

History-Making: The Communist Party of Thailand's Attempt to Shape Hmong and Lua Narratives

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Armed conflict between the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and the military of Thailand in northern Thailand began in mid-1967. By the end of the 1960s, there were a number of CPT stronghold bases in the remote uplands of Northern Thailand. Large numbers of ethnic Hmong and Lua people joined the CPT, and the CPT strongholds were in areas where these groups had previously lived. During the 1970s, once the strongholds were established, the CPT organized a small project on the history of ethnic groups that had not been reported on so far. Led by a scholar formerly from Bangkok and involving ethnic Hmong and ethnic Lua men, the project was expected to collect, compile, and analyze ethnic group histories and create a written history in Central Thai language. While the project was never completed – and no documents appear to have survived from it – the Hmong man who worked on the project has provided an oral account of what happened, one that reveals some aspects of CPT political thought, particularly in relation to ideas about ethnic minority histories. The main argument here is that the CPT, as with other communist regimes in Asia, saw ethnic harmony as important for its broader political project, and tried to enhance good relations through the development of a politically acceptable history that would also fit with Hmong and Lua expectations. The paper contributes to a better understanding of the CPT's approach to ethnicity issues.

Keywords: Communism; Historical Narratives; Hmong; Reconstruction of History; Thailand



INTRODUCTION

On May 15, 2021, I visited the home of Noriki Akararot (Sae Lor), an ethnic Hmong elder and veteran of the *Communist Party of Thailand* (CPT) and its military wing, the *People's Liberation Army of Thailand* (PLAT). He resides in Toop Kho Village, Dansai District, Loei Province, north-eastern Thailand, and is currently a local public intellectual. Born in 1952 on Khee Thao Mountain, also in Loei Province (see Suebsakwong & Baird, 2020), he fled to the forest and joined the CPT in 1968, during a time of great upheaval. For the next 14 years, he mainly stayed at the Phu Hin Rongkla stronghold in the mountains of Phitsanulok Province, until he and most of his CPT comrades accepted a government-offered amnesty and surrendered to the Royal Thai

government in 1982¹ (See also, Bangkok Domestic Service, 1982a; b; Bangkok Post, 1982; Baird, 2021; 2022).

Although Norki had only four years of Thai-language education in Khee Thao Village before joining the CPT, he had received more formal education than most Hmong during that period. However, in many ways, Norki's trajectory was similar to those of many other Hmong youth who had not attended school and ended up joining the CPT in the late 1960s. He was sent from his village as a teenager to study for six months in the forest with a CPT operative, even though Norki did not yet know that his teacher was with the CPT. Norki eventually learned more, became a soldier with the PLAT, and served as a PLAT soldier until 1982, when he surrendered with others. However, what is different about Norki's story, and justifies the writing of this article, is that CPT leaders specifically chose him to work on a project unlike any others that the CPT is known to have initiated. It was a history project, but interestingly, one focused on ethnic groups, particularly the Hmong and Lua peoples who lived along the Thailand-Laos border in northern Thailand. They had joined the CPT in large numbers beginning in the late 1960s, when armed conflict began in various mountainous areas in northern Thailand. He was charged with working with a former Thai professor, known only to him by his 'administrative' or 'revolutionary' name (*chue jatang* in Thai), Thuam, who had previously taught at Thammasat University in Bangkok before joining the CPT. Another ethnic Lua man, like Norki, also joined the project to represent his ethnic group. Together, the three men gradually implemented a CPT-approved ethnic group history project.

The official name of the project is unclear. However, its objective was to produce a new historical narrative written in Central Thai language, and in line with the CPT party politics and Maoist theory. Ideologically, the CPT's politics were inspired by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of China. However, to be effective and accepted by the masses, this new narrative needed to fit with ethnic group understandings of their own history, at least to some extent, and had to be positioned at least partially within Thailand. Indeed, many political documents produced in the People's Republic of China (PRC) were translated verbatim into Thai, thus heavily influencing CPT political thought. But when it came to histories of different ethnic groups, translating documents from China was proved insufficient, as the ethnic groups in Thailand differed from those in China, although Hmong people are found in both Thailand and China. They also had different histories and positioned themselves in various ways throughout history. Thus, the CPT needed to create new histories, weaving them together with old ones and present-day CPT political thought to create a new historical narrative, one that would promote harmony between the ethnic groups. This objective was expected to benefit the CPT politically by making their political narrative more historically grounded. Thus, the project was political but was focused on Hmong and Lua history.

We can understand this project, even if it was not completed, as an attempt to construct history for political purposes. Of course, this is not the first time political groups have sought to construct new histories for political reasons. Indeed, political narratives have long been recognized as being important for maintaining political power, and these narratives are often explained and justified using historical knowledge (Shreiner, 2014). For example, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), in their now classical book, *The Invention of Tradition*, demonstrated how historical understandings are sometimes reconstructed to establish new traditions that are then recognized as having been in existence since time immemorial. However, it takes

¹ Norki Akararot (Sae Lor), *pers. comm.*, Toop Kho Village, Dansai District, Loei Province, May 15, 2021.

work for certain political narratives to become widely accepted, and efforts to promote such narratives often lead to contradictions, tensions, and even conflict (Schmidtke, 2023). For example, new historical narratives about resistance to the Chao Anouvong revolt during the 1800s were created in northeastern Thailand during the reign of Field Marshall Phibul Songkhram (Baird, 2014; Kaew-ngarmprasert, 1995), ones that have been strongly embraced in some areas, but have also created some tensions (Baird, 2014).

Although the *invention of tradition* thesis has been highly influential and widely accepted in academia, some scholars have sought to critique and build on this classical work, and have questioned such concepts as “invention” and “tradition” (Beiner, 2001). In line with this, Raphael Samuel (1994), suggested a more ethnographic approach, which:

might think of the invention of tradition as a process rather than an event, and memory, even in its silences, as something which people made for themselves. Rather than focusing on state theatricals of national myth, it might find it more profitable to focus on the perceptions of the past which find expression in the discriminations of everyday life. (pp.16-17)

In the context of this study, such a proposal is useful, as it tends to provide more agency for local people by emphasizing the need to not only focus on state attempts to create histories.

The goal here is to consider how the CPT and the Hmong people with them imagined that the construction of new historical understandings could benefit them politically. While policy documents specifically related to this project appear to have been lost, this research can help better understand how those in the CPT politically thought about ethnic group issues in the upland areas of Northern Thailand. I contend that CPT intellectuals worked together with Norki and the Lua man to produce politically acceptable histories, that would be satisfactory to people from the Hmong and Lua ethnic groups, while also serving the political interests of the CPT. Although the project was never completed, many years of work went into its development, and examining Norki’s understanding of it can – it is contended here – reveal new insights about the ways that the CPT wanted ethnic minorities to see themselves and their positions in history. The main argument of this paper is that the CPT leadership saw ethnic harmony as important for its broader political project and attempted to develop a political history that would also be acceptable to the Hmong and the Lua.

This paper differs from much of the literature about the CPT during the 1970s and early 1980s, which has been written as memoirs focused on the stories of the university students who fled to the forests to join the CPT after the October 14, 1973 and especially October 4, 1976 massacres in Bangkok (Chutima, 1990; Fongthale, 2013; Khunphol, 2005; 2009; 2014; Phromnamphon, 1999). While many of these mainly Thai language memoirs discuss the ethnic minorities that the students encountered during their time ‘in the forest,’ they differ from this account in that the focus of those memoirs was mainly on the experiences of the students, rather than on the minorities and ethnic minority policy within the CPT. Indeed, there has been little written about the ethnic minority experiences in relation to the CPT. This paper is, therefore, useful for better understanding under-documented experiences and understandings of ethnic minorities during and after their time with the CPT.

The article continues with a review of the methods used in conducting this research. Some information regarding the general history of the CPT is then presented to provide background context required to understand later parts of the paper. The paper then turns to examining Hmong involvement with the CPT specifically. The following section turns to the historical

project itself, and the narrative that was part of the construction of this new history about the Hmong and Lua. After analyzing this historical narrative, concluding remarks are provided.

METHOD

This study is embedded within a broader, long-term research project regarding Hmong involvement with the CPT, which has been ongoing since 2012. Over the last 13 years, over 150 interviews with Hmong people involved with the CPT have been conducted, as well as with people from other ethnic groups who were with the CPT. Hmong and people from other ethnic groups who supported the anti-communist Thai government and fought against the CPT were also interviewed. This has provided a large number of accounts and impressions from people regarding Hmong involvement with the CPT. This began in 1961 and continued until the last CPT gave up the armed struggle and left the forests of western Thailand in the early 1990s and quietly reintegrated into Thai society (Baird, 2021).

While this long-term research provides necessary context-information, this article is centered on a detailed interview conducted by the author with Norki Akararot (*Sae Lor*), a Hmong man who was directly involved with a multi-year CPT historical project during the 1970s, one with an emphasis on the two most important ethnic minority groups within the CPT, the Hmong, and the Lua (often referred to as the H'tin in Nan Province). The interview was conducted in Central Thai language, the language mainly used by the CPT, without any assistance with translation.

Hence, it must be acknowledged that this study relies heavily on the account of one Hmong individual, Norki Akararot. This created some challenges. First, Norki recounted an oral account of something that occurred decades ago, thus making it certain, due to memory limitations, that he does not remember everything. Moreover, Hmong politics, CPT politics, and present-day Thai politics have all likely shaped the narrative to some degree. When dealing with social memories that are created through individual and group dynamics, some alterations and adjustments almost always occur in order to fit with group understandings (Fentress & Wickman, 1992). Although it is not possible to verify all the details of the account presented to me, some aspects give the account credibility. In particular, Norki is well respected within the Hmong community, including among Hmong who were previously with the CPT. In addition, the account covers a number of years of Norki's work on the history project, and while the details may not all be accurate, it seems highly unlikely that Norki has fully fabricated the story, since he would be discredited with his peers if he did this, and my discussions with others who know him seem to indicate that his peers see him as a credible individual.

CPT BACKGROUND

The Communist Party of Thailand has a long history, beginning with activism instigated by Chinese nationals, under the Qiaodang, Chinese overseas communists, and later Chinese Thais (Ai, 2025; Feng, 2024). Initially, the CPT was active in urban parts of the country, such as Bangkok. Although the Party was officially established on December 1, 1942, it is believed to have been active as early as 1927, as the Communist Party of Siam (Ai, 2025; Feng, 2024; Jeamteerasakul, 2003a; Tejapira, 2001), changing its name to the Communist Party of Thailand in 1939 (Rousset, 2009).

In that the early Communist Party of Siam was dominated by Chinese and Chinese Thais, and was urban-based, the movement was not well known to most of Thailand's population. Moreover, in 1952, the Chinese Communist Party of Thailand had 3,000 members, while

the CPT had just 200 (Rousset, 2009). However, changes began to occur around the time of the CPT's Third Party Congress, in 1961 (Baker, 2003; Ettinger, 2007), at which time the idea for armed struggle was formulated. This was during the rule of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, who was strongly anti-communist and intent on suppressing leftists in Thailand (Chaloemtiarana, 1985). During that time, diplomatic relations between the PRC and Thailand had significantly deteriorated. Thus, with the encouragement of China, the CPT made the monumental decision to shift its focus of operations from cities and towns to rural areas. The idea was to surround the cities from the countryside, a strategy in line with Mao's approach to victory in China. This is when people outside of the cities started to learn about the CPT, including in mountainous areas along Thailand's eastern border with Laos (Jeamteerasakul, 2003a). It was also around this time that cadres were sent to the countryside to establish contacts and small bases in preparation for eventually launching an armed struggle (Rousset, 2009).

Initially, political activities and training in rural areas were kept secret, but on August 8, 1965, the first armed fighting between supporters of the CPT and Thai security forces erupted in northeastern Thailand (Alpern, 1975; Baker, 2003; Ettinger, 2007), and the PLAT was established during the same year (Baker, 2003). However, it was not until May 1967 that fighting started in various locations in northern Thailand, beginning in Thoeng District, Chiang Rai Province (Baird, 2021). The armed conflict rapidly intensified, forcing many Hmong and other ethnic minorities to flee into the forests from their villages, which were sometimes burnt down by Thai security forces.

By 1968, the CPT had established a number of stronghold bases (*than thi man* in Thai), all of which were located in remote high mountainous areas in the present-day northern provinces of Chiang Rai, Phayao, Nan, Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, Loei (to the east) and Tak (to the west) (Figure 1) (Baker, 2003; Baird, 2021). Elsewhere, the CPT also grew, especially in the northeast and the south. However, the geography of these regions prevented full-fledged strongholds from being established, since there were no high mountains where bases could be easily defended against a more powerful military force. Instead, "pink" areas were the norm, places that were not always held by the CPT, but where the CPT had a strong presence and influence.

After the October 14, 1973, political conflict between leftist students and the rightwing military resulted in many students being killed and arrested, some students fled to the forest to join the CPT's Maoist revolution. Many of these Thais and Chinese Thais ended up in the red stronghold areas or in pink disputed areas in different parts of the country (Baker, 2003; Rousset, 2009). On September 17, 1974, the CPT's clandestine radio station (broadcasting from Kunming, China), the *Voice of the People of Thailand*, reported that there really were CPT strongholds in Thailand (Voice of the People of Thailand, 1974). The idea was presumably to encourage more people from the cities to join the CPT and enter strongholds or support the CPT in other ways. The CPT had essentially established a state within a state, a place that they could govern that was largely impenetrable by Thai security forces. On October 6, 1976, after the student massacre at Thammasat University, an exceptionally substantial number of students chose to join the CPT in the forests, and many ended up staying in CPT's mountainous bases in northern Thailand (Baker, 2003; Rousset, 2009; Winichakul, 2020).

By late 1978, the CPT was probably at its peak politically (Communist Party of Thailand, 1978), and the PLAT was also militarily stronger than ever before, with the Thai government estimating that the CPT had 12,000-14,000 soldiers under arms throughout Thailand. The CPT was said to have had an influence on over three million people in various parts of the country (Rousset, 2009).



Figure 1. Map of Northern Thailand showing the approximate locations of the CPT strongholds in the early 1970s (map prepared by author with the assistance of the Cartography Lab, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison).

However, even at this high point, problems were looming for the CPT, largely due to external factors. In particular, the relationship between the PRC and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) soured for assorted reasons, including because of the increasing tension between the SRV and Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge). In addition, the PRC was unhappy with the way the SRV was treating the Chinese Vietnamese, particularly in Ho Chi Minh

City (Saigon). The Soviet-Sino communist ideological split was at the core of the tensions that emerged. Conflict particularly escalated after the SRV decided to use its military to bring down Pol Pot and Democratic Kampuchea, after having shown considerable patience after 1975, when the Khmer Rouge started launching deadly attacks on villages on the Vietnamese side of the border (Baird, 2020; Chang, 1983; Heaton, 1982). In turn, the removal of the Khmer Rouge from power angered the PRC, resulting in them attacking Vietnam along the northern border to teach Vietnam a lesson. But the one-month-long campaign led to heavy losses on both sides, and in the end, it was hard to say who had been taught a lesson (Chanda, 1986).

Crucially, during the above PRC-Vietnam split, the Lao People's Democratic Republic sided with the SRV, while the CPT supported the PRC. This turn of events ultimately proved catastrophic for the CPT. On the one hand, the students who had joined them in the forest after October 1973 and October 1976 became increasingly dissatisfied with CPT policy, with some questioning various aspects of CPT thought and practice. Many did not agree that the CPT should side with the PRC. Some wanted to side with Vietnam, and still others advocated remaining neutral, although that may not have been realistic, considering the level of material and political support that the CPT was receiving from the PRC (Chutima, 1990; Rousset, 2009).

In any case, the CPT leadership's decision to support the PRC had important practical implications. For one, in 1979, the CPT was prohibited from using Lao PDR territory as a rear guard, which they had usefully done in the past. The Lao government ordered that PRC-supporting CPT leave their country. This was crippling to the CPT. The final blow occurred when the PRC was able to negotiate with the government of Thailand to allow the Chinese to deliver arms to their key ally, the Khmer Rouge, by passing through Thailand. But the Thais demanded that one crucial change occur before providing territorial passage. The PRC would have to stop materially and politically supporting the CPT. The PRC decided to drop the CPT, including closing down the CPT's clandestine radio station based in Kunming, China, which negatively affected the Thai communists. Despite their loyalty to the PRC, the PRC chose to support the Khmer Rouge over them.

From this point, the morale within the CPT faltered, as they lost access to Laos, stopped receiving Chinese support, and experienced increasing disagreements within the Party over its political direction and future (Chutima, 1990; Rousset, 2009). At the same time, the government of Thailand decided to offer those in the CPT amnesty if they surrendered, first in 1980 and then again in 1982. Thai security forces also exerted increasing military pressure on those unwilling to surrender. These offers, along with the setbacks the CPT was facing, led many to accept the government amnesty (Chutima, 1990; Ettinger, 2007; Wedel, 1982). More followed, and the weakened PLAT also became less powerful. Finally, by 1982, the CPT strongholds had fallen apart and most of those with the CPT had surrendered (Ettinger, 2007; Marks, 1994; Rousset, 2009), although the CPT limped along at a diminished level throughout the 1980s. Most reintegrated into Thai society, with some becoming prominent people in Thai politics and society (Lertchoosakul, 2016). Finally, in the 1990s, the last group of diehard cadres gave up the military fight and secretly abandoned their base in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province, in western Thailand, to reintegrate into Thai society, thus essentially ending the armed conflict.² The CPT remained illegal in Thailand until the law was revoked to encourage reconciliation in the early 2000s.

² Thong Sae Xiong (Ja Her Sae Xiong), pers. comm., Nam Tuang village, Mae Jarim District, Nan Province, Thailand, 3 July 2017.

HMONG IN THE CPT

Before the 1950s, the Hmong in Northern Thailand had little interaction with lowland Thai populations and the government of Thailand. They traded a little with lowlanders, and once a year, some would travel to the lowlands with their horses to purchase or trade for salt, one of the few necessities that they did not produce themselves (Geddes, 1976).

However, in the 1950s and early 1960s, lowlanders and local government officials started going to the mountains and contacting Hmong more. They began taxing, trying to control, and taking advantage of the Hmong in several ways. For example, they sometimes killed Hmong chickens and pigs to eat without paying for them, and there were cases of young Hmong women being harassed and even sexually assaulted. Sometimes officials tried to extort money from the Hmong. There was a lot of discrimination; most Hmong were not recognized as Thai citizens, and many Hmong resented the way they were treated (Baird, 2021).

In around 1960, some ethnic Thai and Chinese Thai people with the CPT travelled overland from China to northern Laos, where they went to the mountains and started making connections with Hmong people. CPT operatives suspected that the Hmong had grievances against the government, and could be recruited more easily. The operatives initially dared not meet villagers in their communities, but instead met them in the forest and near their swidden fields. Later, the CPT started informally teaching Hmong youth about communism. The first Hmong from Thailand recruited was Jong Teng Vang, who was in Laos when he was identified as a Hmong Thai. They asked Jong Teng to 'study' with them, and he agreed, even though he did not speak Thai and was not sure what he had agreed to study. He just wanted to learn more (Baird, 2021).

The CPT's early strategy was to gradually become connected with communities, and then to find interested youth to send to A-30, a CPT basic-training school located along the Laos-China border, in Luang Nam Tha Province or Oudomxay Province. Jong Teng Vang was the first Hmong to study at A-30 (Baird, 2021). After completing training, which typically lasted three months, some of these graduates, Hmong people and those from other ethnic groups, either returned to Thailand to help expand the movement, or were sent for further training in either Vietnam (mainly military) or China (mainly political and medical). Those sent back to Thailand often worked in remote villages to increase the understanding of those interested in communism (called *muanchon* [community] work in Thai) (Baird, 2021; Baird & Yangcheepsutjarit, 2022).

Initially, the CPT wanted to keep its activities secret so that it could strengthen its political base before engaging in military struggle. However, their secret eventually reached the ears of security personnel with the Thai government, and due to a series of events, armed conflict between Hmong villagers who had already been interacting with non-Hmong and Hmong communist agents, and Thai security services broke out, with the first shots being fired on May 8, 1967, almost two years after the first skirmishes between CPT-supporters in northeastern Thailand and government security forces. This marked the beginning of armed fighting between the Hmong with the CPT and government forces (Baird, 2021; Marks, 1973; Race, 1974; Rousset, 2009). Soon, in 1968 and 1969, conflict spread to Hmong and ethnic Lua areas to the south, and finally to the so-called 'three-province area' between Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, and Loei Provinces (Baird, 2021; Baker, 2003; Suebsakwong & Baird, 2020).

Soon, the Thai military was treating all the Hmong in the eastern part of northern Thailand as communists, including those who had been interacting with CPT agents, and those who had not even heard of communism. They were attacked and their houses were often burned down

(Baird, 2021). This drove many into the arms of the awaiting CPT, thus achieving the opposite result than what the Thai military intended (Kerdphol, 1986). In particular, the Hmong and the Lua in the mountains along the border joined the CPT en masse, although the Thai government managed to relocate some of them out of the mountains before the CPT could recruit them (Baird, 2024).

On August 30, 1969, *The Voice of the People of Thailand* (1969), a Hmong-language radio, urged Hmong people in Thailand to revolt against the government of Thailand. Indeed, by this time, most of the CPT strongholds were populated by ethnic Hmong and Lua people, and these two groups are the main upland minority groups who supported the CPT, although some Karen joined the CPT in Western Thailand.

The Hmong in the CPT developed significant friendships with people from other ethnic groups and parts of the country who came to stay at CPT strongholds, especially after the student influxes in 1973 and 1976 (Fongthale, 2013; Khunphol, 2005, 2009, 2014; Lee, 2016; Lertchoosakul, 2016). This resulted in many Hmong people, including women, learning to speak Central Thai, since that was the language promoted by the CPT (Baird, 2021; Baird & Yangcheepsujarit, 2022).

Because of low formal education levels, no Hmong were ever appointed to the central committee or politburo of the CPT, but some became provincial and zone committee members, and many others became civilian and military leaders and party members (Baird, 2022; Baird & Yangcheepsutjarit, 2022).

As with others in the CPT, most Hmong surrendered to the government of Thailand after the 1980 and 1982 amnesties were issued by the government of Thailand (Baird, 2021), but a small number continued to support the CPT in southern Thailand and finally western Thailand, when the CPT's armed struggle quietly ended in the early 1990s.

THE HISTORY PROJECT

The history project that is the focus of this article was important to the CPT for a few reasons. First, a large proportion of their key supporters, and rank-and-file military were Hmong and Lua, particularly in the eastern part of Northern Thailand. Therefore, maintaining good relations between these two groups, and also other groups from different parts of Thailand, was important to the overall revolutionary struggle of the CPT.

The CPT was not the first communist party in Asia to take ethnic minority solidarity issues seriously. The CPT was heavily influenced by Maoist thought, and soon after the Chinese Communist Party gained control of mainland China in 1949, it undertook efforts to categorize and incorporate ethnic minorities into the unified national framework of the PRC (Harrell, 1994). In addition, Charles Keyes (2002) wrote about how the communist government in Vietnam worked to develop an ethnic classification system that would integrate ethnic minorities into its larger political and nation-building agenda. Vatthana Pholsena (2006) also wrote about how the Lao People's Revolutionary Party addressed ethnicity issues in Laos after it took control of the country in 1975. Thus, the fact that this was also an important part of the CPT's efforts should not come as a surprise.

According to Norki, he was especially engaged in the CPT history project over two periods, each continuing for a few years. The first was between 1971 and 1973, and the second was between 1973 and 1976. This indicates that the project began before the influx of students in 1973 and 1976. Norki explained that the brains behind the project was Thuam, a man with whom Norki had worked for many years. However, he never learned his real name. He only knew his administrative or revolutionary name. He did, however, know that Thuam was a

Chinese Thai, as Norki heard him speak Chinese. Norki also learned that Thuam had previously collected data about Hmong in China and had taught at Thammasat University in Bangkok.

Norki explained that he had never been invited to become a Party member, but that he was assigned to conduct fieldwork to document the history of the Hmong, his people. Therefore, he interviewed many elderly Hmong people, one of whom told him the story that I will convey below. However, Norki emphasized that he did not believe everything that he was told. He told me that he collected “real data,” although without explaining the difference between real and not real data. Norki emphasized that Chinese history books were used to supplement the interview data, indicating how Chinese political thought was an important part of the project. The objective, Norki emphasized, was to collect high-quality data. He could speak Hmong and Thai fluently, so he was chosen for the history work.

Since Norki was a soldier too, he worked on the history project part-time, whenever he had time, especially when there were no pressing military matters to attend to. “I could only work on the project sometimes,” he said, “but I was glad to work on it when I had the chance.” Indeed, he was proud that the CPT leaders in the area recognized his importance, and he felt he was assigned to a prominent position. However, he emphasized that what he prepared was not simply an oral history. He also claimed that he looked for other evidence to support these stories. One of his jobs was to compare different stories that he collected from various locations. However, he emphasized that he needed to be scientific, something that was critically important in the communist world during this time.

Norki and others involved with this small project, which was expected to result in a written history in Central Thai language, were based at an office high up in the mountains near the zone headquarters, an area restricted for regular people living in the CPT controlled Phu Hin Rong Kla area (*khet 10*) (see Baird, 2021). Thuam wrote up the results in Central Thai. A hand-written book manuscript was eventually completed. The plan was to type up a copy at the CPT school at Phu Hin Rong Kla, but the CPT stronghold fell before this could be done, and it is unclear what happened to the hand-written original.

Although the written document that Norki played a role in producing was never reproduced, and may no longer exist, his oral account of the Hmong part of the history remains, as selective and politically influenced as it may be. This account helps reveal how Hmong ideas about their history were brought together with CPT political thought during the 1970s.³

As Norki remembers and recounted – and how he narrates the story to the frequent guests who visit him – the Hmong and the Lua were once slaves during the time of feudalism. However, at one point, the ethnic Tai Lue king of Sipsongpanna – today the southernmost part of Yunnan Province, China – fled from his homeland, leaving only his slaves, who later worked for a new group of leaders. Slaves were living in various parts of the region, from Lanna, in present-day Northern Thailand, to Sipsongpanna, and the Hmong and Lua were transported to Chiang Mai as slaves. However, the exact period that they were brought back from Chiang Mai to Sipsongpanna was unclear to Norki. However, he reported that they were brought back to Xayaboury, in present-day northwestern Laos. However, the number of people is unclear. But crucially, the emphasis on slavery in the past was important for producing the CPT's political narrative at the time.

Later, explained Norki, Lanna (northern Thailand) gradually expanded its influence to the east, as far as Xayaboury Province. However, the Lanna soldiers could not easily settle down

³ Norki Akararot (Sae Lor), pers. comm., Toop Kho Village, Dansai District, Loei Province, Thailand, 15 May 2021.

there. They did not have enough food, including rice, and there were reportedly many human-eating tigers in the area. Later, however, Lanna was able to send rice as far as Tha Wang Pha District, Nan Province, and to Chiang Kham in present-day Phayao Province, so the soldiers ultimately settled in those areas.

However, the Hmong and the Lua at Tha Wang Pha knew the territory of the tigers. There was one particularly large tiger that people were terrified of. However, the Hmong and the Lua entered the territory of this tiger when others did not dare. Their secret was that they brought only their own excrement with them, which dissuaded the tiger from attacking them. Later, they returned unharmed, causing the soldiers in the lowlands to wonder how they were able to return without being attacked by the tigers. But the Lanna king was impressed and allowed the Hmong and the Lua to stay in his kingdom. He also ordered that they be freed from being slaves. The Hmong became free citizens, or *samanchon* in Thai. The key political message that emerged here was that the Hmong and Lua had a shared distant history, even though it is well known that Hmong migrated to Thailand from China and Vietnam via Laos much more recently than the Lua (Suebsakwong, 2021), who are believed to have lived in the area much longer.

According to Norki, the Hmong and Lua continued to play a key role in Lanna. “The Hmong and Lua were important,” he emphasized. The Hmong between Chiang Khong and Dansai allegedly protected the boundary of Lanna from the Lane Xang kingdom in Luang Prabang, in present-day northern Laos. However, in reality the Hmong were not in the area during the Lanna period. In any case, Lanna was also said to have sent a group of Lua people to the Burma-India border. They reportedly became known as the Lawa by the Chinese, according to Norki. The old Lua people, the grandchildren of a Lua king, stayed in Chiang Mai.

According to Norki, two groups of Hmong came to Thailand. The first was the one discussed above. Norki claimed that the second group came to Thailand 230 years later. According to Norki, the second group was not brought to Thailand as slaves, like the first group, but came by themselves. He explained that their origin was Qinghai in Tibet. He claimed that they were located east and west of old trade routes and associated markets. He explained that many years later, Europeans took control of China, but that the Chinese were eventually – through difficult struggle – able to take back their country. The Hmong were said to have lived at Tong Khong near the Yellow River in China. One can see how the revolutionary struggle of China was included in the new historical narrative being produced. Norki did not mention that the Chinese and Hmong had any conflict, although this is a common reason given by Hmong for why they migrated south.

Later, the Hmong were said by Norki to have resisted the Hong Te Emperor of China’s army when they tried to pass by them to travel to the south. However, they could not defeat the emperor’s army and eventually had to retreat further south. The Chinese continued to press to takeover Qinghai, in northwestern China. Therefore, the Hmong eventually had to come into Vietnam and then Laos. The second group entered Laos at Long Tong Village, across from Chiang Kham in Phayao Province, northern Thailand, and later they met the second group and urged them to cross to the west side of the Mekong, which was the first time that the second group had travelled that far west.

Later, Xayaboury became part of French Laos, Norki explained. According to him, the Hmong did not like the French, as each able-bodied adult had to pay ten *tamleung* of gold as tax annually. The Hmong also did not like corvée labor, as the French system forced them to build roads for a couple of weeks each year. The Hmong also had to carry heavy amounts of gold for the French from one place to another. The exploitation of Hmong labor allegedly caused the second group of Hmong to cross into Thailand. Norki said that this group came to Thailand over

100 years ago. During the Second World War, more Hmong came to Thailand from Laos. It is noteworthy that he did not mention the large number of Hmong in Laos who sided with the French during this period (see Lee, 2015).

Eventually, two Hmong village leaders, Phu Yai Noo and Phu Yai Thao, were reportedly allowed to meet the King of Siam (Thailand), during the reign of King Mongkut, Rama IV. Around this time, all ethnic minority groups were given Thai citizenship if they sent a representative to register with the King. Phu Yai Noo and Phu Yai Thao brought a large elephant with long tusks to offer to the King when they met him. According to Norki, that was the only way that the Hmong were allowed to have an audience with the King. Norki claimed that the tusks are still in Bangkok, as they were taken and displayed after the elephant died, and the King died long after. Norki claimed that he was a seventh generation direct descendent of Phu Yai Noo.

Norki explained that during the early 1960s, Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat became the dictator of Thailand, and it was him, he reported, who said that the Hmong were new arrivals to Thailand, and that they should not be allowed to become Thai citizens. In response, a new historical narrative emerged, asserting that the Hmong had been in Thailand much longer than previously recognized. This narrative served two purposes: it supported the CPT, which the Thai government often tried to portray as foreign, and it also advanced the Hmong's quest for recognition within Thailand.

More recently, Norki reported that people from many universities had visited him, often spending about half a day with him to hear about the history project that he had been part of. However, he claimed that he does not write anything down, for fear that doing so could lead him to be considered a national security threat to Thailand. He also claimed that his phone was tapped by the Thai government. However, he reported proudly that he still loves collecting world news. He claimed to know what is happening around the world within just three hours. He considers himself to be supportive of progressive political parties in Thailand. This may indicate how present-day politics is affecting his understanding of the past.

ASSESSING THE HISTORY PROJECT

The history project, as narrated by Norki, is interesting for a few reasons and is worth assessing in some detail. While more conventional CPT histories have also been created (see for example, Baker, 2003; Communist Party of Thailand, 1978; de Beer, 1978; Jeamteerasakul, 2003, a & b), this one was different, as its focus was specifically on ethnic Hmong and Lua peoples and their relations and legitimacy in Thailand. No other ethnic group-based history is known to have been produced by the CPT.

Going through the story chronologically, the first part, about the Hmong and Lua being brought to Lanna from Sipsongpanna as slaves hundreds of years ago does not coincide with other historical accounts of Hmong migration into Thailand (Lee, 2015; Leepreecha, 2001; Suebsakwong, 2021), and there is no clear evidence to support it, or to refute it. There could be some truth to it. However, it seems likely that the CPT emphasized this narrative to link the history of Hmong and Lua solidarity, for strategic reasons related to reimagining history so that the two groups of upland peoples had a shared history, which would have improved ethnic group harmony. Indeed, Mao endeavored to improve ethnic relations in China during the revolutionary period, and the idea was to do something similar in Thailand. The reality was, however, that the Hmong and the Lua had not always gotten along well, which might have been a key motivating factor in developing the project in the first place. Indeed, these aspects do not appear to have been included in the narrative, probably for political reasons.

The depiction of the Hmong and Lua as slaves in the past is intended to emphasize their previous condition, and their liberation from that horrid state to the situation in which they were in the CPT. It helps explain the class struggle that was a fundamental part of Maoist thought, since the Hmong and the Lua were all classified as *chon chan kamakorn* (laborers).

Of course, the oppression and creation of traditions that are linked with manipulated history are often an important part of political projects related to state and nation building (Beiner, 2007; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Sievers, 2007), including in Asia (Baird, 2014; Kaew-ngarmprasert, 1995; Vlastos, 1998). For example, rewritten histories can help maintain fighting spirit and morale during times of conflict, as was the case during the period of the Khmer Republic, between 1970-1975, when the Vietnamese were cast as the historical enemies of the Khmer. The heroic deeds of the Khmer kings were deemphasized, and the deeds of regular Khmer people were emphasized, including in textbooks (Shintani, 2018). Rewritten histories can also help direct focus away from controversial figures and focus them more on others deemed to be more acceptable by those with power. For example, in Khorat, Ya Mo's role was exaggerated, and she was elevated. She was real, but her role in history was changed (Kaew-ngarmprasert, 1995). Meanwhile, in adjacent Chaiyaphum Province, some leaders who sided with the Lao were deemphasized and their memory was suppressed, such as Phraya Narin Songkhram, while other leaders loyal to Thailand, such as Phraya Lae, were celebrated and elevated in importance (Baird, 2014).

The second part of the history, about the Hmong moving from China, their eventual crossing of the Mekong, and the Hmong relationship with the Thai King, and Phu Yai Noo and Phu Yai Thao, has not been discussed in this way by other scholars. However, it is well-known that the Hmong did migrate south to Vietnam and Laos due to oppression from the Han Chinese, but also to find new forests and fertile forests to conduct swidden cultivation (Lee, 2005; Leepreecha, 2001; Suebsakwong, 2021). This suggests that while the CPT wanted to promote a particular narrative of ethnic solidarity, they also allowed the Hmong and the Lua considerable agency in shaping parts of their histories, in order to make them credible to the people. There was clearly some implicit compromising going on in order to create a history that would be acceptable to both the CPT and the ethnic Hmong and Lua.

Interestingly, the Hmong are described as arriving in two waves, hundreds of years ago, and the other about 100 years ago. Scholars have discussed the first group of migrants before, but only the second group is well-known (Leepreecha, 2001; Suebsakwong, 2021). However, recognizing this earlier group was politically important, as it legitimized the Hmong as having arrived in Thailand much earlier than most believed, thus implicitly pushing back on accusations that the ethnic minorities who fought with the CPT in the 1970s were foreigners, not Thai people, or Thai citizens. Moreover, the CPT was often characterized by the Thai government as "not Thai," so it was politically important to push back against that idea.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided insights into the ways that the leadership within the CPT thought about ethnic minority groups, and how it developed a history project with the goal of increasing the solidarity of two important ethnic minority groups with the CPT, the Hmong and the Lua. It demonstrates how the CPT put together historical information regarding the Hmong and the Lua in order to present a narrative that would bring the two ethnic groups together in the same broader historical narrative, and legitimate them in Thailand. Thus, this is yet another example of how 'the invention of history' occurred, in this case with the participation of ethnic Hmong and Lua people. The minorities were given a degree of agency in developing the historical

narrative, to ensure that they would accept it. It appears that the CPT both saw ethnicity as a weakness, something that could drive people apart and divert attention from more important structural economic or class disparities, but also something that needed to be managed and addressed at times, to ensure ethnic group harmony and loyalty to the CPT, and to address outside criticisms that were part of the propaganda campaign against the CPT.

While it would have been preferable to have been able to assess a written copy of the history project documents that were produced with Hmong and Lua input at the time the project was operating, we are unaware of the continued existence of the original or any copies of the text that was reportedly produced by the project. This leaves only oral histories, and this one can both reveal some aspects of what happened, but more importantly, it can show how ethnicity issues were sometimes seen by intellectuals working with the CPT during the 1970s, even if memory is a limiting factor. Still, the article contributes to better understanding the CPT's approach to ethnicity issues between the late 1960s and the early 1980s.

Ultimately, the existence of this ethnic minority history project indicates that one of the ways that the CPT tried to create and control its own historical narrative, including emphasizing a history that fit well with political theory and practical goals, and involved important ethnic minorities, especially the Hmong and the Lua, whose contributions to the revolution could not be ignored and needed to be managed carefully. But the revolution fell apart before the history project could be completed, leaving only the oral history of how the project developed. We may never be able to learn the details regarding this intriguing initiative.



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