social memory and social construction of space.

First, the building of monuments of these three Hmong heroes, while in different countries, signifies the meaning of social memory reproduction for Hmong people in both countries. Traditionally, the virtue of Hmong heroes was conveyed to later generations in the form of oral history. Since the 1990s, stories of former Hmong heroes have been written and published in the form of books (Lyfoung, 1996; Naotouayang, 2014; Vang, 2011). Recently, in early the 2010s, monuments of those three former Hmong heroes were officially set up with the hope that future generations will learn about, honor, and remember their qualities.<sup>5</sup> Zerubavel (1996: 292) states, “the preservation of social memories need not depend on either oral or written transmission. After all, material culture plays a very similar role in helping us retain

<sup>5</sup> Monument building is a new social phenomenon among Hmong people in Southeast Asian and western countries. Hmong people even confuse the Hmong terms for “statue” and “monument.” According to interviews, besides the English and Lao terms, Hmong TV reporters and leaders in both countries use different terms. Those include *Pej Thuam*, *Mlom*, *Tus Duab*, and *Qauv Mlom Puab*, etc.

them. Consider, for example, the mnemonic role of ruins, old buildings, souvenirs, antiques, and museums.” This article has discussed the role of monuments in reproducing social memory in Hmong societies in Laos and the United States. These monuments and the history of those heroes involve collective memory among Hmong peoples in the two countries.

As Zerubavel (1996: 204) noted, “the notion of a collective memory implies a past that is not only commonly shared but also jointly remembered (that is, ‘commemorated’). By helping ensure that an entire mnemonic community will come to remember its past together, as a group, society affects not only what and who we remember but also when we remember it.” Between Hmong leaders who played important roles in setting up the monuments in the two countries, the history and virtue of heroes of the opposing sides are completely ignored. Within each country, although there are other key leaders who sacrificed themselves by contributing to the country, they were not honored through the construction of monuments. Such circumstances were also observed and discussed by Evans (1998) and Tappe (2011, 2017).

Second, the appearance of Hmong heroes’ monuments, because of either state or local initiatives, signifies the creation of social space for the Hmong ethnic group in both countries. As pointed out by Bourdieu (1985), interaction between agents or groups of agents in the social world always relates to social space. Furthermore, social space is constructed or could be produced by agents. Social space is the production of humans, based upon social relations (Lefebvre, 1984). Within certain societies, social space is different between agents or cultural groups. In the context of Laos, Hmong used to be defined as highlanders or Lao Soung who were viewed as “the other” and thus, as primitive. The social space of ethnic Hmong was limited when compared to that of mainstream lowland Lao society. The contributions of Thotou Yaxaichu and Faidang Lobliayao to the revolution of the country since the early 1950s have proven that the national government recognizes Hmong people together with the ability to elevate current high-ranking



Hmong authorities, so their monuments were included with others in Laos. Consequently, based on the existence of two monuments of two Hmong national heroes, younger generations of Hmong people are proud of their former leaders and have gained self-confidence about living in Laos. One good example is that most Hmong in Laos retain their ethnic Hmong names and surnames/clan names in official documents, unlike the Mon-Khmer language-speaking ethnic groups in Laos and the ethnic Hmong in Thailand.

Regarding Hmong in the United States, the building of Vang Pao's monuments has created more social space for them, as well. Yet while Hmong have been settled in America for four decades, they are still perceived as refugees who snatch the jobs of American people and benefit from the taxes paid by American people. Some of them have even been told by everyday Americans to go back to the country of their birth – which happens to be the United States. Previously, Hmong people used various means, such as conferences, exhibitions, publications, alliance organizations, etc., to have American people understand and accept them. Building monuments of their former leader, General Vang Pao, has become a means of creating more social space, understanding, and recognition for the Hmong ethnic group in American society. Although most Americans do not know much about the existence of Vang Pao's monuments, many local state authorities had met the former Hmong leader, and become involved with the procedures allowing monument-building projects to move ahead, including working closely with local Hmong community leaders, so they have come to understand the Hmong people more than they have in the past.

At the national and international levels, I would argue that the Hmong media, especially Hmong television programs and various types of Hmong social media, play significant roles in spreading awareness of the existence of the three monuments of Hmong heroes. Nonetheless, Hmong in other countries who do not share a common history with those in these two countries are also being absorbed into sharing the sentiment and being proud of those leaders, though not as much as Hmong in the

two countries. Furthermore, in the case of Laos, tourism has been recently promoted for both domestic and foreign tourists. Revolutionary historical sites, such as caves, battlefields, museums, monuments, etc., have been promoted as tourist attractions (Tappe, 2013). Tourists who are both Hmong, either from Laos or abroad, and non-Hmong have the opportunity to visit the monuments and learn about the contributions of those Hmong heroes. Hence, the building of these monuments in Laos and the United States both reproduces and constructs social memory for later generations. Moreover, the monuments have become a symbolic means for creating more social space for ethnic Hmong people, not only in the two countries but also worldwide.

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