Lisa Whalen’s Notes from Sources on Hmong History and Culture

Hmong Creation Stories

Original Sin
Human beings were once immortal. However, sin and mortality entered the world when a woman ate a white strawberry and drank from a stream forbidden by God (Quincy, *Hmong*, 22).

Tower of Babel
This story is virtually the same as the one recorded in the Bible. It explains that all people were once a unified race and spoke the same language. However, when they built a structure to reach heaven, God struck it down and made it so they spoke different languages. They then scattered to all parts of the earth (Quincy, *Hmong*, 24-24).

Flood Story
A massive flood covered the earth. A man who found out it was coming from a mole who dug a hole to hide from the floodwaters tried to tell others, but they didn't believe him. He hid all of the seeds he'd need to plant after the flood in a tree trunk. He created a boat and led animals and his children onto it. After the flood, his children had no one else to marry, so they married each other. Their children were balls with hands and feet but no arms and legs, with eyes but no face. God told the girl and boy to chop their children into 18 pieces. The pieces were scattered and became the 18 Hmong clans (Hillmer 15-16).

Humans’ Earthbound Lives
Humans once lived in paradise and rose from their graves 13 days after their death. But cursed by a frog they killed, humans were set to live on earth, where weeds grew in their fields and weather couldn't be predicted. When they died, the spirit Ntxwj Nyug decided what form their reincarnated selves would take (Hillmer 16).

Rooster/Night Separated from Day
Kaj Yuam, the Heavenly Archer, killed nine of the 10 suns and eight of the 10 moons. The last sun hid. Humans were near death in the darkness, but the rooster called the sun back. The sun first hit its comb, which is now red. Roosters lead dead souls to the “Otherworld” (Hillmer 22).

Patriarchy
The Hmong king offered a deal to all the men: Kill your wife and bring me her head; I’ll give you my throne. The men refused to do it. The King offered the same deal to the women. Every single woman did it. The King declared women would never be in charge within Hmong society because no one knew whom they would kill (Hillmer 24).

How Hmong Settled in Mountains of Laos
One Hmong ancestor in China had a virgin daughter who became pregnant but did not give birth for nine years. Chinese leadership heard God would be born among the Hmong, so it ordered all pregnant Hmong women to be killed. A group of Hmong fled with the virgin (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 129). When the group found an empty hut, the girl announced she would give birth the next morning. If she were to disappear, the remaining Hmong should look at a designated banana stalk. If it had three flowers instead of the usual one, God had arrived and they must travel in the direction the stalk indicated to find Him. The group followed her admonition, and settled in the place that became the Hmong homeland (the mountains of Laos) (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 129-130).
Shaman
They do not have to perform ceremonies of spirit calling, funeral, marriage, or birth. They can perform a “light-faced shamanism” with no spiritual connection or a “dark-faced shamanism” which includes travel to the spiritual realm (Hillmer 17).

Like doctors of Western medicine, Shaman do not treat their own family members (Hillmer 17). The idea of shamanism originated in Siberia, another reason some researchers believe the early Hmong lived in Siberia before migrating to China and then to Southeast Asia (Quincy, Hmong, 29).

Religious/Spiritual Beliefs
Hmong believe in one supernatural being (god) who created all things on earth: Tswv Ntuj. Other spirits (deities) exist as well (Hillmer 15).

Each person has three souls and many spirits. Upon death, the first soul stays at the grave, the second is reincarnated by Ntxzwj Nyug, and the third returns to every place it has lived then back to its birthplace to retrieve its golden jacket (placenta) before resting forever in “the land of the ancestors” (Hillmer 18).

Demons reside at the bottom of lakes. Dragons reside in rainbows (Hillmer 19).

The feet of a dead person are covered in hemp shoes to protect his feet during a long walk through a land of poisonous caterpillars, which leads to Ntxzwj Nyug’s (the afterlife judge’s) home (Hillmer 37).

Viet Minh
The Viet Minh were a pro-communist movement and military force in Vietnam that included Hmong followers of Ho Chi Minh in Laos. They supported the Japanese when the French tried to take back Laos (Indochina) from Japan near the end of WWII. The Viet Minh were also supported by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) early on (the OSS became the CIA after WWII). The OSS supported Japan because, as a former colony, the U.S. opposed any country trying to colonize another and did not want France to colonize Laos (Hillmer 53-54). The Viet Minh also gained favor with the U.S. by rescuing downed pilot William Shaw. The U.S. rewarded it with weapons for returning the pilot to U.S. forces (Hillmer 54).

Pathet Lao
An antiroyalist movement in Laos developed circa 1948. Paul Hillmer claims it was “reared by the Viet Minh” (59). As part of the growing split in Laos, “Souphanouvong [the Red Prince], ousted from the Lao Issara [Lao Nationalist movement], joined . . . adding appeal and legitimacy to an otherwise obscure, Viet Minh-backed splinter movement” (59). The Pathet Lao became a brutal force fighting for communist rule; it sought to eliminate the Hmong from Laos (Hamilton-Merritt).

ChaoFa or Chao Fa
_Hmong ChaoFa Federated State_
The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, created at The Hague in 1991, has recognized the existence of the Hmong ChaoFa Federated State (HCFS) since July 1998 ("Hmong," Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization). HCFS covers a horizontal rectangle in the north-central region of Laos (or Laos People’s Democratic Republic, LPDR) that stretches from border to border. Hmong people in HCFS face persecution from the LPDR government, military, and citizens as a result of helping American forces during the Vietnam War. Additionally, HCFS is “facing environmental concerns as gold mining, illegal wood logging, and dam building have reached record numbers” ("Hmong," Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization).

UNPO “is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organisation. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognised or occupied territories who have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their environments, and to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts which affect them” ("About UNPO").

**Chao Fa Resistance**

The phrase “Chao Fa” is Lao for “god of the sky” (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 6). Various sources disagree as to whether or not a group of “Chao Fa bandits” continues to attack and fight against LRDR forces. Some claim the people of HCFS are merely defending themselves against constant persecution from LPDR, while others claim small groups continue to fight LPDR military and government as a holdover from the war and a means of obtaining a nation of their own. Scholars of Hmong history define Chao Fa as “ethnic Hmong insurgents fighting against the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) government and Lao People’s Army (LPA) and their Vietnamese communist allies and supporters. This resistance began with the communist take-over in Laos in 1975 and is continuing up to now, albeit at a low level and with few remaining fighters” (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 4).

During the 1980s and 1990s, some members of the Chao Fa were supported by Tham Krabok, a Theravada Buddhist temple (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 8). “The last substantial group of Hmong refugees was sent mainly to the USA in 2004-2005 from Tham Krabok Temple in Saraburi, Thailand” (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 9). The movement essentially ended in 2002, after the leader who had taken over for Shong Lue Yang was assassinated. One man, Pa Chong Her, continues to lead a very small group of resisters to this day (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 9).

**Plain of Jars**

The Plain of Jars (PoJ) is a large expanse of flat land within the mountainous region of northeastern Laos. Its name comes from the collection of stone jars, some as tall as eight feet and weighing as much as three tons, scattered across the area. Historians do not know which
human civilization created the jars but have surmised they were used for burying the dead (Quincy 9). The PoJ became a central battleground in the CIA Secret War. Hmong fighters and American CIA officers fought the North Vietnamese Army several times as control of this region vacillated between the two sides. General Vang Pao, in particular, fought to gain and keep the PoJ within Hmong/American control. In earlier times, Pa Chay (sometimes spelled Pa Chai) also fought French military forces in this region (Quincy 594; Vang, Yang, and Smalley 43).

**Pa Chay/Pa Chai**

Pa Chai was a Hmong messianic leader who spoke out against French rule/colonization 40 years before the Vietnam War. A group of Hmong who supported the communist agenda was named for him during the war. The leader of the group was Gnia Nou Thao (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 43).

**Shong Lue Yang: The Mother of Writing**

*Introductory Overview*

Shong Lue Yang is the Hmong “Mother of Writing,” best known for inventing a written version of the Hmong language known as Pahawh. He was a messianic figure for the Hmong because he received instructions for creating the written language through a series of divinely-inspired dreams while he lived in Tham Ha, a village in North Vietnam, in 1959 (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 4; Quincy 299). He also led a spiritual movement that taught the Hmong about God and God’s plans for the future of the Hmong people (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 40-43).

*Brief Biography*

Yang’s father was Hmong and his mother was Khmu’ (a tribal people who still live in the lowlands of Laos). He was born and lived his early life in the area of North Vietnam (Quincy 299). Followers attest to his Messianic/divine nature by explaining that he was a “typical uneducated Hmong peasant farmer” who went on to devise written scripts for both the Hmong and Khmu’ languages at the same time (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 1; Quincy 299). His philosophy and written language survived in part because his primary disciple, Chia Koua Vang, published a book explaining Shong Lue Yang’s divine intervention, spiritual beliefs, and written script (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 1-2).

Yang’s parents were killed when he was just over one year old. He lived with relatives for a short time until the rest of his relatives died from either illness, starvation, or violence inflicted by communist forces in Vietnam and Laos. His written script and spiritual teachings became so popular, however, that communist leaders and Vietnamese military officers became nervous about his growing influence and tried to kill him. He fled into the jungle in 1963. He continued teaching while moving frequently through Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand due to repeated attempts by communist forces to silence, capture, or kill him (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 43).

Shong Lue Yang married on January 15, 1965, and spent a few years teaching in his wife’s village (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 70-73).

Captured by Vietnamese soldiers, Shong Lue Yang remained imprisoned from 1967-1971, until a group of his students rescued him (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 168-175).
He was assassinated in February 1971 while at home with his wife and a close friend (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 5). Though his wife survived being shot and was brought to a medical center, she soon died as a result of her injuries (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 179-185). Shong Lue Yang knew the assassination attempt was coming, so he gave his writings to followers and sent them away from Nam Chia to spread his teachings (Quincy 401).

**Divine Intervention**

Receiving *Pahwah* began when Shong Shong Lue Yang’s wife, who brought him lunch as he worked in the field each day, was struck down by a whirlwind. He considered this event the following day and heard a voice, but no one was within sight. Then “he received a slap in the face, so hard he saw stars. The voice spoke again: ‘I am God, your father, who sent you to be born on earth as a human begin. You are not crazy, but you must do what I tell you to do’” (Quincy 299). God then indicated that He’d sent Shong Lue Yang to earth to “save humanity, to create the Pahwah, and institute a new morality” (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 143).

While smoking opium during the following days, Shong Lue Yang received the *Pahwah* and also located a buried cash of silver, which he used to build a house for worship (Quincy 299).

Among the feats that led the Hmong to accept Shong Lue Yang as a messianic figure are the following:

1) Shong Lue Yang’s status as an uneducated farmer coupled with his ability to create written scripts for two languages (Hmong and Khmu’) simultaneously and over a short period of time (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 34).

2) Shong Lue Yang’s predication of an attack by communist forces. He told the Hmong about it and advised them how to prepare. As a result, when the attack occurred, the Hmong fended it off successfully without any injuries to Hmong fighters (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 75-89).

3) Chia Koua Vang’s (Shong Lue Yang’s primary disciple) lack of sleepiness and fatigue despite working in the fields all day and learning *Pahwah* from Shong Lue Yang most of the night.

4) Shong Lue Yang’s announcement and demonstrated proof that an ancient Hmong taboo no longer applied. The taboo was that any adult who consumed breast milk or food that had come in contact with breast milk would be struck by lightning. Individuals who tested the taboo in Shue’s presence were not struck (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 98).

5) On a journey, Chia Koua Vang (first author of the book and primary disciple of Shong Lue Yang) lost sight of the trail he was to follow. He mentally asked Shong Lue Yang for help. An unusual-looking bird appeared just in front of Vang, and each time he tried to capture it, it moved a few yards ahead. By following it, Vang found the trail. Then the bird disappeared (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 110-111).

6) Shong Lue Yang predicted his own assassination by Hmong leaders but allowed it to happen (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 179).

*Roles and Leadership*
Shong Lue Yang’s teachings attracted thousands of Hmong from all walks of life when he settled in Long Cheng, Laos, in 1966. This included some high-ranking officers in Vang Pao’s military (Quincy 301). Even Vang Pao revered Shong Lue Yang, sending troops and money to rescue him the first time he faced capture or execution by communist Vietnamese military troops (Quincy 301).

Once rescued (or allowed to escape by guards who had been converted by his teachings, as Quincy claims on page 400 of *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat*), Shong Lue Yang built a temple in the shape of a nonagon as God directed and continued to gather followers by the thousands.

Shong Lue Yang designed a flag for the Hmong (this source did not provide a description or image of the flag) (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 173).

**Spiritual Beliefs and Teachings**
Shong Lue Yang’s faith was known as Chao Fa (“Lord of the Sky”) (Quincy 401).

Shong Lue Yang taught that only one God exists for all of creation and humankind. God lives on the moon; his wife lives on the sun (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 93). Upon creating the universe, God chose a six-pointed star and a twelve-pointed star as homes for his sons so that humankind could live on the earth (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 92). In the 22nd year of creation, God turned the sun on earth to separate land from water by drying up some of the water and allowing the land to emerge from it (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 168). God then created four separate streams of air that rotated the earth to create cycles of light and dark (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 93).

God continued creating for many years. He created humans in year 35, scattered plant seeds in year 55, dried the sky to allow for growing plants in year 59, created rain in year 64, enabled vegetables to grow in year 74, allowed plants to reach maturity in year 88, and granted animals and humans the ability to eat plants in year 96 (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 168-169).

In year 102 of creation, two characters from Hmong folk tales created the **Plain of Jars**. In years 336-339 vampires were allowed to eat humans for a period lasting 139 years. Then, the Xeng Xai brothers (figures form Hmong folklore) killed all of the vampires and ruled over a peaceful empire for 130 years (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 169). During this time, Buddha (originator of Buddhism) created a lavish feast for the Xeng Xai brothers and gave them a Hmong alphabet, which Buddha then distributed worldwide (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 170-171).

After some time, God flooded the earth by cutting off two streams of air and tipping the world so water ran over the land (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 94-95). God sent the flood because people had become evil. After the flood, God promised never to flood the earth again because doing so killed innocents as well as sinners. Instead, he threatened to send fire ignited by weapons next time people turned evil so that only sinners would be affected (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 94).

Eventually God sent his sons to earth one at a time to communicate with and save humankind. Each changed the season as he arrived, so seasons on earth change 12 times and include 12 weather cycles (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 93). The sons went to a different parts of the earth to reach as many people as possible. Shong Lue Yang was one of these sons, though he was born and killed by humans three times before successfully accomplishing his role of accepting written scripts for Hmong and Khmu’ languages as delivered to him by God through a series of dreams (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 34). God and Shong Lue Yang called the Hmong script
Pahwah. God had decided in the beginning that the Hmong did not deserve Pahwah until they could demonstrate readiness in the form of compassion for all creatures, including humans and the pig into which Shong Lue Yang had been born for one of his earthly incarnations (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 43). God indicated that Hmong who accepted Pahwah would be blessed (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 34).

Hmong believe that evil spirits exist on earth and respond to any prayer uttered on days other than the 15th, 5th, or 25th of the month (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 100).

Shong Lue Yang advocated for traditional Hmong culture in its purist form. At Long Cheng, in particular, he railed against Hmong adaptation of Western materialism and against Hmong adopting Lao attire (women in saris and men in t-shirts and jeans). He succeeded in convincing the population at Long Cheng to return to traditional Hmong dress and string-tying (Quincy 301-302). String-tying is done at special ceremonies. Attendees tie strings around the wrist of the person at the center of the ceremony, such as a newborn baby or a person who is ill. Each string is a wish for happiness, health, and protection.

Controversies and Disagreement among Sources

Some sources claim Song Lue Yang was a shy and reticent figure who reluctantly accepted his role as teacher and messianic figure and taught only those who sought him out. Chia Koua Vang, the first author of The Life of Shong Lue Yang: Hmong “Mother of Writing” explains that every day for two months he asked Shong Lue Yang to teach him, but Yang refused. Finally, when it seemed the written script might be in danger of being lost forever because of the communists’ pursuit of Shong Lue Yang, he agreed to teach Vang the script and the spiritual truths God revealed to him (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 89). Vang then became Shong Lue Yang’s primary disciple and took notes on his teachings, which he then turned into the book titled The Life of Shong Lue Yang: Hmong “Mother of Writing” (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 1-3).

Sources who portray Yang this way indicate he showed no interest in choosing sides during conflicts between communist, Lao nationalist, French, and American interests in the region; rather, he sought to remain a neutral figure who carried out the role God conferred upon him (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 40-43).

Other sources, however, claim Shong Lue Yang sought to establish a religious movement. God led Yang and his followers of the movement to the buried silver bars to show they were God’s favored ones. These sources include Keith Quincy, author of Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat: The Hmong and America’s Secret War in Laos, and Ian Baird, author of an article analyzing the influence of Chao Fa movies on Hmong attitudes toward Laos. Quincy indicates that Shong Lue Yang spied on communist forces for General Vang Pao, which prompted those forces to seek his arrest and/or execution (301). Both Quincy and Baird claim Shong Lue Yang helped recruit Hmong fighters for the CIA in its Secret War in Laos (Quincy 301; Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 5).

A claim that Shong Lue Yang eventually declared himself the Hmong King appears in only one source: Ian Baird’s article on Chao Fa Movies (5).

1 It should be noted, however, that some scholars of Hmong history, especially Nicholas Tapp, author of “The State of Hmong Studies” in Hmong/Miao of Asia sharply criticize Quincy for misinterpreting elements of Hmong history and passing along information never cross-checked or analyzed for supporting evidence.
Though sources agree that Shong Lue Yang was assassinated in January 1971, they fail to agree as to who was responsible. An eyewitness told Chia Koua Vang that Hmong in Vietnamese uniforms shot Yang, his wife, and one other person in his home with an AK-47 to earn a one million kip ($2000) reward and a military promotion (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 183). Ian Baird and Paul Hillmer suggest General Vang Pao may have been behind the assassination because he viewed Yang’s growing influence as a threat to Pao’s own power and widely-recognized leadership (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 5). Quincy claims that not only did Vang Pao organize the assassination, he is also the person who had Shong Lue Yang arrested in 1967 (302).

Gnia Nou Thao
Thao served as a liaison between the Hmong and Vietnamese communist forces during the lead-up to the Vietnam War. However, when he heard that Shong Lue Yang was teaching Hmong a written script (Pawah), he gave approval for Yang to build a school for this teaching and a round house for worship. When communist leadership heard about the school, temple, and Yang’s teaching, they ordered Thao to arrest him. Instead, Thao gave up his position and left the communist movement (Vang, Yang, and Smalley 43).

Pa Chay
The wheat referred to in the title of Quincy’s Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat is “a tiny, fragile plant with bright blue flowers that blossomed at the end of the monsoon rains” and “had mysteriously sprouted in the mountain meadows” (Quincy, Harvesting, 44). It became symbolic of Hmong forces that “blossomed” when challenged by persecution and colonization and “mysteriously” found success against much larger and better-funded military forces.

Pa Chay was among the first and most well-known Hmong rebellion leaders. Born in China, he migrated to Vietnam at a young age (Quincy, Hmong, 126). An orphan taken in by the chief of a nearby village, Chay could speak and write Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao languages (Quincy, Hmong, 128).

In 1916, he had a vision of ascending to heaven and brought back symbols and a written script for the Hmong language (this was long before Shong Lue Yang’s written script) (Quincy, Hmong, 128; Quincy, Harvesting, 3). The vision also inspired him to lead the Hmong at Dien Bien Phu in a holy war against T’ai oppressors (Quincy, Hmong, 128). To build his fighting force, he extorted money from those unwilling to fight, built cannons from tree trunks, and developed gunpowder and explosives from bat guano (Quincy, Harvesting, 38-39). He ordered fighters to drink sacred water before battles to protect them from harm, and he conducted egg ceremonies in which each soldier wrote his name on an egg. Chay then put the eggs in a grinder. If they broke, it was a sign the soldier would be killed, so Chay withheld him from battle that day (Quincy, Hmong, 129). He had a virgin carry a white flag into battle insisting the flag had magical powers that would deflect French bullets (Quincy, Harvesting, 32-33). French officers claim the virgin carrying the flag was never hit by a bullet despite the massive volleys she walked through (Quincy, Hmong, 130).

Chay had a lot of early success against French forces. Eventually, he declared himself Chao Fa (Hmong King made by God). Along with his ruling council, he enslaved the Khmer and killed off ethnic Lao, burning their villages (Quincy, Harvesting, 39). The French defeated Chay’s forces in what came to be known as the “Mad Man’s War,” and Chay fled to safety with his family. He was assassinated by his own former disciples on November 7, 1922, to gain a reward from the French (Quincy, Harvesting, 41; Quincy, Hmong, 132).
To punish the Hmong for Pa Chay’s rebellion, the French demanded they pay in silver for each Lao, T’ai, and Vietnamese person killed as well as damage done to all villages (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 42). The Hmong went along with this at first but could not afford the total costs levied against them. They rebelled, and the French agreed to allow them more self-governance to avoid future conflict (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 43).

**Blia Yao Lo**

Blia Yao Lo was a Hmong leader who sided with the French against Pa Chay. He became very wealthy as a result of his connections to the French. He extorted money from the families of Pa Chay’s fighters and used his connections to get them out of French prisons. He also skimmed money from the French and gave it to Hmong workers (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 45).

Blia’s daughter Mai fell in love with Foug Ly (Touby LyFoung’s father) and married him against her father’s wishes. Ly severed all of Mai’s ties with her family once she was married. He also abused her physically (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 46). She committed suicide in 1922, further exacerbating a long-standing feud between the Lo and Ly clans (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 46). Blia lived to an old age but became an alcoholic and opium addict. The feud further intensified after Blia’s death, when the families battled over his estate.

**Touby LyFoung**

Touby LyFoung was a Hmong leader educated in lycee (French-run schools) in Hue, Vietnam, and an early mentor to General Vang Pao (Hillmer 44). He is a controversial figure because he became a millionaire by collecting taxes from the Hmong for the French and convinced many Hmong to side with the French against the Japanese during and after WWII. He also convinced the Hmong to turn against communist forces prior to the Vietnam War. At one point, he raised 3000 Hmong and took Xieng Khouangville from the Viet Minh, who had far more training and military hardware (78). When the French had to flee Japanese forces, LyFoung and his allies provided refuge (Hillmer 52).

LyFoung’s enemy (due to a clan feud) Faydang Lo supported Viet Minh forces. To combat them, LyFoung entered Hmong villages, identified Lo clansmen, and tortured and/or executed them to find out where Faydang Lo and his fighters were stationed (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 81). This was a primary cause of the divide that emerged among the Hmong: some sided with Lo and the communists; others sided with LyFoung and the French/U.S. (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 82).

LyFoung also helped the French establish exclusive buying rights for Hmong opium as a way to cut the Viet Minh out of the market. He hoped to make the French dependent on the Hmong and thereby improve education, status, and influence of the Hmong in French-ruled Southeast Asia (Quincy, *Hmong*, 141-142). He then used the funds he skimmed from opium transactions with the French to support Hmong military operations. The French offered LyFoung a place on the Opium Purchasing Board (Quincy, *Hmong*, 149). They came to call him “King of the Hmong” (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 88). Later, they offered him a position in the Lao coalition government, but fearing the appearance of being spread too thin or having divided loyalties, he suggested his brother receive the position instead. Additionally, the French gave LyFoung and his followers prime land in Laos and monetary rewards (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 84).

LyFoung’s reputation with the Hmong became tarnished as a result of his eventual distraction from official duties to pursue a “playboy” lifestyle. Many Hmong villagers became particularly disillusioned with and resentful of him when one tax collector he appointed demanded villagers slaughter animals and prepare enormous feasts for his visits, provide young women to satisfy
his sexual appetite, and surrender increasingly high fees so he could skim from the taxes he turned over to the French.

Vang Pao would eventually marry one of LyFoung’s daughters (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 104). LyFoung and his Ly clan maintained a feud with the Lo clan that existed for several generations (see above *Blia Yao Lo* entry for details).

LyFoung’s status fell when the French left and the Americans entered the scene. The Americans didn’t want to work with him because in their perspective, the French had worked with him and failed. The Americans didn’t want to fail (Quincy, *Hmong*, 155).

**Vang Pao**

Quincy portrays Vang Pao differently than other sources. Quincy portrays Vang Pao (VP) as a skilled soldier, military leader, diplomat, and manipulator who likely had the Hmong people’s interest in mind but was also driven by desire for personal power and wealth. Quincy discusses how VP overcame significant obstacles to rise to his position as general and trusted liaison to U.S. C.I.A. officers. Previously, VP’s Vang clan was stigmatized because in the past some members had married within their own clan; others fled to Vietnam to get out of repaying loans/debts to fellow Hmong. VP was also considered suspect because of his connections to Touby LyFoung, whose tax collectors abused their status and positions. VP benefitted personally from his connection to LyFoung, amassing wealth by becoming involved in the opium trade (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 243). VP aroused further suspicion by practicing nepotism, giving command of a key forward base to his brother-in-law, Chao Ly, who “robbed soldiers of their pay, beat them often, and executed troops for failed missions; also, he was haughty toward civilians, most of whom were his clansmen” (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 247). When VP refused to remove Chao Ly from command at the request of Vang clansmen, Chao Ly’s own soldiers killed him. These circumstances initially hurt VP’s reputation and influence among the Hmong. Quincy also claims that VP skimmed from soldiers’ salaries, although that hasn’t been substantiated or mentioned in other sources, and some of those sources doubt the veracity of Quincy’s claims [see footnote under entry for *Shong Lue Vang*, “Controversies and Disagreement among Sources”] (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 243).

Quincy also gives a more detailed account of VP’s marriages than any other source, which he claims reveal VP’s political savvy:

Vang Pao’s first marriage was to a strikingly beautiful woman from the Lo clan. She died young, leaving behind three children. Vang Pao married again for love, this time to a woman from the Thao clan. She gave him more children, but favored them over those from his first marriage. Concerned for the children’s welfare, Vang Pao married again, this time his first wife’s sister, May Lo, knowing she would give them [his children from the first marriage] the love they deserved. . . . He married Tru Ly to create blood ties directly to Touby LyFoung [to gain personal power and influence], then wed Chia Moua to gain the allegiance of her father Cher Pao Moua, the warlord of Bounam Long, a strategic stronghold north of the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao took his next wife from Sam Neua to form better relations with the Striped Hmong, and his seventh from Tase, a Moua enclave that had previously shunned his leadership. His eighth wife was a Lao woman, a concession to the ethnic Lao who nearly equaled the number of Hmong in the province [again to increase his influence]. His ninth and last wife was Zong Moua, the daughter of Cher Chao Moua, the chieftain of Long Cheng before Vang Pao made it his headquarters. With refugees spilling into Long Cheng and occupying land reserved
for Moua clansmen, relations with Moua villagers became strained. The marriage was intended to cool tempers . . . (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 246)

VP is also depicted as willing to gain power through assassination. Quincy claims VP “ordered an attack on the RLA [Royal Lao Army] provincial commander Colonel Khambou Boussarath” (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 246). He is suspected of orchestrating the murder of a man Bill Lair, the CIA officer in charge of the Secret War in Laos, who had selected as VP’s “understudy” (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 246). Quincy sums up this aspect of VP’s personality by concluding that “How many others he ordered killed is impossible to document, though one Hmong in his inner circle believed there may have been dozens . . .” (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 246).

It is important to note that Jane Hamilton-Merritt, author of *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*, portrays VP as almost saint-like: altruistic, generous, protective of his people, and ambitious only toward gaining freedom and autonomy for Hmong people. Other sources place him at various points along a spectrum that stretches between Quincy’s and Hamilton-Merritt’s seemingly contradictory depictions.

**General Giap**

Giap was a General and successful commander of Viet Minh forces. He was largely responsible for defeating the French military at Dien Bien Phu, which caused the French to give up their colonization efforts and leave Southeast Asia. Initially, the American government was happy about this development, as it had been supporting rebel forces fighting France because it opposed colonization as a general rule. However, France’s departure and nearly worldwide economic devastation after WWII allowed communist forces to build strength and draw the U.S. into a conflict that would become the Vietnam War.

Giap also put Ho Chi Minh in place as the leader of independent Vietnam (Quincy, *Hmong*, 144).

**Lao Royalty**

Unlike other sources, which outline the Lao royal family’s role in political and military events, Quincy’s *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat* provides information about their early lives and personal struggles and triumphs. When pieced together with information from Hillmer’s book, it provides a more complete picture of leadership in Laos.

Until Laos was colonized by the French, it consisted of three kingdoms (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 11). Eventually, the country unified under the leadership of King Sisavong Vong, whose “authority emanated from the Kingdom of Luang Prabang, the old royal capital” (Hillmer 53). His son, Crown Prince Savang Vatthana, was kidnapped by the Japanese and held for ransom, so on April 8, 1945, the King officially declared that Laos was no longer a French colony to secure his son’s safety (Hillmer 52). Vatthana would go on to become King from 1959-1975 (Hillmer 49).

Three other princes emerged from the Kingdom of Vientiane “the administrative capital” of Laos (Hillmer 53). Each followed his own path in life and leadership:

- **Prince Phetsarath**: oldest son and “European-educated viceroy who . . . had toured the kingdom [of Vientiane] on horse and foot, gaining a solid reputation as both a patriot and a peacemaker” (Hillmer 53). He went on to found the Lao Issara, an organization seeking Lao sovereignty (Quincy, *Harvesting*, 82). The King disagreed with Phetsarath’s desire to create an independent Laos, so he dismissed Phetsarath as viceroy and prime minister. “Phetsarath and the Lao Issara responded two days later by declaring
themselves Laos’s new government, ‘deposing’ the king” (Hillmer 57). Phetsarath’s forces were defeated by the French, and he fled across the Mekong River. Phetsarath’s brother, Souvanna Phouma, disassembled the Lao Issara in October 1949 (Hillmer 58).

Prince Souvanna Phouma
Phouma was the second son. He “earned two engineering degrees in France before returning to Vientiane as chief of the Architecture Bureau” (Hillmer 53). He supported a neutralist position, hoping to keep Laos out of conflicts between Western democratic and Eastern communist forces (Quincy, Harvesting, 82).

Prince Souphanouvong
Souphanouvong was half-brother to Phetsarath and Souvanna Phouma. He was educated by the Vietnamese and described as “ambitious, flamboyant, and academically brilliant” (Hillmer 53). “He had earned a reputation as a rebel, his resentment of authority fanned by childhood discrimination because his mother was a commoner” (Hillmer 53). He spent 16 years working as an engineer in Vietnam and married a Vietnamese woman who was a follower of Ho Chi Minh (Quincy, Harvesting, 73). For this reason, he identified more as Vietnamese than Lao (Hillmer 57). He hated the French because they paid him less than his French colleagues, who often didn’t have as much education or experience as he did (Quincy, Harvesting, 73-75). On September 3, 1943, he met with Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, North Vietnam, hoping to establish a partnership between the Viet Minh and the Lao Issara (Hillmer 57). He would go on to become known as the “Red Prince” because he later joined the Pathet Lao, which was created by the Viet Minh and advocated for communist rule (Hillmer 49, 59).

When the French retook Laos from the Japanese at the end of WWII, these three siblings went into exile in Thailand. Although the French offered them amnesty, only Sovanna Phouma accepted (Quincy, Harvesting, 82).

Disagreements and attempts to grab power among these three siblings served as a major factor in the development of Laos’s civil war, which spilled over into the Vietnam War.

Ho Chi Minh
Vietnamese by birth, Ho Chi Minh believed wholeheartedly in communism, learning “revolutionary tactics of Mao Zedong in China” as part of a 30-year study of Marxism, which also included time in France and the Soviet Union (Hamilton-Merritt 37). Seeing an opportunity in Japanese surrender and French weakness as a result of WWII, he took power and declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2, 1945, managing to give the false impression that he had U.S. backing (Hamilton-Merritt 38). The flag representing his republic was also raised in two Laotian towns on March 9 (Hamilton-Merritt 39).

Viet Cong/NVA forces established a supply line known as the Ho Chi Minh trail, which proved a key factor in U.S. inability to gain an upper hand in the conflict. NVA forces moved fighters, food, weapons, first aid, and other supplies along the route. It ran along the border with Laos, as depicted in the accompanying image (left). Because the U.S. government prohibited its military forces from entering Laos for all but two brief operations to destroy supply lines, disrupting the flow of supplies proved nearly impossible.

General Vang Pao

General Vang Pao (VP) served as a messenger for Touby Lyfoung when he was a boy (Hillmer 59). He was the first Hmong to graduate from the military academy of Laos (Hillmer 62). He led the “United Front for the Liberation of Laos” (UFLL) (Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat in Lao) (Baird, “Chao Fa Movies,” 6). However, some claim he’d been a wayward youth, caught stealing and ordered to attend school to avoid punishment and loss of reputation because of his strong ties to Touby LyFoung. He was also a close friend of Yang Thao Tou, a prominent Hmong Pathet Lao leader. “A Lao historian claims . . . Vang Pao might have come to the other [communist] side . . .” because of his early friendship with Yang Thao Tou, but Tou was killed in January 1961, curbing his influence on VP (77-78).

Early in his military career, Vang Pao was almost killed by the Lao soldiers he’d been put in charge of. They resented answering to a Hmong man (Hillmer 78-79).

In what seemed like direct opposition to the traditional purity Shong Lue Yang preached, VP advocated for adopting elements of Western culture, such as formal education, expanded roles for women, use of Western weapons and technology (hand-held radios and airplanes), and travel abroad (Quincy 302). He sought to unite the Hmong and help them assimilate into Lao culture, eventually becoming citizens of Laos (Quincy 9; Hillmer; Hamilton-Merritt). According to

Quincy, VP even urged Hmong to accept Buddhism to build relationships with ethnic Lao, many of whom were Buddhist (302).

Ly and Lo Clan Feud
The origins of the feud stem from the fact that Lo clansmen were regularly chosen as kiatongs (little kings) for villages. However, after villages in Southeast Asia had been settled for some time, the Ly kiatong arrived at one of these villages and refused to renounce his position and recognize the Lo kaitongs already in place (Quincy, Hmong, 64). Blia Yao Lo was kiatong for the Lo and was eventually placed in charge of all Hmong in Xieng Khouang. However, he skimmed money from a raise he negotiated for Hmong who created roads for the French (Quincy, Hmong, 125). When the workers found out, they organized a strike. Lo then encouraged the French to use military force to subdue the strike (Quincy, Hmong, 126). Pa Chay organized a rebellion against the French, but Blia Yao Lo helped the French defeat him by telling the French about the weaknesses in weapons and strategy (e.g., fuses on homemade weapons couldn’t be lit in the rain) (Quincy, Hmong, 131).

The feud heated up further when Blia Yao Lo’s daughter, May (sometimes spelled “Mai”), fell in love with Foung Ly. She married Ly against her father’s wishes in 1918. Blia made Ly his personal secretary, increasing the status and wealth of the whole Ly clan. However, Ly married another woman a few years later. When May complained the Lay favored the second wife’s sons over May’s, May committed suicide, for which Blia Yao Lo blamed Foung (Quincy, Hmong, 138). The French brokered an uneasy truce between the two clans, which held until Lo’s son, Song Tou, proved to be an incompetent leader for the region he was placed in charge of. When he was driven from office, the French allowed Foung to assign his French-educated son, Touby, as tasseng (governor) of Song Tou’s region (Quincy, Hmong, 138). The Ly clan then vowed to do the opposite of whatever the Lo clan did. For example, when the Ly clan allied with the French, the Lo clan allied with the Viet Minh (Quincy, Hmong, 148).
Works Cited


