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## **Ban Khee Thao, a Site of Political History, and a Symbolic Space of Resistance and Land Politics of the Hmong in Thailand**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to study a Hmong social movement that has its roots in the Cold War and is focused on their requesting the return of land concerning Ban Khee Thao. The community in question is located in the border area of three provinces of Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, and Loei in Thailand. In this study, Ban Khee Thao - a community that was physically dissolved during the Cold War - is a site of the Hmong political history and the imagined and symbolic space of resistance. A group of Phu Pattana Chat Thai, or Collaborators for Developing the Thai Nation (CFDTN), formerly with the Communist Party of Thailand, are focusing their efforts on requesting permission to go back to their domicile community or “qub zej qub zos” in Hmong, drawing on the Thai government amnesty policy 66/23 from 1980. The emergence of Ban Khee Thao and this social movement represent the Hmong being, which follows Edward Soja’s tri-alectics of Spatiality, Historicity, and Sociality, rooted by Lefebvre’s theory, and which are concerned with the social production of struggle. The Hmong being of social struggle, according to our study, demonstrates that the Hmong have a long history of struggling to adapt themselves to the political environment and diverse forms of domination and destruction. They have faced robbery and disease, the Cold War which has been running up until today and the symbolic struggle of land politics which social memory and political history are the site. This analysis of Hmong being emphasizes the heterogeneity of Hmong society and that the Hmong are not just a unified semi-nomadic group of tribal people, as is often presented in structuralist depictions included in some agrarian and cultural studies of the Hmong (people). Therefore, this study presents their diverse roles (that are) involved in each political situation.

### **Keyword**

Ban Khee Thao, Hmong being, Cold War, Communist Party of Thailand, Space of resistance land politics

## Introduction

*“Ban Khee Thao is a legend to the people. The river, the forest and the land have endless relations. We have long been nostalgic about Ban Khee Thao, as it connects to the Hmong traditional way of life”*  
*Nor Chai Lor, a former Hmong member of the Communist Party of Thailand, 2015*

The above quote depicts a moment in which social memory is evoked, a discursive practice used in this particular case by Hmong people to request permission to return to their domicile community or old home, “qub zej qub zos” in Hmong.<sup>1</sup> These comments reflect the will of some Hmong who have insufficient land due to the Cold War and state policies, to request the return of their land. In particular, we argue that the Hmong themselves diversely give meaning to land, not only as places where farming – economics – can occur, or cultural practices – rituals – take place, but as spaces that take on various meanings based largely on political context. Significantly, for the Hmong we write about, land has gone from being somewhere that was just being passed as people moved elsewhere, to being a homeland, and part of a nation state. Indeed, the Hmong have interacted with, lived on, and experienced land in different ways, thus leading to social memories that have been transmitted over generations and are valuable in supporting Hmong requests for permanent land rights, something that is against the so-called semi-nomadic tribe stigmatizing that has been directed at them. These meanings, however, sometimes contradict state land management policy, in which the state has taken spatial control in order to govern upland society through the concept of development. In 1959, the Hill Tribe Self-Help Settlement Project (Nikhom Sang Ton Eng Chao Khao) was established. The upland people, including the Hmong, were categorized beginning in the 1950s as Chao Khao, which has a similar meaning to the term hill tribe in English. Naming and associated civilizing and hill tribe discourses are important, as state power is employed to manage highland peoples through ethnic classification, particularly the Hmong in forested mountainous areas. The management of highland peoples and the Thailand political situation were fundamentally linked to circumstances of the Cold War, which caused stress and led to turmoil for the Hmong communities located along the borders of three provinces, namely Phitsanulok, Phetchabun and Loei. Ban Khee Thao is a village that was impacted by these circumstances, as the village was dissolved and its houses were burned down, and the villagers mostly ended up on the side of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). After fighting broke out, Ban Khee Thao became part of the battlefield, and the meaning of a Hmong homeland was altered to fit the political situation.

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<sup>1</sup> We use Hmong RPA to spell out Hmong words, since this is the most common system for writing Hmong internationally today.

The war lasted for 15 years, before it was ended by the state amnesty Orders 66/23 and 66/25, launched in 1980 and 1982 respectively. However, the consequences of the war have caused many Hmong to lose their land, which they cannot return to, despite the reconciliation policy declared.

During the past ten years, 2009-2019, Hmong who live in many communities have organized a series of movements about land. Land issues have become more intense recently due to the political circumstances. While progressive ideas were included in the 1997 Constitution of Thailand, it was, surprisingly, the September 19, 2006 military coup d'état in Thailand, that spurred the Hmong that this paper is focusing on. After the coup, Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont supported the idea to resurrect amnesty Orders 66/23 and 66/25, probably at least partially because his father was previously a key CPT military leader. Surayud's rise to power provided a chance for former communists, including many Hmong, to request permission to return to their previous homelands. This study, thus, intends to analyze the political circumstances of the Hmong, especially the group of Nor Chai Lor, who was previously with the CPT, to better understand how they have organized and how state agencies have responded to them. Land issues are problematized because the Hmong have lost their land due to political factors that are the consequence of the Cold War. This land loss has resulted in some of Hmong requesting to return back to their former domicile, Ban Khee Thao, located in the mountainous zone, which currently has been defined by the state as a national park. These former Hmong from Ban Khee Thao have applied the state amnesty Orders 66/23 and 66/25 to legitimize their claim, with them defining themselves as "Phu Ruam Pattana Chat Thai" or "Collaborators for Developing the Thai Nation (CFDTN)," who have to be supported due to the policy which led them to surrender. Those in the CFDTN are no longer communist terrorists; they are those helping to develop the nation. For this reason, the issue of requesting land has become our interest. With the goal of better understanding spaces of resistance through social memory, which reflects the power of relationships between different actors from the local to the national and the global levels, so to break apart our understanding of Hmong societies that are not culturally essentialized and have unilineal social tribal forms, as explained by structuralists and evolutionists.

## **Theory, Approach and Methods of Study**

### **Theory and Concept**

In this section, we outline the theory and spatial concepts that have been developed by Western theorists for examining Western circumstances, but which we contend can also be usefully applied to examine social phenomena related to the Hmong - the formation and the change of their communities, and the practices of community members in

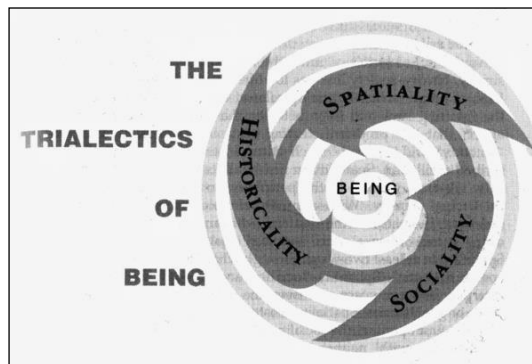
responding to different political environments over history. We are especially focused on the case of contemporary land requests that are conducted by a specific group of former villagers from Ban Khee Thao, who are the “Phu Ruam Pattana Chat Thai” or “Collaborators for Developing the Thai Nation (CFDTN)”.

Henri Lefebvre opened the gate and explored the limitless dimensions of the social spatiality (Soja, 1996). Lefebvre (1974) distinguished three types of dimensions, namely the physical, mental, and social spaces against the illusion of a dichotomic vision of materialism (objective) and idealism (subjective). He elucidated the practice of space as the tri-alectics of spatiality that are spatial practices (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational space (lived space) (Lefebvre, 1974, p.40). These three types of spaces influenced many scholars, one being Edward W. Soja. Soja (1996) applied this idea of spatial function to encourage his concept of “Thirdspace” which is a process directly linked to social struggle. According to him, the Firstspace is spatial practice or “perceived space” which are materialized, socially produced, empirical spaces (Soja, 1996, p. 66). The Secondspace is representations of space or “the conceived space,” which is the dominant space in any society concerning dominating spaces of regulatory and rely on discourses that are the representations of power and ideology, of control and surveillance (Soja, 1996, p.66-67). Meanwhile, the Thirdspaces are spaces of representation or “the lived space” which is the terrain for a generation of counterspaces, spaces of resistance to the dominant order, arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positioning (Soja, 1996, p.67-68). The social functi

on that have been applied by Soja as the “lived space,” is appropriate for explaining that the Hmong occupy a “space of the weak,” as they are marginalized and dominated under the political environment and the state. Indeed, the state has expanded its power into Hmong communities through the governing system and development project and land management, which can be seen to occupy “conceived space” or “space of the dominant,” space supervised by state agencies.

Soja’s concept of Thirdspace represents an ontological assertion as the tri-alectics of Spatiality, Historicity, and Sociality, which mean the “being” of social production and social struggle more than cultural essence and the unilineal social form of structuralism ( Soja, 1996, p. 70-71) ( Figure 1). The argument against structuralism is supported by Rosaldo (1980), as he demonstrated that timeless primitiveness is an illusion created by the preeminent methods of anthropological research that conceptualized cultural homogeneity and cultural continuity. For example, the essential notion of tribal culture that confined the Hmong to being defined as a migratory tribe bounded with agrarian practice, as Geddes (1976) asserted his theory of cultural ecology, labeling the Hmong as migrants of the mountains when they moved to another place because the soil

was depleted of nutrients. However, Scott (2009) argued that mountainous communities, or what he called the people of Zomia, occupied another zone or political unit that is not primitive but is the place where its residents are against being incorporated into state power, namely the classical state, the colonial state, and the independent nation-state.<sup>2</sup> For Scott, the mountainous landscape constituted a space of political resistance and cultural refusal, with the peoples there were seeking to escape from central power. However, other scholars have effectively demonstrated that these mountainous societies have been much more heterogeneous and variously connected with the lowlands and the state, than Scott imagined (Lee, 2015; Jonsson, 2014; Baird, 2013b). Thus, the condition of being lets us see the social ontology of each society in diverse senses, which helps us to understand how the Hmong socially produce heterogeneity for themselves and others. Moreover, we have to excavate how their being came to become geography of resistance when responding to the state power.



**Figure 1** Diagram of “being” by Soja (1996, p.71)

The theory of space refers to different ideas about the meanings and significance of space, which are related to the spatiality of human life: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography (Soja, 1996, p.1). Nevertheless the being of the places, communities and social events, which are the social phenomena relating to cultural spatiality, war, conflict, movement, and protest from the past to present are not only presented by elites, media, official documents and archives but can be reflected through social memory. In the context of this study, social memory was used as the main text to conduct history from below or “bottom-up history” ‘A people’s history’ focuses on the lives of ordinary people, with an eye to their struggles, everyday practices, beliefs, values, and mentalities (Port, 2015), so as to appropriately transmit the voice of the local people. Therefore, the concept of social memory is necessary to be claimed as an approach for

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<sup>2</sup>Scott wrote that the state of Zomia lost its power after the World War II.

historiography. According to Cattell & Climo (2002, p.3 - 4), social memory reflects a number of thematic perspectives as moral knowledge and practice, as a strategy to cope with traumatic experiences or to deal with ancestors and death, and as local forms of historical interpretation constituting present communities and identities and as strategies in economic and political struggles. Social memory can be a social reality, transmitted and sustained through the conscious efforts and institutions or groups. Moreover, Fentress and Wickman (1992) posited that social memory exists in many forms of expression as oral history by words, images, narrative and oral tradition. In this study, Ban Khee Thao is the main location of Hmong social memory as place of homeland, qub zej qub zos, which the Hmong Phu Ruam Pattana Chat Thai or CFDTN use to set the scene for making claims to return to their imagined homeland.

### **Research Site and Methods**

Our study was conducted as a multi-sited ethnography and ethno-history in which the 'site' does not necessarily mean a particular 'location' or 'place', but also a 'perspective' (Falzon, 2009) that is related to 'social memory' and Thirdspace. According to Falzon's review,

The essence of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space

(because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous). Research design proceeds by a series

of juxtapositions in which the global is collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations,

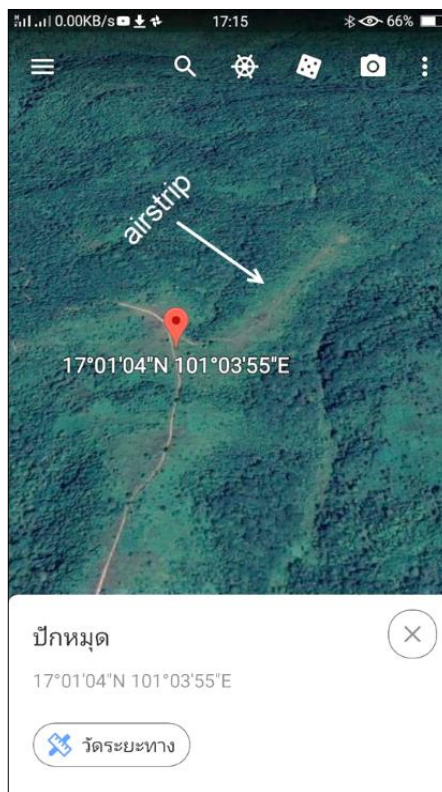
rather than something monolithic or external to them. In terms of method, multi-sited ethnography involves

spatially dispersed field through which the ethnographer moves - actually, via sojourns in two or more places, or

conceptually, by means of techniques of juxtaposition of data (Falzon, 2009, p.1-2).

Therefore, this method facilitates localized and larger scale analysis that deals with the study of connections between places and people within local and global contexts where meanings differ through time and space. Multi-sited ethnography is appropriate for studying Hmong societal and social phenomena, because - by our argument - the Hmong do not exist as isolated social units, rather, they constantly shift their connections in line with external societal shifts related to the external political environment. This is why we chose to investigate Ban Khee Thao (see Figure 2 and 3) - a setting with multiple spaces, both real and imagined, are correlated despite the village vanishing during the Cold War. Later, the emergence of its ideal space as qub zej qub zos or old homeland during the post-war period, where its territory was declared as part of Phu Hin Rong Kla National Park, keeping everyone

from being able to resettle. Thus, Ban Khee Thao is useful to study, as it has become a space or geography of resistance concerning Thailand's politics, including travelling internationally through cyber-space and multi social media. For example, YouTube and Facebook have become important mediums for disseminating information. Therefore, multi-sited conditions connect the past and present; to many ideas and ideologies; to the local, national and the international; to social networks. In this sense, we consider Ban Khee Thao - as a unit of analysis and social memory - to mean a process of assemblage that fluidly brings together social phenomena and perspectives across time and space.



**Figure 2** Location marker of Ban Khee Thao, an imagine site of symbolic space as space of resistance, pinned by the group of Nor Chai. The old airstrip built during the Cold War is still noticeable from this aerial view.



**Figure 3** Nor Chai describing the images, indicating the official leader, Nor Lwe, and the Hmong residents of Ban Khee Thao. According to Nor Chai, the lower picture shows horse racing at the airstrip built by the village.

There are several reasons why Ban Khee Thao was selected as the main site to examine Hmong being relating to “Thirdspace”. Firstly, Ban Khee Thao is a site that has been Hmong historically studied in Thailand’s context about the formation of Hmong community in the early period they moved to Thailand in which it has the root from two Hmong communities that were indicated their location being at Phu Lomlo and the adjacent areas by the western expedition<sup>4</sup>. However, these two Hmong communities were unknown about their origin even if they were mentioned in some works as the pioneer communities located in the far south of northern Thailand. For example the work of Bernatzik (1947), Mottin (1980), and Culas &

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<sup>3</sup> Interview 5 August 2016

<sup>4</sup> The first expedition was in 1927 by A. Kerr who noted that he found a large Hmong village at 17° north latitude on the heights of the Phu Lomlo on the Uttaradit-Lomsak route (as cited in Bernatzik, 1947, p.29). The second expedition was in 1928 by L.J. Robbins who indicated a track to a Hmong village during his expedition from Phitsanulok to Lomsak in 1928 (Robbins, 1928).



Michaud (2004) who only claimed their existence by referring them briefly which made a lack of information and details about them. Therefore, the Hmong who resided in these communities, as pioneers in the provinces of Phetchabun, Phitsanulok and Loei, did essentially lack of their social identifying in academic study which we need to find out to explain their history and political landscape. In this sense, we chose oral history as the main means to search for the Hmong being, by allowing them more of a voice through conducting personal interviews with local Hmong elders. In this context, Ban Khee Thao is multi-sited as it does not only mean an official village which has a fix physical site and boundary. In particular, it is also an imagined space away from where its former inhabitants partially live now, in Thailand's largest Hmong community, Khek Noi, in Khek Noi Sub - District, Khao Kho District, Phetchabun Province.

Secondly, an imagined place was proposed by the group of Nor Chai who are the CFDTN or former Hmong communists as their qub zej qub zos, in Hmong, or their homeland, to be a political setting that conducts their social movement about requesting land from the government, and the return to domicile place, following policies 66/23 and 66/25. This action connects the Thai political history during the Cold War, and their desire to request land instead of monetary compensation. This social moment is bounded with contemporary Thai politics, since General Surayud Chulanont paid special attention to the Hmong involved with the CPT, due to his father - Lieutenant Colonel Phayom Chulanont, a former leader of the CPT, especially after General Surayud became the Prime Minister of Thailand following the 2006 coup d'état. So, we need to know and present the history of this community more deeply than the simple representations provided by the state officials, or writers and elites who affectively dismissed the Hmong and claimed their power to represent them through constructing the histories of National Parks, memorial books, and so on. Indeed, these histories are a kind of colonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). Instead, we needed to consider where Ban Khee Thao is located and the political situation associated with it, so as to allow local voices to be heard since they lost their community in 1968.

For data collection, various informants were selected to help us to understand Hmong social phenomena, especially the CFDTN or former Hmong communists who are key to this article. Most of the first author's field research was done between 2013 and 2019, although he began some preliminary investigations in 2003. During the main research period, we collected primary sources of information, which can be seen as part of a process of producing social memory. Bottom-up history was also produced through conducting at least 100 informal and semi-structured interviews with many groups of Hmong people from Hmong communities in Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, Loei and Tak provinces, including Nor Chai and some from his group. The people interviewed were all over 50 years old, and included men and women. Our data collecting process involved

voice recording and note taking together with photographing and video recording. Personal participation in some rituals, ceremonies and meetings was also necessary. Deep official archives - pictures, materials, and documents - both from local and state agencies are collected including online data from the cyber space to support the process of multi-sited ethnography. Crucially, the first author is himself Hmong from Khek Noi Sub-District, while the second author has been studying Hmong and the CPT for a number of years.

### **The History of Ban Khee Thao**

At present, Ban Khee Thao, written in Hmong as *zos khij thauj*, is an empty place<sup>5</sup> - there are no more houses, and nobody lives there - and the area has been re-subjected as part of Phu Hin Rong Kla National Park, a conceived space, the dominant space set up by a state agency - the Forestry Department - and lawfully declared in 1984. The park was defined to create a new discourse - to create a place for studying nature and recreation (see National Park Act, 1961) - to serve society broadly defined. The history of the mountainous communities, the Hmong communities, which existed in the area before the park was declared, and even before fighting broke out in 1968 between the CPT and the Thai army, has been ignored.

Therefore, this section excavates more deeply to see the emergence of Ban Khee Thao, including the being of its social production under the Hmong, which is related to state power, even before the fighting broke out against the superficial history - ignorant history of Hmong space. To identify the existence of Ban Khee Thao and its people as Hmong of the CFDTN, Nor Chai and his group, has claimed to be their old homeland or *Qub Zej Qub Zos* - and need to make it to be a "conceived space" to become their real village as they request from the government.

### **The Emergence of Ban Khee Thao**

A long time ago, Bernatzik (1947) noted, "A. Kerr in 1927 found a large Meau village at 17° north latitude on the heights of the Phu Lomlo on the Uttaradit-Lamsak route" (Bernatzik, 1947, p.29). Does this western note refer to Ban Khee Thao? We have to investigate the possibility with some oral history from both Thai and Hmong elders. Firstly, we start with the etic story that justifies the existence of Ban Khee Thao, then an emic story will present the early period when the Hmong came to form their social space in this area.

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<sup>5</sup> Just the old airstrip built during the Cold War was still noticed in a long distance from aerial view (see google map).

An anonymous 84-year-old Thai informant<sup>6</sup> from Ban Mark Khaeng<sup>7</sup> once recounted that the first time he saw the Hmong in a large group was at Ban Khee Thao. During that time, there were around 30 houses in the village. Later, more Hmong gradually moved from Laos until the population increased up to 200 houses, making a big community. During his first visit to Ban Khee Thao, he was still young. He went with his mother to sell some fruit, pomelos. They exchanged 4 pomelos with opium which the Hmong grew at that time. The Hmong came to this area for growing opium. He recognized that the deputy district chief of Dan Sai District came to appoint a Hmong man at Ban Khee Thao to be the village headman. The important information from his words were that “During the time the Japanese came to our local area [during World War II], the Meo<sup>8</sup> were already living in Ban Khee Thao.”

According to the etic story above, it can be concluded that Ban Khee Thao existed before World War II, and that based on the note by A. Kerr, that the village was large. It is the term “Phu Lomlo” in A. Kerr’s statement refers to a well-known high mountain located in Loei<sup>9</sup>. This will be the task of the second oral history, which is more etic, and comes from Hmong elders who originate from Ban Khee Thao.

Yong Leng Thao, a 90-year-old<sup>10</sup> Hmong man from the first pioneer Hmong group to settle in the area said that the first Hmong group to come to Phu Lomlo were slaughtered by Thai robbers. Only a little girl survived<sup>11</sup> as a witness to recount the story to Yong Leng, who he met in a Thai village called Ban Mark Khaeng when she was old. She said that the robber killed all the people except her. They took her to Mark Khaeng. She married a man there and they had a son and a daughter.

According to Yong Leng, after the group was robbed, another group came to Phu Lomlo. This one was stronger and had learned from past experiences. Pa Nu Lor, who limped, led them.<sup>12</sup> He was well known as an elephant hunter. Pa Nu and his first pioneer group moved from the mountains of upper northern Thailand and Laos, for example, Nam Hung (Naj Hooj) and Phu Wae (Phwv Ves). They stayed a couple years at Phu Mieng (Phus Miab), before moving southwards to Phu Lomlo where they established a community

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<sup>6</sup> Interview on 29 June 2017 at Ban Mark Khaeng.

<sup>7</sup> It is in Kok Saton Sub-district, Dan Sai District, Loei Province.

<sup>8</sup> The local Thai people call the Hmong Meo.

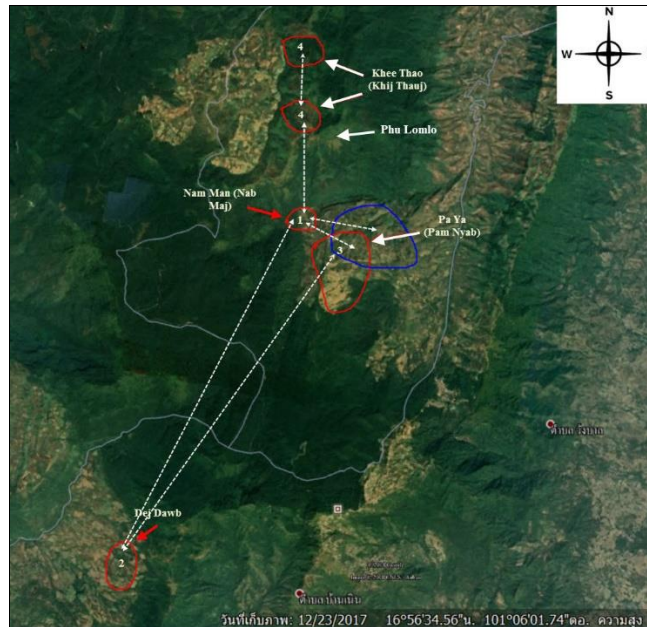
<sup>9</sup> Anyway, nowadays, it was officially remarked as the border of three provinces or “Roi Tor Sam Changwat”.

<sup>10</sup> Interview on 18 June 2003 at Ban Tabberg.

<sup>11</sup> Some informants said there were two girls left.

<sup>12</sup> This is why he was called “Pa Nu, the limping leg” (Paj Nus Ceg Tawv).

(Figure 4). Pa Nu initially chose to settle his community near the Nam Man Stream<sup>13</sup>, but did not cross it yet. They spent many years living in this valley and in some surrounding mountains before he passed away.<sup>14</sup> According to Yong Leng, the Hmong had crossed the Nam Man Stream by the time he grew up and married. Then they moved northward to settle on Phu Lomlo. Some of them spread to the other side of the mountain to the side of the Khek River (Dej Khej), which the Hmong called Dej Dawb, or Nam Khao in Thai, to cultivate opium.



**Figure 4** Dispersing settlement for opium cultivation, crossing the Nam Man Stream to Phu Lomlo and side of Khek River, forth and back moving.

The movement to Phu Lomlo was explained by Nia Blia Cha,<sup>15</sup> a niece of Yong Leng - who was over 80 years-old. She recounted that the Hmong moved to Phu Lomlu where they set up a village called Ba Ka (Bav Kam<sup>16</sup>) where they encountered robbers. The robbers often came to their village. This resulted in some Hmong separating and moving elsewhere. Some moved further to Khee Thao. During that time, some Hmong elders from

<sup>13</sup> This stream flows down to Dan Sai City to Nam Hueang, a demarcating river between Thailand and Laos.

<sup>14</sup> A story that circulates among the Hmong is that Pa Nu reincarnated as a lowland Thai. Some people claimed that they met him and that he said that he was Pa Nu.

<sup>15</sup> Interview on 1 September 2018 Khek Noi.

<sup>16</sup> This village's name is understood in Thai as Ban Klang, it was acknowledged as a Hmong village by the Thai elder interviewed from Ban Mark Khaeng too.

Ba Ka went down to contact the lowland Thai community. However, when they came back, they found that many were infected with an epidemic. After that, the villagers got sick and died so they scattered to live elsewhere. Nia Blia Cha moved with her families to live in Khee Thao. Then the robbers - the team of Seng Oo <sup>17</sup> - came back again to rob them. The robbers went to rob every Hmong village in the area. At that time, the Hmong had the first female village leader appointed by district chief. Her position was called "House Wife Leader" (Niam Me Bab), and her name was Nia Pa Ki. She was the wife of Pa Ki Thao. When the robbers went to rob the community, at Red Man village (Naj Maj Liab), she ordered some men from Ban Khee Thao to kill the robbers there, which they did.<sup>18</sup>

From the etic story of the Thai elder from Ban Mark Khaeng and the emic story of Yong Leng Thao and Nia Blia Cha, we can conclude that there is a linkage to the note from A. Kerr about the existence of a Hmong village. However, the village A. Kerr noted in 1927 is more likely to be Ba Ka or Ban Klang than Khee Thao, which separated from it later - because of the remarkable 17° north latitude <sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated that the Hmong had been located in the Phu Lomlo area since before the reign of King Rama 7. Moreover, Ban Khee Thao has its roots from the movement of the generation of the first pioneer group, "Pa Nu, the limping leg". The emergence and social being of the Hmong society is bound with the upland Thai communities, like Mark Khaeng, and the lowland settlements, the towns of the district through the governing power given to the Hmong leader. Epidemic disease and robbers caused the movement of the Hmong. Nevertheless, the governing power did not dissolve, but shifted with the Hmong community within the territory they occupied.

During this period, the Hmong spatial production was organized through their ideology, mostly mixing Hmong and Chinese ideas regarding the human and spirit worlds, which led to the organizing and dividing up of the forest, farms and community. Forest was defined as a place for food and herbal gathering, including for hunting but it was not a place to live. Some areas were designed as sacred places, like the Dong Seng (Ntoo Xeeb), where a big tree was chosen to be the sacred place for the guardian spirit staying as a stake of protection and prosperity for every life <sup>20</sup> - human, animal and crops, in the community and farm. In addition, the forest was full of wild spirits (Dab Qus), which are harmful to the human soul. The shaman is the one who negotiates with the spirits to take the soul back in case

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<sup>17</sup> This group of robber is acknowledged by the Thai elder interviewed from Ban Mark Khaeng too, he called "Bug O".

<sup>18</sup> This story is acknowledged by the Thai elder interviewed from Ban Mark Khaeng too.

<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile Ban Khee Thao a little bit was farther in the scale of distance, 17° 01', indicated on the map.

<sup>20</sup> By oral history, the Hmong had set up one Dong Seng where the name well-known as Seng O Chia (Xeeb O Txia) which the sacred tree has swollen shape.

somebody's soul was taken away. Nevertheless, forestland is spare space that can be turned into farmland and community too. Community is composed of clusters of houses and is a place to live. A house is designed by the family leader following both human and spiritual ideologies, localities like wall (Phab Ntsa), stove (Qov Cub), post (Nceb), door (Qov Rooj) and attic (Nthab) are places of spirits too. In this sense, community is separated from the forest as different in design and meaning, however their power relation is relatively between the spiritual places in the house and forest that the shaman mediates. Farming, including raising cattle and other domestic animals were both subsistence and economic activities, especially opium production, which bound the Hmong bound to the outside economic system. Money, especially silver bars were made by the Chinese, French Indochinese coins, and Thai money circulated into the Hmong social being through opium trade and exchange. This made their society wealthy enough to be followed by the state authority to collect taxes and the robbers to rob them.<sup>21</sup> However, it did not resemble the type of upland resistance that Scott's (2009) Zomia expected.

In spatial analysis, the Hmong male elders act themselves as technocrats in design the Hmong spatiality so they are conceived space dominating the trajectory of the Hmong social space. They are clan leaders seeking land for cultivation, building community pattern, setting ritual performance and the governing system through kinship relations and accepted morality. While women were labor, housewives and textile designers, children and youth were followers. They occupied lived space or the dominated, who were like inhabitants and users. The Hmong being as Tri-alectics of Spatiality, Historicity, and Sociality (Soja, 1996, p.70-71), bounded through the political environment they encountered. This became social memory, to prove that they had spent a lot of time in the vicinity of Phu Lomlo, and that it had become their homeland. Thai people and state authorities in the area came to recognize them as opium cultivators.

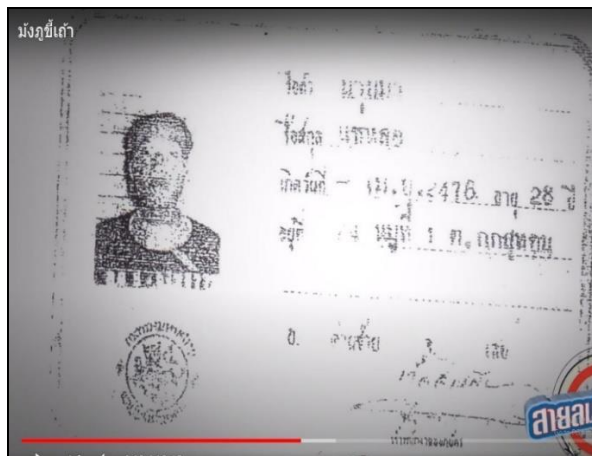
### **Emergence of the Communist Insurgency and the Tribal Settlement (the Nihom Phu Lomlo)—THE STATE'S POWER OF EXCLUSION**

How did Ban Khee Thao become the settling area for other Hmong newcomers from the upper northern provinces of Thailand and Laos, and how did its older members split to set up new villages - Ban Tabberg and Pa Ya? The external political situation, especially World War II, blocked the long march of the Hmong, but after the war ended, more Hmong from the upper provinces of Thailand - Chiang Rai, Nan and Phayao - travelled to the three provinces of Phitsanulok, Phetchabun and Loei. According to Nor

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<sup>21</sup> Conceptualizing from some Hmong informants by interview.

Chai Lee <sup>22</sup> of Nam Sai Village, the great movement started after the World War II, especially since 1947 onwards. A Hmong elder from Ban Khee Thao named Yia Keng Thao went to Nan Province to pick up some Hmong around that time.<sup>23</sup> After that, a lot of Hmong came to Ban Khee Thao from several directions. It became the resting area before people separated to set up other new villages scattered on other mountains surrounding Phu Lomlo. The crowded community made some old residents move to set up new villages like Ban Tabberg <sup>24</sup> (Zos Thab Bawm) and Ban Pa Ya (Zos Pas Nyab). Therefore, the movement gradually increased from 1947 to 1962. It took around 15 years for the Hmong to form their new communities, scattering through the mountainous zone. Finally, many communities were registered as formal villages under the modern Thai governing system, where district chiefs and provincial governors appointed the village headmen. Ban Khee Thao is the oldest one in the area (Figures 5 and 6).



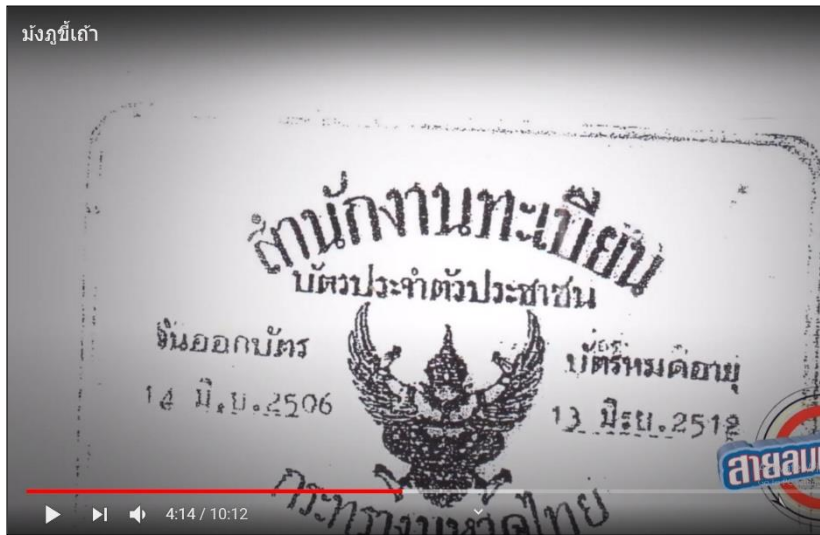
**Figure 5** <sup>25</sup> Thailand's citizen ID card. In Thailand's provincial government system, before fighting broke out in 1969, Ban Khee Thao was officially section 1 of Khok Sathon Sub-district, located in Dan Sai District of Loei Province. The last village head was Chua Por Song (Tshuas Pov Xyooj)

<sup>22</sup> Interview on 28 October 2016, Khek Noi.

<sup>23</sup> Interview Chong Khw Yang, who was formerly from Ban Khee Thao, on 18 August 2017 in Khek Noi.

<sup>24</sup> Ban Tabberg and Ban Khee Thao were noted by Father Harry Thiel as the two Hmong villages he initially visited, during 1964-65, see his story-in his own words online at <http://fatherharrythielcssr.com/story.html>

<sup>25</sup> Online source, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E1pYIC4Zgw&t=92s>



**Figure 6** <sup>26</sup> The backside of Thailand's citizen ID card, date issued on 14 June 1963, expired 13 June 1969.

Why did the spatial control by the state emerge to control mountainous space? During and after World War II, opium production was promoted to replace imports (Leepreecha, 2005, p.21), Phu Lomlo and its adjacent mountains like Phu Khee Thao, Phu Tabberg and Phu Hin Rong Kla attracted the Hmong because the landscape was wide enough for opium cultivation. However, the external political situation brought on by the Cold War led to social change in the Hmong communities when opium production was banned. The Thai government advocated for the surveillance and spatial control of mountainous and forest areas, due to concerns regarding the spread of communism, especially after the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of China in 1949. The expansion of the CPT into rural parts of northern Thailand followed in the 1960s, particularly with Chinese support (Baird, 2020). The domino theory in Southeast Asia concerned the United States government, and resulted in the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), an alliance that helped solidify strong relations between the United States and Thailand, and facilitated the provision of military aid, especially after 1950 (Fineman, 1997). This vision was also realized through the creation of upland projects and programs launched to control the mountainous populace who were not ethnically Thai, so as to make them become the Other, encompassed through the term "hill tribe" or "Chao Khao" in Thai.

<sup>26</sup> Online source <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E1pYIC4Zgw&t=92s>



Laungaramsri (2003, p.164) explained that the name Chao Khao, which is literally translated as 'people of the hills', is also a third-person pronoun, connoting the 'other'. When contrasted with *chao rao*,<sup>27</sup> literally 'those of us' or 'we people', the expression falls into opposition to 'us'. It is certainly true that the Hmong were already recognized as separating from lowland Thai society because of their different culture. Nevertheless, they could live there and were accepted for their role in the opium trade as opium cultivator, even though state officials appointed a village headmen. However, in 1959, opium was banned and hill tribe discourse was handled by the government as a soft means to control mountainous space and put people under surveillance.

These discursive practices were encouraged by non-discursive practices - development with training programs - including research conducted by both Thai and foreign institutions. Laungaramsri (2001; 2003) explained that the term "hill tribe" was given official status in 1959 as the result of the formation of the Central Hill Tribe Committee (CHTC). The CHTC was later replaced by the Tribal Research Center<sup>28</sup> in Chiang Mai, which was set up in 1965 with major funding from international donors, including SEATO and UNESCO. Hill tribe discourse did not simply apply to people living in the mountains, as the term literally implies, but is most commonly used to refer to people belonging to nine particular ethnic groups, namely the Karen, Hmong, Lisu, Akha, Lahu, Iu-Mien, Khamu, Htin, and Lua/Lawa (Laungaramsri 2001; 2003), regardless of where they lived. As a result, upland areas and the so-called hill tribes were turned into subjects to be researched systematically, often to serve the state policy of assimilating and integrating. This notion made the government set up the, Self-Help Settlement of Hill Tribe Project,<sup>29</sup> which were first officially set up in 1960 in Chiang Mai and Tak Provinces, and later, in 1962, in Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, Loei and Chiang Rai, supervised by The Department of Public Welfare.

In Phetchabun, Phitsanulok and Loei, the Nikhom was established in 1962 at Phu Lomlo, and it became known as Nikhom Phu Lomlo, of which Ban Khee Thao was part. The primary aim, as Tapp (1989) stated, was to persuade the scattered hill tribes to move into the project areas and settle down permanently. This policy was not favored by the Hmong because it did not provide them much space to live. The dispersing of the Hmong throughout the mountainous zone would prevent them from having insufficient amounts of arable land. Thus, people from many villages ignored the project, so the Nikhom idea was not successful because the Hmong did not embrace the initiatives. Later, this project was transferred to be

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<sup>27</sup> Newspaper columnists frequently stressed this term to distinguish the uplanders from the lowlanders.

<sup>28</sup> This center later became an institution but it was dissolved in 2002 (Buadaeng, 2006)

<sup>29</sup> The short name is well-known as the Nikhom.

programed as a mobile unit, "The Nikhom Unit of Tribal Public Welfare and Development".<sup>30</sup> The state authorities supervised, and intended to construct, force and spread particular notions of development. In responding to these programs, some Hmong, both men and women, were selected to receive basic knowledge training in Mae Rim District, Chiang Mai Province.

The tribal and development discourses came with new ways of managing property and governing the Hmong, inserting a new image and memory from the past, even though the Hmong were never conscious of how their consciousness was being changed. Hill tribe discourse labeled the upland peoples in a negative way, as reviewed by Mischung (1995). From the late 1950s onwards, the image of hill tribes became increasingly negative, namely 1) swidden cultivation was labeled as an inefficient method of cultivation, 2) the cultivation of opium was presented as dangerous for the welfare of the lowland population; and 3) uplanders were presented as threats to national security. In particular, highlanders were suspected of becoming foreign communists. These perspectives were combined to constitute the hill tribe problem (Laungaramsri, 2001), but the insurgent image was the most dangerous, as it often led to the use of force by the government (see Marks, 1973; Race, 1974). In responding to this perceived problem, the Border Patrol Police (BPP) were established in May 1953 to maintain security and gather intelligence in remote frontier regions, with the support of the United States Operations Mission (USOM). In many areas, the BPP were the first government agency to have much contact with the uplands-dwelling minorities. They initiated an upland school project in 1955, with the goal of maintaining security and gathering intelligence in remote frontier regions, training hill peoples as village guards, and forming border security volunteer teams in conjunction with the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC) (Tapp, 1989, p.32).

In this political context, airstrips were built in Hmong settlements located in the border region between Phetchabun, Phitsanulok and Loei using the labor of villagers after the Border Petrol Police (BPP) arrived. One airstrip was built at Ban Khee Thao, and its mark on the landscape can still be seen from the air (see figure 1 on page 4). Song Kao Lo<sup>31</sup> recounted that the villagers were the laborers for the airstrip, the officials forced every family to send one person to support the work with no wage. After they finished the work in the evening, one liter of rice and two mackerel fish were given to each of them. The American experts guided the BPP's officers blasting the big trees, after that the villagers dug up the whole roots of the trees. At that time, the rumor of communist action<sup>32</sup> was spreading, so Thai officials, with American support, prepared the base to fight against the communists, in case

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<sup>30</sup> The name in Thai was "หน่วยนิคมพัฒนาและสงเคราะห์ชาวเขา".

<sup>31</sup> Age 80 years old, interview 29 June 2017.

<sup>32</sup> The Hmong knew as kam pam tim vab or communist revolution.

conflict broke out. The road from Ban Tabberg was built to connect Ban Khee Thao. After the airstrip was built, the BPP came to set up a school and start teaching. They came together with The Nikhom Unit of Tribal Public Welfare and Development. Por Song was the village head during that time. According to Bli Cha Song<sup>33</sup> there were official units operating in Ban Khee Thao, namely the mobile Nikhom Unit. He finished 4<sup>th</sup> grade at the BPP School. A Buddhist temple was also built. On November 7 1955 some Hmong from Ban Khee Thao, together with some from Ban Pa Ya, had a chance to meet King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit when His and Her Majesty went to Loei Province; a Hmong man offered a silver necklace (Xauv Siav) to the King, and a Hmong woman offered a silver hairpin to the Queen. All these are social memories.

Since the Nikhom was based at Ban Khee Thao and other villages in the area, hill tribe discourse was used to justify strict spatial control in every Hmong settlement. The Hmong space as homeland was spatially produced, which the Hmong felt proud about, even if their ethnic identity and culture had been interpreted as threatening to Thai society. State officials, and religious and other foreign staff, became technocrats - building the school, temple, clinic and development center, where modern crops, animals, modern medicines and Buddhism was introduced. In this political context, they were conceived spaces or spaces of dominants who converted the Hmong to inhabit lived space or space of the dominated, who had to be assimilated and integrated. Even the Hmong clan leaders and village headmen were influenced by these practices, which are 'the perceived space or the spatial practices' of spatial control to limit the power of Hmong leaders through the use of institutions and official units. But as will be seen in the next section, the tactics employed by the government would not achieve their expected results.

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<sup>33</sup> See his speech at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E1pYIC4Zgw&t=111s>

## **Rupture of Ban Khee Thao, Communist Manifesto Against State Power**

How did the communist ideology come to influence the Hmong community? Cold War politics started to heat up in Asia during the 1950s, especially after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This was followed with North Vietnam becoming a communist country after the departure of the French from Indochina in 1954. Soon, communist China began stepping up support for various Maoist communist movements, including the CPT.

In 1957, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat seized power in Thailand through a coup d'état (Baker & Pongpaichit, 2005, p.169). The military was already powerful before the coup, but Sarit gained more power for the military (Baker & Pongpaichit, 2005; Baird, 2013a; Hyun, 2014). The government organized religion and education to serve what it thought was in the national interest. Buddhist monks and schoolteachers were sent to remote villages and communities to teach Buddhism, promote the central Thai language, and generally encourage assimilation into national space. They were also tasked with discouraging communism (Ford, 2017). This divided upland society based on Cold War politics, and the Hmong were affected through interactions with both sides. Moreover, in the northern Thai hills, upland minorities were forced to shift from cultivating opium to growing new cash crops (Forsyth & Walker, 2008).

This political situation caused tremendous social change, leading to the rising up of upland peoples, including many Hmong. As Baker & Pongpaichit (2005) put it, "In 1967-68, a full-scale Hmong rebellion spread across four provinces of the north. The army reacted by bombing and napalming hill villages." The communist CPT came to the Hmong living along the mountainous border area between Phetchabun, Phitsanulok and Loei provinces beginning in the early 1960s. Communist radio in Laos was broadcasted, and the Hmong in Thailand heard the news easily because their settlements were not too far away from Laos.<sup>34</sup> Some Hmong, both men and women, were chosen to go to Laos to learn about communist ideology (see, also, Baird, 2020). There were particular circumstances that resulted in communism spreading quickly. The first was related to the state's programs, which were designed to force the Hmong to live in the space of the Nihom, where they could be educated and civilized. Counter-communist campaigns ordered by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn constituted the second condition. These attacks were very severe and became known as, "Seize all, kill all and burn all." State authorities had the authority to make decisions about who was or was not a communist.

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<sup>34</sup> Phone Interview Ernest Kuhn, a former Peace Corps Volunteer who used to work in Ban Tabberg in 1964-1965, on September 2, 2018.

In the three provinces of Phetchabun, Phitsanulok and Loei, the first armed fighting between communist guerrilla forces and the government began on November 29, 1968<sup>35</sup> at Huay Sai Neua and Huay Sai Tai Villages.<sup>36</sup> The battlefields were in the forestland in the mountains, where the communists hoped that eventually the “forest [would] embrace the city”. During this time of rapid transformation, most of the Hmong living near the border with Laos joined the CPT (Baird, 2020). At the beginning of the movement, they hid themselves around their former villages; after that, they organized their communities based on communist ideology, locating themselves under the form of strongholds (Khet Than Thi Man in Thai) in the mountains, where they could easily defend themselves and hide. This landscape was advantageous for ambushing the military. During the fighting period, the Hmong communist communities emerged as social units following communist ideology, which dominated the traditional Hmong social practices basing on clan and kinship. The pseudonym of communist comrade or “Sahai” (in Thai) represented the dominant social relation, a new discourse that served to bring together a new assemblage of Hmong and non-Hmong, with the Hmong made up the majority of the people living in the strongholds. After the fighting broke out, communist communities emerged as units of production within strongholds, following the system of communist China, which Mao Zedong led.

The communist communities located in the mountains of Phu Khee Thao, Phu Lomlo and Phu Hin Rong Kla in Phitsanulok and Loei Provinces, were organized under the 10<sup>th</sup> stronghold section, following a particular spatiality. The Section headquarters was called the “Office of State Power” (samnak amnat rat in Thai). Seven units of production were organized in the Section, with most of the people in these units being Hmong. During this time, the government declared these mountainous forests to be in a Red Zone or fighting area. Up until the early 1980s, severe armed fighting continued between the government and the communists in the red zone areas, with the CPT performing much better than the military. However, the CPT was greatly weakened by the changing geopolitical situation in the region. The Thai government also took advantage of the geopolitical situation to further weaken the CPT by issuing Prime Minister’s Orders No. 66/23 and 66/25, which were designed to win over the communist insurgents by offering them amnesty from government punishment if they gave up their armed struggle.<sup>37</sup> These government amnesty orders also included

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<sup>35</sup> This information was included in a military memorial book for Khao Kho, together with an interview with a former Hmong militia member.

<sup>36</sup> However, on November 27, 1968, the Nikhom Unit team at Phu Tabberg were attacked while they were checking the route construction cut to Ban Pa Wai. This attack resulted in the death of one driver (Pimthaiarhit Newspaper, 1 December 1968).

<sup>37</sup> The order was issued on April 23, 1980 and signed by Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda. (Bunbongkarn 2004).

provisions that allowed those who took advantage of the amnesty the right to receive a house and 15 rai of farmland. These orders greatly influenced “the forest people”<sup>38</sup> with the CPT, and most gradually surrendered. Many of those who gave up were sent to a training center in Phitsanulok Province. These people then resettled in various new and old settlements, which were located in Phitsanulok, Loei and Phetchabun. Some also ended up in Tak Province. Therefore, the armed fighting lasted 15 years, before it finally ended. According to a military memorial book, which was distributed during an annual memorial ceremony at Khao Kho monument, during the period of conflict the government initiated 12 major military campaigns to fight the CPT in the Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, and Loei Province area.

What was going on in Ban Khee Thao during this time? The emic sense from Nor Chai Lao<sup>39</sup> detailed that the Thai national conflict caused the fighting between the two sides, one group were the communists, who were called ‘forest soldiers’. The others were the government soldiers. On December 3, 1968 at noon, fighting broke out in Ban Khee Thao. The BPP were ambushed, a tractor and the office of the Nikhom were torched. Nor Chai was 12 years old and was studying 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in the BPP Primary School.<sup>40</sup> He did not understand why the fighting happened. He just saw that there were people dead and a helicopter flew the injured and dead away. After that, the government soldiers together with a teacher flew out to Ban Khee Thao to call the BPP students. The teacher said that they came to pick up the students so that they could study in the city. However, the students feared coming out, even though they know the BPP people well. The day after that they came to call again, but a gun was fired from the helicopter into a cattle-grazing pasture near the village. The horses and cows were seen dying, which made the Hmong fearful. Then a house was burned. Later, the BPP came to burn all the houses down. At that time, there were 100 households in Ban Khee Thao. After their houses were burned, the villagers did not know how to manage their lives, they could not go to their house or anywhere, eventually they had to spend their lives in the forest. Therefore, at this moment the communist operators came to set up the Hmong so that they had their own defending forces. They were trained and given weapons. The Hmong were recruited to carry weapons from Laos and China. Refusing to help was not seen as an option. This all resulted in the Hmong living in the forest for 15 years before reconciliation through the amnesty policy - Prime Minister’s Orders No. 66/23 and later 66/25 - were launched. This resulted in the Hmong giving up their weapons and coming out to be Phu Ruam Pattana Chat Thai or CFDTN, a definition that the former communists accepted.

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<sup>38</sup> We use the term “forest people” here to refer for all people who sided with the CPT operation and stayed in communist strongholds, including the Hmong, students, Thai elites, officials, politicians, etc. They all took the forest as a space of resistance against the government.

<sup>39</sup> Interview on 2 August 2016, at Khek Noi.

<sup>40</sup> Hmong children often did not start going to school until they were older.

According to Nor Chai, during the war, the Hmong of Ban Khee Thao separated themselves to organize two villages, one named Ban Thong Chai or Victory Flag Village, and the second one named Ban Thong Daeng or Red Flag Village. These two villages were organized under the communist system (rabop jat tang in Thai), as units of production or nuay karn phalit supervised by stronghold section 10 - located at Phu Hin Rong Kla - where a court of state power, a civil school, a military school, a prison and a hospital were set up. The Hmong were educated to be soldiers, nurses, doctors, and politicians. The court of state power judged all cases. There were two mobile military companies, Company 508 and 561. They protected the stronghold. The unit of production, which were the villages, used the Commune System. Workers received scores when they labored. Annual production, both of crops and domestic animals, contributed to one's score.

During this period, the Hmong came into the communist system. Their traditional space became lived, while the communist system became conceived, dominating space, influencing the governance of the perceived or spatial practices of the Hmong people. The technocrats were selected to organize each social unit and the work, which was clearly divided. This new system caused social change for the Hmong, who had been forced to follow the situation. The only way that they could refuse to follow was to escape from the forest, which was under the spatial control of the communist stronghold. During this time, the government defined - as myth (Barthes, 1991) - the Hmong who followed CPT as communist terrorists or the red Meo, who had to be suppressed by force. Ban Phu Khee Thao was within the area of the first main campaign - the Phu Khee Thao Campaign - which ran between December 4 and 18, 1968. Phu Hin Rong Kla was declared part of the Phu Khuang Campaign,<sup>41</sup> where the Thai military decided to battle the CPT. The being of the communist Hmong, which concerned this experience about the communist system and battling the government, something that is still part of the social memory of many older Hmong up to now - the loss of their home land, Ban Khee Thao for more than 50 years since the fire broke out in 1968.

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<sup>41</sup> Phu Khuang literally means obstructive mountain.

## **Mobilizing for Land Rights: Returning back to Ban Khee Thao, “QUB ZEJ QUB ZOS OR DOMICILE COMMUNITY”**

A Thai language book called ‘Good Bye, Hin Rong Kla’ in English, depicts the story of the memory of a young man from Bangkok who spent four years of his life, between 1977 and 1981, as a communist comrade at Phu Hin Rong Kla. At the end, he and his comrades went back to their homes; urban areas in the lowlands, all his experiences in the forest has just been parts of his memory. But, for the Hmong forest and mountain are their homeland which they lost and a place where they want to return. The reconciliation amnesty policy - Prime Minister’s Order No. 66/23 - was first launched in 1980 and resulted in some Hmong giving up their weapons and coming out to be Phu Ruam Pattana Chat Thai or CFDTN. Others did not come out of the forest until Policy No. 66/25 was announced in 1982. These policies, which had the same purpose, allowed people to go back to their own homes - or domicile communities - but the people from Ban Phu Khee Thao were blocked from returning. Phu Hin Rong Kla National Park was declared in 1984, covering the old area of Ban Khee Thao, Ban Pa Wai and Ban Rong Kla. As a result, the Hmong of Ban Khee Thao were separated to live in three new settlements in three provinces, namely Khek Noi in Khao Kho District of Phetchabun Province, Toob Kho in Dan Sai District of Loei Province, and Nam Khub community in Chat Trakan District of Phitsanulok Province. Since the post-CPT period, mountainous land and forest have been categorized as state property under the supervision of some state agencies like the Army, the Royal Forestry Department, the Public Welfare Department, and the Treasury Department. The Tribal Nikhom was re-structured by the Tribal Public Welfare Center. The Royal Forestry Department established and managed the National Parks. Phetchabun’s Treasury Office was put in charge of the land claimed as state land - Treasury Department land - for example, included much of the land where Khek Noi is located. The Third Regional Army backed up these state official units.

In this way, the Hmong became dependent on state power according to the Thai governing system, with overlapping spaces under the influence of different state agencies. They are not the technocrats of land management who have the right to manage their own land using their own land tenure system. The military and government officials from the Tribal Public Welfare and Development Center allocated the remaining land, but unequally in terms of plot sizes, and there was not enough land for every family. This particularly disadvantaged the communist Hmong who arrived late after surrendering. Moreover, even those who were allocated plots of land did not receive land titles. They just received land user permits supervised by these state agencies. This process fits well with the conservation-induced displacement that Leblond (2010) wrote about. The Hmong who ended up with no land or only a small amount of land had to buy or rent it from other villagers, or from the Royal Forestry Department. In addition, national security has been promoted in a broader sense,



including covering internal politics, international politics, economics, society, psychology, science and technology, energy, national resources, the environment, and national defense (Wongpratya, 2007). This discourse of national security has installed state power into every spatial dimension, causing tremendous stress to the local people. This is the new politics of space, which the Hmong have encountered and adjusted themselves to in response to insecure land tenure.

Ban Khee Thao has become a space of resistance for some CFDTN, including Nor Chai and his group. They have mobilized spatial practices to request permission to return to their qub zej qub zos (domicile community). This politics of space is the consequence of the Thai politics after the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was overthrown in a military coup d'état in 2006. General Surayud Chulanont rose up to become Prime Minister. During his political reign, to get popularity from the CFDTN, he adopted a historical discourse from the Cold War, particularly Orders 66/23 and 66/25, and launched a compensation program for former communists now discursively recognized as Phu Ruam Pattana Chat Thai (CFDTN). This generated the political conditions needed to induce the Hmong to request permission to go back to their qub zeb qub zos or domicile community in line with this old policy. The compensation project continued running until the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva, and money were distributed to participating CFDTN. Nevertheless, some CFDTN refused to accept the money; they only wanted land, based on the original amnesty policies.

Nor Chai Lor and Bliia Cha Song, as former communists, are the leaders of a group who has been, for many years, requesting permission to return to Ban Khee Thao. Nor Chai insists that his group's purpose is to be allowed to move back to their qub zej qub zos or domicile community, instead of receiving monetary compensation. The group's discourse of resistance includes the Maoism-influenced view that money would only promote more consumerism, which supports a bubble economy. They also claim that receiving monetary compensation would be against the state's sufficiency economy policy.<sup>42</sup> This is a setting of the geography of resistance they set up as an argument.

In this political situation, they initially asked for permission to move back to the area from the Second Regional Army, which is responsible for the northeastern region of Thailand. However, there was no response to their request. Then, in 2007, they organized a petition to the crown to request their land back so that they could go back to their domicile community. However, there was still no progress. Then, on December 4, 2008, they petitioned for land to be allocated to them from the Office of the Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister's Office. This was their last attempt before they adopted a bolder tactic: to simply go back to Ban Khee Thao.

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<sup>42</sup> Statements of the group of Hmong Khee Thao Village on January 23, 2012.

Between late February and mid-March 2009, Nor Chai and his group travelled to Phu Khee Thao and stayed there. They built shelters made with materials that they brought from the outside. Soon after, however, they were arrested and sent to the central prison of Loei Province. Later, they were charged with encroaching on national park land, and damaging reserved forestland and the national park. In court, they were fined 10,000 baht per person, sentenced to three years in jail, but with parole for two years of that time. Moreover, the law turned against them when the Wildlife and Plant Conservation Division of the Department of National Parks brought a civil law suit against them too. The civil case was appealed to the Court of Appeals and then to the Supreme Court. However, in 2019 the villagers finally won the case, when the Supreme Court insisted on following the judgement of the first court.<sup>43</sup>

Even though the Hmong were considered wrong according to the law, they were able to generate public interest by presenting their needs as CFDTN, and returned to Orders 66/23 and 66/25, thus moving “the past across to the present”. They discursively attempted to contest the meaning of land through identifying Ban Khee Thao as a ‘homeland’, recalling back to their long last village before the war, as opposed to the state’s view of the area as being a part of a national park - the modern spatial control excluding them from their own home. In this situation, Nor Chai’s group became even more active to conduct spatial practices to be perceived by the public even if they were the weak or the voiceless during the time they were incarcerated, or even later they were sentenced and received two years’ probation. These spatial practices included several petitions and letters were sent to state agencies and ministers, such as to the Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva on April 6 and October 12, 2009,<sup>44</sup> at which time he was asked to resolve the case and allocate land according to Orders 66/23 and 66/25. They also sent a letter to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR),<sup>45</sup> and another to the provincial governor asking for land.<sup>46</sup> The group also lobbied many other government agencies, more than can be mentioned here.

Cyber space, mass and electronic media, has also been crucial, with news published about the case in the national media and on YouTube. For example, on March 20, 2018, Nor Chai and his group launched a short history of Ban Khee Thao and their land

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<sup>43</sup> This civil case lasted for 10 years.

<sup>44</sup> Information from official response letter from Office of the Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister Office, dated on July 10, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Information from official response letter from OHCHR, dated on April 28, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Information from official response letter from provincial governor of Phetchabun Province, dated on May 14, 2009.

request on YouTube.<sup>47</sup> An ancestor ritual was also done at Phu Khee Thao Village on July 14, 2019, which was a spatial practice designed to claim rights over their ancestral land.<sup>48</sup> Their movements have also been publicized in newspapers, for example Manager News Online Thailand, which reported about their actions in requesting to go back to Phu Khee Thao.<sup>49</sup> According to Nor Chai, some Hmong scholars from the United States and France have showed interest in their advocacy. Therefore, media and cyber links do not only represent a means for Hmong resistance and negotiation, but have also influenced the construction of collective memory and social consciousness among the Hmong over broader spaces. As discussed, it can be seen that the young Hmong generation pay attention to their history and the politics of land which influenced their future, by chatting on Facebook and other channels. Many foreign Hmong and scholars are interested in these issues. This political context creates the new strong sense of Hmong being and social memory worldwide binding with the social struggle where the lost mountainous and forest communities (in Thailand) are the symbolic movement.

Thailand's political situation and the continual request from groups of CFDTN in Thailand have made their request effective, and on June 29, 2016, state agencies proposed a plan to send Nor Chai and other CFDTN Hmong back to their qub zej qub zos. Nor Chai was the main coordinator of this program, with the Third Regional Army endorsed under the name, "Establishing Conservation Village for Recovering the Ecosystem and Tourism for Security." The objective of the program was to send the group back to the Phu Kee Thao area (around 500 rai or 0.8 km<sup>2</sup> of land) so that a total of 300 Hmong families could live there. However, the spatial conditions were altered when the resettlement area was moved to another place that the Army claimed belonged to them, near Kaeng Lad Village, Noen Pherm Sub-district, Nakhon Thai District, Phitsanulok Province. Even though this program was run under military state power in cooperation with the Royal Department of Forestry, "The Suppression Director of 17 Provinces", used forestry regulations - article 25 - to seize rubber tree plantations from local civilians who were accused of encroaching on protected forest, and then allocated the land to the Hmong CFDTN. A detailed plan was drawn up with CFDTN Hmong family participation. Success seemed imminent, but the civilians who were going to lose their land turned the tables on the state agencies through petitioning for justice

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<sup>47</sup> See the content at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E1pYIC4Zgw>

<sup>48</sup> See the content at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgNS3jA-Oik>

<sup>49</sup> See the news content at <https://mgronline.com/local/detail/9550000143220> . See more recently news in Samarth news, November 2018, at <https://siamrath.co.th/n/55254>:

with the Administrative Court.<sup>50</sup> The Royal Forestry Department was accused of acting illegally, which forced the program to be cancelled.

As a result, Nor Chai and his group are continuing their advocacy through various actions broadly connected to national politics. They tried to do this before Thailand's general election on March 24, 2019. On March 3, 2019, Nor Chai joined a political campaign event in Khek Noi organized by a political party called Thai Local Power Party. He went up on the stage to present his political intentions to the public, so as to request land for his CFDTN group, which he claimed signified the fight for liberty, righteousness, and equal rights. He announced publicly that, "It is not us intruding on the forest but the forest intruding on us." This statement reflected resistance to the process of state territorialization (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995), which governs the local people through a new categorization of space.

At the present - after the national election - the movement of Nor Chai and his CFDTN group is still ongoing and they have prepared for the long haul, since there are no signs of land reform to respond to their request in the near future. The most recent action conducted was to present a petition letter to the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, and the Provincial Governor of Phetchabun Province.<sup>51</sup> On January 2, 2020, they presented to the military when the unit visited Khek Noi, although without any success. This social movement of the CFDTN, was conducted by elders, it represents Hmong being - spatiality, historicity, and sociality - including a broader sense of eco-politics to show their diverse power struggle to several actors at the local, national and international levels. Social memory - including political history - has been used as the principal means to claim their land rights and to go back to Ban Khee Thao, the Hmong qub zej qub zos. Some Hmong wore communist uniforms to symbolize this political history as a "symbolic space" or "spaces of representation" (Soja, 1996, p.68).

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<sup>50</sup> See the conflict in MGR online news at <https://mgronline.com/local/detail/9570000138347>, accessed November 14, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> See details on local news at <http://www.phetvariety.com/?p=28113> and <https://www.77kaoded.com/content/882633>, accessed November 14, 2019.

## **Conclusion**

This article demonstrates that Hmong being is related with lowland Thai society and the world as part of a political history and eco-politics. Ban Khee Thao - dissolved during the Cold War - has become a symbolic space and a space of resistance, used by Nor Chai and his group of CFDTN to claim their rights going back as their qub zej qub zos according to the old policies 66/23 and 66/25. Understanding the emergence of Ban Khee Thao - the oldest official Hmong village - and the social movements of its members, represents clues for understanding the coming of the Hmong to the border of Phitsanulok, Phetchabun and Loei, where the Tribal Nikhom Phu Lomlo was set up in 1962, to implement state spatial control of upland space. Before World War II, the Hmong had the power to design their own space, because there was less state power controlling mountainous areas and upland societies. Opium was the main economic and social crop. Mostly, Hmong spatiality lied between the spirit and human worlds, and was designed by the Hmong male elders, who acted as the technocrats, determining the conceived or dominant space, while women and children were in the lived space as the followers. However, after World War II, the political condition changed to the Cold War, which made the government launch a project to control the mountainous space by setting up the tribal settlement or Nikhom Chao Khao and the BPP came. Opium production was prohibited. The Hmong were subjected under hill tribe discourse or Chao Khao, or hill tribe, which has defined them to be the Other who threaten Thai national security. The operations of the Nikhom Unit and the BPP, together with other external social units made the Hmong have docile bodies for being assimilated and integrated with the new programs - education and development - as spatial control launched to the Hmong communities, for example airstrips, new crops, schools and Buddhist temples. This was the situation of warfare during the Cold War, which caused social change to Hmong societies, and was one main reason that the Hmong ended up joining the CPT when the communist operators came to recruit them. The war dissolved all official Hmong communities in the area, including Ban Khee Thao, as almost all of its members joined with the CPT. Communist ideology and the governing system were applied to set up and organize the Hmong who escaped to the forest and stayed in the 10<sup>th</sup> stronghold, covering the mountainous zone of Phu Lomlo, Phu Khee Thao, Phu Tabberg and Phu Hin Rong Kla. New red star villages were set up instead. The communist strongholds operated against the Thai governing system as spaces of resistance, leading the government to retreat. In this political situation, the Hmong being was cooperating with lowland Thai people as communist comrades or Sahai and became connected to modern Thai history through communist action that threatened Thai national security. The war lasted 15 years, and ran between 1968 and 1982, ending with the amnesty policies 66/23 and 66/25.

Land management and social development became the processes the government used for solving the post-war situation. However, it was not systematic and successful because of the encirclement of Thai official process that the state agencies are the technocrats. Indeed, these processes were used to solve Thai national security problems rather than the problems of the local people. Especially when Phu Hin Rong Kla National Park became the conceived space in 1984, the Hmong were excluded from accessing their former homeland and were left with limited access to land, and together with lowland Thai people were induced to relocate in Phu Hin Rong Kla National Park where the Hmong had previously lived. This condition made some Hmong lose their land. The land allocated to them was not enough. Ban Khee Thao and its members have been forgotten, becoming only lived space - a memory place - for the Hmong. However, over the last ten years Ban Khee Thao has been recalled as a space of resistance when some CFDTN, Nor Chai and his group, have themselves mobilized spatial practices to request to go back to their old homeland. This politics of space is linked with contemporary Thai politics, especially since the time of Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont, when the policies 66/23 and 66/25 were revived for launching a compensation project for the CFDTN all over Thailand.

Nor Chai and his group, the main case presented here, have refused monetary compensation and have conducted several spatial practices - the perceived space - to claim their right over land where Ban Khee Thao used to be located. They started with asking permission from the military, and also sent several petitions to the Crown and the Prime Minister's Office of each government, and letters to related agencies. A bolder tactic was going back to Ban Khee Thao, their lost homeland, and trying to reoccupy the area without government permission. However, they were arrested and sent to jail. They were fined 10,000 baht per person. Moreover, the law was used against them by a state agency via a civil law suit. The struggle made the news and circulated through the media and social media, helping to empower them spatially. Thailand's political situation with the continual request from groups of CFDTN in Thailand made their request effective, land allocation was conducted for them, instead of sending them back to Ban Khee Thao, which they accepted. The state agencies led by the Third Regional Army and the Royal Department of Forestry expropriated some land of the lowland Thai people located in a village of Noen Pherm Sub-district, Nakhon Thai District, Phitsanulok Province. However, the project failed because state agencies were accused of acting illegally when a civilian petition for justice was sent to the Administrative Court. This resulted in Nor Chai and his group continuing to conduct their movement until now, with Ban Khee Thao remaining a symbolic space and a space of resistance.

The Hmong are located in the tri-alectics of Spatiality, Historicity, and Sociality, which represents the spatial function of social space - spatial practices (perceived space),

representations of space (conceived space), and representational space (lived space) - which is concerned with their social production and social struggle as the social emergence of power relations. The Hmong being of social struggle, according to our study, shows that they have been struggling to stabilize their society and adapt themselves to the political environment in responding to diverse kinds of domination and destruction. Since the early period, they were faced with robbery and disease. Later, it was the politics of discourse or discursive practices like the hill tribe discourse of the state that were used to construct the Tribal Nihom for controlling the mountains and forest together with upland communities, but most Hmong refused to follow until the CPT came to dominate. The Cold War caused an ideological war where communist strongholds turned Hmong communities into ideological spaces of resistance against the state power. This caused severe fighting before the policies 66/23 and 66/25 were launched. However, post-war eco-politics, stressing the struggle for land and the law in which the state defined every space as being under their control. The Hmong then lost their land by the declaration of a national park. Nevertheless, they used Ban Khee Thao and the policy of 66/23 for symbolic struggle, through social memories designed to support a social movement to claim their right to the land. Therefore, the Hmong *being* represents the heterogeneity of Hmong societies - in the dimension of social struggle, more than singular unity of a semi-nomadic society of tribal peoples, as presented in structuralist perspectives of various kinds.

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