

# Literacy and L'Armee Clandestine: The Writings of the Hmong Military Scribes\*

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## Abstract

While histories of Hmong literacy development in Laos have focused on the role of village schools, the arrival of missionary Christianity, and the development of various Hmong religious alphabets, one site for Hmong literacy development has been consistently overlooked: *L'Armee Clandestine*, or the Hmong "Secret Army." This article examines literacy development in the Hmong military, looking at the writings of Hmong military scribes. The article discusses how 1) literacy skills taught in other contexts, such as Laotian public schools, were further developed in the Hmong military, 2) a selected number of Hmong men were introduced through military service to English language and literacy, and 3) military scribes might appropriate literacy to address personal needs and aspirations.

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When we learned how to write we were taught by the officers. They taught us that, if we were writing something to be telegraphed back to the main base, for example, if we did not have enough food, then we should write just a little bit, just the precise meanings. But we were also taught how to write a letter telling them that today we fought this many hours and this many of our soldiers died; or that we killed this many Communists in this area. These things, we went to learn about these things in the military. We then became good in writing.

--A Hmong military veteran, describing the writing that he did while serving in *L' Armee Clandestine* [\[1\]](#)

[1]

When the CIA first began contacting Hmong leaders in northern Laos in the early 1960s, the idea behind the initiative was that, given arms and assistance, the Hmong would make an effective guerrilla army, an irregular force that could provide military intelligence, harass North Vietnamese troops, and rescue U.S. pilots who had been shot down over Laos. As the war intensified, however, the role and size of the covert army increased dramatically. From its modest beginnings of 750 recruits in 1961, the Hmong force grew to approximately 14,000 to 18,000 troops by July 1962, and after that to some 40,000 men by 1969 (Castle, 1993, p. 57; Chan, 1994, p. 32). {2} The build-up of what became known of as *L'Armée Clandestine*, or "The Secret Army," resulted in a corresponding shift in military strategies. Where Hmong forces had initially conducted small-scale hit-and-run attacks, by 1969 they were engaging North Vietnamese troops in full-scale, logistically demanding battles on the Plain of Jars.

[2]

Among the many consequences of this transformation of the Hmong fighters from a guerrilla force into a conventional army was the growth of a large and increasingly complex military bureaucracy. This in turn called for a new class of person in Hmong society -- the military scribe, who was responsible for carrying out the specialized literacy activities in the Lao language called for by the expanding bureaucratic apparatus of *L'Armée Clandestine*. Military scribe was not a designated rank or position; rather, the term could be applied to anyone whose job involved writing on behalf of the Hmong Army. Among these writing tasks were keeping inventories of personnel, weapons, and food supplies; writing letters on behalf of Hmong soldiers and their families; sending reports from the field to base commanders; and providing written information to CIA and Hmong pilots who were making food drops to Hmong troops in the field or attacking enemy positions. {3} The testimony of Ger Thao, who became a military scribe in the 1960s, was typical:

When I was a soldier, I served as a secretary. . . . helping the battalion commander. I would write such things as, Tonight, we fought each other, and how did we do? I would keep records of how many people died,

how many people were injured. . . . Also the enemy, how many people did we see, exactly, die there in that battle? How many of them were injured and killed? And if we got grenades, or guns, or bullets from the enemy, I would write that down. We needed to report everything.

[3]

Literacy has long played a role in warfare. Writing has been vital to military leaders for disseminating information, maintaining archives, and accounting for expenditures of men and material (Diamond, 1997, pp. 78-80, 215-216). Today, the importance of literacy to military structure is evidenced in the time and resources devoted to education in the training of military recruits (Sticht 1995). Indeed, one can argue that literacy has long been one of the most potent weapons in the military arsenal.

[4]

Despite the historical links between writing and warfare, however, few scholars have considered the role of the Hmong military in promoting the literacy skills--in this case, literacy skills in the Lao language--of the Hmong people in Laos. While historians have investigated much of the rich and complex history of literacy in Hmong culture, a history that crosses several centuries, languages, and national borders, the role of the "Secret Army" in promoting reading and writing skills has been comparatively neglected. As a result, the larger story of the literacy development of the Hmong people remains incomplete. [{4}](#)

[5]

The neglect of the Hmong military's role in promoting a specialized form of literacy in the Laotian language is perhaps explained by the relatively small number of Hmong who served as military scribes. Although the exact number is not known, the count is probably not very high. [{5}](#) Another explanation for the lack of attention afforded to military scribes might be that while the Hmong military required scribes to carry out certain types of specialized literacy activities, such as creating lists or writing reports, the

army was not engaged in the systematic teaching of literacy, as were the village schools and Christian missionaries. Instead, the military's contribution was to provide a context in which Hmong men could use the literacy skills they had learned elsewhere, usually in village or missionary schools.

[\[6\]](#)

[6]

Nevertheless, the writings of the Hmong military scribes represent an important tributary in the history of the literacy development of the Hmong people. For one thing, the kinds of writing activities practiced in the military were more specialized and practical than those taught to Hmong students in Lao schools, which emphasized rote learning rather than practical applications of literacy. This meant that the military offered the Hmong scribes a chance to use writing skills they had learned previously in new and unfamiliar ways. So although the Hmong military was not teaching literacy in a systematic fashion, it was providing opportunities to practice specialized and technical forms of literacy. Military service also introduced a small number of Hmong to certain functional forms of English language literacy, suggesting an historical starting point for what has become the primary spoken and written language for tens of thousands of Hmong men and women in the United States. Finally, the reading and writing skills practiced in the context of Hmong military service were important because they could later be used by the scribes in other contexts and situations. Some scribes, for example, used the skills they had practiced in the military to record their personal histories as commanders in the Hmong *Cob Fab*, the anti-Communist resistance movement that was formed after the demise of the Royal Lao Government in 1975. We shall examine two such cases below. For these reasons, the military writings of the Hmong scribes merit consideration in the larger story of literacy development as it has been experienced by the Hmong people.

[7]

In this article, I draw upon interviews that I conducted with Hmong military veterans to consider the writings of the Hmong military scribes, looking at how the scribes were selected

and trained, what they wrote, how they were introduced to certain forms of English language literacy, and the ways in which some scribes used their skills after the demise of Royal Lao Government. In this way I hope to enrich the narrative of Hmong literacy development by bringing attention to a part of the larger story that has been largely neglected.

[8]

Before setting forth, a few definitions and disclaimers. First, I should explain what I mean when I speak of "Hmong literacy development." When I talk in this paper about the contribution of the military to "Hmong literacy development," I mean Hmong people learning to read and write in any language, and in any writing system. I am not referring specifically to reading and writing in the Hmong language--for example in the Romanized Popular Alphabet created in the 1950s by William A. Smalley, G. Linwood Barney, and Father Yves Bertrais. Rather, I am referring to the history of Hmong people learning to read and write generally. This means that "Hmong literacy development" can refer to literacy in the Hmong language, but also to learning to read and write in the Chinese, Laotian, Thai, or English languages. When I wish to refer specifically to reading and writing in the Hmong language, I use the phrase "Hmong-language literacy development." This is perhaps more confusing than enlightening, but I shall try to be clear as we proceed.

[9]

I should also say what this article is not. My account of Hmong literacy practices in the military is based on interviews that I have collected over three years in one Hmong community in Wisconsin. My purpose in conducting these has been to gather information for a larger study of the social, political, and economic forces influencing literacy development. Of the 46 people interviewed, ten men reported working as military scribes; the testimonies of eight are quoted here. Thus, this article is not a definitive history of the Hmong military scribe. Rather, it is meant to introduce the role of the military in promoting literacy, and to serve as a possible starting point for more comprehensive studies.

[10]

Obviously, the testimonies of eight men do not represent the experiences of all Hmong military scribes, much less all Hmong people. The research method used here is that of the biographical interview, otherwise known as the "life history" approach or, more simply, as "oral history" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 129). In this approach to telling history, a selected number of individuals speak from their experiences, relating, interpreting, and valuing events as they understand them. Their testimonies are not meant to be comprehensive but rather serve as first-hand accounts of an historical era from some of the people who lived through it. We must always acknowledge that other Hmong might have radically different interpretations of the times and events discussed in this paper. These are not to be discounted but welcomed by anyone seeking to understand the complexities of the past in general, and of the Hmong past in particular.

### **Soldiers as Writers: The Training and Writings of the Military Scribe**

#### **Selection and Training**

[11]

Becoming a Hmong military scribe was not a formal process. There were no applications to fill out, no standardized tests to pass, no recommendations to solicit. Rather, Hmong soldiers who could already read and write in Laotian, Hmong, or English were the most likely to become scribes. Once selected, the scribes were typically stationed at one of the Hmong military bases and excused from fighting at least temporarily so that they could perform their duties. Moua Hang, for example, recalled that after he was chosen as a scribe he was given a respite from combat:

So they selected the ones who knew how to read and write to stay in the base, behind the fighting, to do personnel work, things like that.

Pao Vang, another Hmong scribe, had a similar recollection:

I went to work in Long Cheng, mainly. And since I knew

how to read and write they didn't allow me to go fight in battles.

[12]

Bee Lee Xiong recalled how, as a young boy, his father admonished him to get an education because Hmong men who learned to read and write might be excused, at least temporarily, from going into combat:

So at that time my father came back home from the war, and he told me, "Son, you have to listen to me now. I see other people's fathers and sons, and they are all reading and writing, and they have good jobs, and they make good money. And they don't go to the front and fight. Now there is still time for you to learn from me. No matter if there is no school, you can still learn from me. And I will teach you whenever we have time."

[13]

These testimonies suggest that the Hmong military was not a primary agent for disseminating literacy but provided a context for using the literacy skills developed elsewhere, such as in the Lao schools in Hmong villages, where teachers taught the Lao language and writing system. Both Moua Hang and Pao Vang, for example, came into the military knowing how to read and write and were selected to become scribes on the basis of that.

[14]

While there was no formal training process for Hmong military scribes, some Hmong soldiers were sent by the CIA for military training in Thailand. In classes taught by CIA operatives -- whose English was translated into the Thai language by Thai paramilitaries -- Hmong recruits learned about weapons, communications, ordnance, and map-making. While these were not literacy classes, much of the training called for reading instructional materials and taking notes. Va Youa Yang recalled:

When you went to learn about guns, how to shoot guns, how to throw grenades, how to set mines, things like

this, then you wrote very little. But you did write to remember the proper way to shoot the guns--to see how far the bullets went, how heavy the bullet was. And you took notes on how to add gunpowder to make the bullets shoot further, and how to decrease the gunpowder to shoot closer. . . . So you just wrote notes to remember these things.

[15]

For Hmong recruits who had been selected to become officers, other kinds of training sessions were offered, and some Hmong used their literacy skills in the context of these sessions. Va Youa Yang remembered:

But when you went for training, you also learned how to be a leader. You had to take notes as to how you should lead so that you will get along with your soldiers. Did you lead in a good way or bad way so that you will get along with the soldiers? Also, when you would lead the citizens, how should you lead? When I went to study how to be a leader, for example, I wrote about the ways to lead people: You must love and care for your soldiers. You must know how to teach your soldiers so they will listen to you and will be willing to fight the war with you. So you must write these things down that they teach you then. Yes, so you must write them down.

[16]

As before, there is no indication in these testimonies that the Hmong military was teaching recruits to read and write in the manner in which literacy was taught in the village schools, or in the bible schools run by Christian missionaries. What the Hmong military was providing, however, was a context for literacy, a practical application for it, and several new and unfamiliar ways of using one's literacy skills. Let us now look at some of these uses for literacy.

### **What They Wrote**

[17]

After the scribe had been chosen, he was given a variety of writing tasks, all of which were related to the military mission of *L' Armée Clandestine*. Much of scribal writing was clerical: scribes created lists, compiled accounts, and kept records of the human and material resources necessary for the prosecution of the war. Tou Lor, for example, recalled that his duties as a scribe required that he keep personnel and payroll records:

After I became a soldier, then I wrote for the soldiers. I became a what you would call in this country a secretary. I was the person who wrote letters to help the soldiers, who recorded the soldiers' names into lists, who wrote whether they were good soldiers or not. . . I made lists of the people who were receiving government money; what rank these people had, and what rank I and others had, things like this. Then I typed it into pages and saved them. [\[7\]](#)

Va Youa Yang recalled similar duties:

I wrote letters and kept records of the military personnel and their status. I kept records about the fightings and where people fought. So, I helped them write records and reports regarding these things. . . . In doing this, I came to keep records. I kept track of gun registration numbers. When there was a battle, I recorded how many guns were lost, how many guns were still at hand. I also kept records of the soldiers, how many came back from their leave, how many did not, how many soldiers were ill, and how many soldiers were in the base. I did these things.

[18]

These were the kinds of secretarial duties performed by the Hmong military scribe. But the scribes did not simply keep lists of salaries, ranks, and registration numbers. The escalation of fighting meant increasing casualties for Hmong soldiers, and scribes compiled lists of the killed and wounded. Va Youa Yang explained:

Regarding those reports. . . like when the soldiers

went to war or when there was fighting, after the fighting they would radio back or return and report to us. Then I would have to write down as to how they fought, how many were killed, and how many survived.

[19]

Aside from reports and lists, Hmong military scribes also wrote letters on behalf of Hmong soldiers and their families. Typically, these letters were written for soldiers who wanted a military leave but could not read or write themselves. In this case, they would request that the scribe write the letter for them, which would then be forwarded to the ranking officer responsible for approving or denying the request. Ying Lee recalled:

The writing I did included writing permission letters for people who wanted to go home. If a person was injured, I had to write to the commanding officer asking permission for this person to go home. If a person was ill, the letter would ask permission for this person to stay in the back, away from the fighting for a little while. This is what I did.

[20]

When soldiers overstayed their leaves, the scribe would write another kind of letter, this one on behalf of the Hmong military command at the CIA headquarters at Long Cheng, reminding the person that it was time to return to the war. In this way, literacy took on a regulatory function, serving a means through which the Hmong military commanders could communicate with and control the soldiers under their command. Va Youa Yang recalled it this way:

Those soldiers who requested permission to go home, you would write letters for them asking . . . to go home. But when the soldiers went home and did not return, then you would have to write letters ordering them to return. When someone did not return, I would write to him telling that he has gone past his date and he must return to work as before. If he did not come back after this letter requesting his return, then he must accept his punishment himself. . . . Most

came back.

[21]

The military scribes also wrote letters requesting compensation on behalf of Hmong women whose husbands had been killed in combat. Pao Youa Vang explained that when a soldier was killed, his widow had to file paperwork to receive compensation from the Hmong military command. Since few women could read and write, the necessary paperwork was commonly handled by the scribe at the request of the woman or other party involved. Vang explained how this procedure was commonly handled:

You had to keep records when soldiers died, and you had to apply for money from the high officials. You kept a record of when you applied for money for those who have died, or were wounded and were in the hospital. You wrote to help those families--wives and children--who have needs. The letter would explain as to whether the husband was killed by a gun shot, got hit by a mine, or just disappeared; these things you explained also. {8}

These letters were not original compositions but were actually form letters that the scribe filled out in consultation with the widow or other family member. Vang explained:

Those forms would tell the soldier's name, service, rank, age, the city he lived in, the names of his mother and father, the name of his wife--this is what the form would say. Yes, they gave you a sample form and you filled out the form. They were already created; they left white areas for you to fill in.

These letters would then be sent to Hmong military command where the claim for compensation would be addressed.

[22]

But if most of the work of the scribe was clerical, some writing tasks called for the exercise of more complex mental activities. Scribes were also expected to write summaries of battlefield reports sent to the base by Hmong commanders in

the field and send these on to Hmong military intelligence. Such reports demanded the complex literate skills of restating, summarizing, and synthesizing information from multiple sources. Tou Lor, for example, recalled summarizing reports that were sent from several locations on the battlefield and synthesizing these for his commanding officer. If the reports were not accurate or clear, the officer would return them with instructions to rewrite them:

. . . after I was done writing the reports then I would give them to Colonel C. . . . He has to check the reports then you can send them . . . . He would check to see if the information was correct, if you wrote them correctly or not; he would finish correcting them in Laotian. And then he would approve whether or not you could send the report. . . . If it was not right then you must redo it.

Lor explained that his commanding officer was demanding and specific. He insisted, Lor said, on proper grammar and spelling, and even showed him how to format the page when writing a report.

[23]

Being a Hmong scribe also meant being introduced to technologies that were not widely used by other Hmong soldiers or civilians. Tou Lor remembered being taught how to use a Lao-language typewriter for writing his reports. Ying Lee learned a specialized military code for transmitting information between the field and the base, and was taught how to operate the electronic equipment necessary for transmitting and receiving in this code. Lee's translations were sent directly to General Vang Pao, the supreme Hmong military leader:

Those who went to fight in the front would send telegraphed messages back to the base. These were very hard to translate. The messages were written in numbers. They had written numbers in groups of four; one group would be made up of four numbers. These would be written down [after they were received]. Then they would be translated into one line, one sentence at a time. Then they would be sent to General Vang

Pao. General Vang Pao would send them to the appropriate offices, and each office would do its specific tasks accordingly. [{9}](#)

[24]

In general, scribes learned a specialized set of literacy functions and performed these on behalf of the Hmong military command. In this sense did the Hmong military scribes resemble what Eric Havelock (1963, cited in Ong, 1982, p. 93) called the literacy "craftsmen" of ancient Greece, those whom "others might hire to write a letter or document as they might hire a stone-mason to build a house, or a shipwright to build a boat." Hmong scribes, however, did not work for the civilian population but for the Hmong military. Their writing served as a conduit for a higher authority. [{10}](#)

[25]

There were also important social and regulatory functions of scribal literacy. As Bernardo Gallegos (1992) has explained, literacy functions as an instrument for social cohesion and helps to maintain the social order "through the human record keeping system" (p. 73). Similarly, the writings of the military scribe--the lists, records, letters, and reports--served as an instrument through which military authorities could keep track of and regulate the Hmong military and civilian populations. Furet and Ozouf (1982, p. 312, quoted in Gallego, p, 73) have observed that "it is through the written word, as it short-circuits the barriers erected by the oral community, that each subject or citizen is recorded and defined by his social coordinates; born on such and such a date, of this father and that mother, in the town of X, occupying some specific profession, and so on." In the same way, the forms, lists, letters, and reports filled out by the military scribe "recorded and defined" Hmong soldiers and their families, locating them within the bureaucratic universe of the Hmong military and its CIA sponsors.

### **Alpha, Bravo, Charlie: Learning English as a Scribe**

[26]

Another significant feature of scribal literacy in the Hmong

military was that it introduced at least some scribes to particular forms of the English language--specifically, military jargon--suggesting one point of origin for the much larger story of the Hmong acquisition of English language and literacy. [\[11\]](#) While most of the writing undertaken by scribes was in the Lao language, a conscious choice made by the Hmong leadership to reflect their loyalty to the Royal Lao Government (Smalley, 1985), the everyday relationships of Hmong soldiers with CIA advisors and pilots demanded a medium through which Hmong and Americans could communicate. Since few CIA personnel knew Hmong or Lao, some Hmong began to learn technical forms of English from CIA operatives to facilitate military operations. Chang Lo, for example, recalled seeing English-language materials on the military base in Thailand, and using these to study the language:

We saw that language, English, and we were curious. There were these books, which were written in English, with Thai and Lao on the other side. We bought them and studied them ourselves. If you knew someone who knew the language, you would go ask him to help you for a little while. There was no class for us to learn it.

[27]

Scribal English was typically functional and motivated by immediate needs. Hmong soldiers who undertook to learn English did so to communicate with U.S. pilots who were conducting bombing missions over Hmong territories in Laos or dropping supplies to Hmong soldiers in the field. Chang Lo recalled:

So we bought [English] books to study, so that we could work with the pilots, the Americans, who came to work in our country. Where should he drop the bombs? Where should he drop the food? Where should he go pick up the dead people? Where should he go pick up the wounded people? All these things we studied, and we studied how to read map coordinates, so we can direct the airplanes to go land there.

[28]

Ger Thao was also introduced to English literacy while working with CIA pilots in Laos. Thao remembered learning the linguistic code known as the "NATO alphabet," or the "military phonetic alphabet," in which common nouns replace letter names in long-distance communications such as radio transmissions (O' Conner, 1996, p. 791). Thus, "A" becomes "Alpha," "B" becomes "Bravo," "C" becomes "Charlie," and so forth. Thao's first introduction to letters of the English alphabet came from exposure to this code:

For example. . . in the army, they used ABCs, right? In the army, they would say "Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo". . . They would say it like that. They would have a map. But on the map, they would just write an abbreviation, like "Hotel" or "Tango." Tango is "T" right? "Tango" and "Ouija," these would be on the map. So when they told me, I learned how to read it.

[29]

Thao explained that learning the code was necessary to ensure accurate communication between Hmong soldiers and CIA pilots. Clear communication, Thao said, could literally be a matter of life and death:

Usually, we have to tell the pilots what map to look at, and we have to tell them the numbers, the coordinates. And they take a look at the map, and they want to know, "All right now, the enemy is here, right?" We would report the place where the enemy was surrounding us. But we would use the codes of the map, for example, FV or sometimes G or GF, sometimes U or G, like that. It depends what the map said, and where we were.

Sometimes the map had six numbers, sometimes twelve numbers. And the people there, or the leader, they would know where the enemy is and they will call in the jets or the T-28 planes to bomb the enemy positions. In the army, the map was very important for us. If you gave the wrong coordinates to the pilot you would die. If the airplane dropped bombs on you because you gave them the wrong coordinates, you died

right away. . . .

You know, one time, I can't remember exactly, I think it's 100 or 200 soldiers died when the battalion called in the wrong coordinates and they dropped bombs on our soldiers. Yeah. It was very hard for us. So they wanted the people who reported that information to know how to do it, and to report it exactly right.

[{13}](#)

[30]

In later years, after Thao had fled Laos and been resettled in the U.S., the English letters he learned in the context of his military training would provide his foundation for learning the most popular Hmong writing system, the Romanized Phonetic Alphabet (RPA), which uses the same Roman characters as the English alphabet. The "ABCs" of the NATO code, in other words, were transferred when Thao began learning the sound-symbol correspondences of the RPA. In Thao's case, therefore, learning an unfamiliar military code while fighting a war financed by foreign interests eventually helped him to become literate in his own language, albeit in a writing system conceived and promoted by foreign missionaries. All of this underscores the tremendous complexity of the Hmong literacy experience.

### ***Cob Fab Journals:*** **Appropriating Literacy**

[31]

When literacy is introduced into a society or culture in which it was not widely practiced, it is usually done so in the context of a larger social, political, or economic program. This means that people are generally not taught simply to read and write but are taught to read and write about something--usually in ways that support the ideas or beliefs of those introducing literacy (Soltow and Stevens, 1981).

[32]

In Laos, the specialized literacy skills of the Hmong military scribes were taught in the context of the overwhelmingly destructive military struggle for the political and economic future of Southeast Asia. The activities of the scribes were intended to support one side in this military struggle and were shaped by the communicative needs of the Hmong military and their CIA advisors. The writing activities of the military scribes were specific in purpose, limited in scope, and directed toward a single overriding purpose: the successful prosecution of the war. This means that Hmong military scribes did not use reading and writing for any of the purposes typically associated with literacy. The Hmong scribes did not write, for example, so that they might express their feelings, persuade others of their cause, or remember their pasts. [\[14\]](#) Rather, literacy practice was generally functional and restricted in the ways we have seen above.

[33]

Yet it is equally true that once literacy is introduced it can never be entirely limited or controlled. People who are taught to read and write almost always turn literacy to their own purposes, using their literacy skills in ways that go beyond the purposes for which these were originally intended. People taught to write job applications, for example, may someday use their writing skills to compose poetry or essays. In this way can we say that literacy is always appropriated, meaning that reading and writing become the property of those who learn and use it for their own purposes, whatever these may be.

[34]

And so it was for the Hmong military scribes. Although the specialized literacy skills practiced in the Hmong Army were specific and limited to the everyday operations of the military bureaucracy, the scribes--some of them, at any rate--would continue to use their specialized literacy skills in the months and years the Hmong military had ceased to function. In some cases, they used those skills to support the anti-Communist resistance movements in which they participated after 1975. In some cases, the Hmong military scribes might direct their specialized skills to more

personal ends. Let us consider two examples of this in the testimonies of the former scribes Chang Lo and Ying Lee.

**Writing as Verification:  
Chang Lo**

[35]

In 1975, when General Vang Pao was airlifted out of Long Cheng and the official Hmong Army effectively disbanded, not all Hmong soldiers surrendered. Some fled into the hills and jungles of northern Laos, where they continued to resist Communist forces as members of the Hmong resistance, or the *Cob Fab*. {15} One of the Hmong who stayed behind was a former military scribe named Chang Lo.

[36]

Lo joined the military in 1961, when he was 25 years old. He could read and write when he joined the army, having attended a Lao village school for three years. From 1961 to 1962, Lo received military training in Thailand, then returned to Laos to perform a variety of military functions, including those of the military scribe. In 1963, Lo began keeping a journal in the Laotian language, the language he used as a scribe, to record his experiences. As he explained:

You would write. . . Since you have gone into battle, where have you lived? What did you do? Where did the fighting take place? Did you shoot them or did they shoot you? How long did you fight before you got to come back home? How long did you get to stay away before you went back into the battlefield? These things, you kept in the journal.

[37]

Lo kept this journal for seventeen years, filling five notebooks with his accounting of battles, dates, places, and the names of the wounded and dead. Lo said that when the Hmong Army disbanded in 1975, he threw away his writings and fled into the jungle to join the resistance. There, he led a small company of men against Vietnamese and Laotian Communist forces. As a *Cob Fab* commander, Lo began yet another journal, again keeping track of battles, dates, and places:

We would put down, for example, "Today we went to fight the Communists. What time did we leave? What day did we attack their base? Did we win or lose? How many of us died? How many wounded? How many were missing? Or how many Communists did we kill?" These things, we wrote them down.

The lists of the dead and wounded on the *Cob Fab* side were meant to ensure that families who lost a husband or a son would be compensated when General Vang Pao eventually returned to liberate Laos, as many still believed he would:

And when we fought and died, there was no money to pay to the soldier's parents, or to the soldier's widow. So we only wrote down the names, wrote down the dates, wrote down the times when the soldiers were killed. If in the event that we did not win the war, or if we lost the country, then that is okay. But if we struggle and the General and others could return due to our efforts, then we will take the parents and widows to the General and tell him that they are owed money.

[38]

Lo also used his scribal skills to write what were essentially IOUs to the civilian population supporting the *Cob Fab*. When he had fought as a soldier in Vang Pao's army, Lo related, weapons, ammunition, and especially food had been readily available. But after 1975, these same supplies were harder to come by. Food was a particular problem, as men fighting in the resistance found it difficult to plant and harvest crops. Consequently, Lo and other *Cob Fab* fighters were forced to rely upon local villagers for rice and other provisions. Each time his men requisitioned food from Hmong citizens, Lo said, he wrote a letter stating exactly the kind and amounts of food that had been taken. The villager was given this letter, which was to be redeemed for cash after General Vang Pao returned. Lo explained:

When we were fighting with the CIA and with General Vang Pao, we had airplanes; we had guns; we had food to eat; we had everything. . . However, after Vang Pao fled and we went to live in the jungles, we did not

have anything to eat. . . We would have to ask the general population, both Lao and Hmong, to give us rice to eat--to give us this many kilograms of rice, for example. But we did not have any money. So we had to write on paper that "If we had money, we would pay you; but since we do not have any money, General Vang Pao will pay you when he returns." This was because we lived in the jungles, and we did not have any food to eat. So we wrote these things down. If we came to buy a pig or ask for a pig to eat, we would write it down. We would write down, "If you give us your pig for the soldiers to eat, when the General returns he will pay you," or "When we have our country back, we will pay you." So we did these things.

[39]

From these comments, we see the changing role of literacy in the *Cob Fab*. While the former scribe Chang Lo was still carefully compiling lists, records, and accounts--using the same literacy skills he had practiced as a scribe serving in *L'Armée Clandestine*--the meaning of these writings had changed. Previously, Lo had written on behalf of the Hmong military bureaucracy, carrying out the literacy tasks that would enable it to function efficiently. As a *Cob Fab*, however, Chang Lo was writing on behalf of Hmong guerrillas and the Hmong civilian population, using his literacy skills to create documents that were meant to support future claims upon the Hmong military and the CIA, should these someday return to Laos. Lo's writings, in other words, no longer belonged strictly to the Hmong military or to the CIA; instead, literacy as practiced by Chang Lo had become the property of the Hmong resistance and the civilians who supported it.

[40]

Besides mediating transactions between the resistance and the civilian population, Chang Lo's scribal writings had a more personal meaning: to verify his experiences and protect himself against possible disavowal by the Hmong military or the CIA in the future. Lo explained that he kept records of his experiences so that he would have documentary evidence in the event that his own claims for compensation, and the

claims of his men, were someday denied by the CIA or other military authorities. In his words:

We wanted to have records about our life, about what we did. The first thing, if the government does not care about us and help us, or if the Americans do not want and help us, then we will have these writings to support us. . . We kept these records so that one day if General Vang Pao did not care about us, and if they were to deny us, we will have these writings when we talk with them. And, if one day the CIA did not want us and would not help us, we will have these writings when we talk with them.

[41]

As before, Lo was using the skills he had learned as a scribe in the Hmong military, but he was now using these to protect himself and his men. Indeed, we might even interpret Lo's *Cob Fab* journals as an act of latent resistance against the Hmong military and the CIA. Lo viewed literacy as a form of validation and a means through which he could contest the authority of the Hmong military bureaucracy if the situation demanded.

**Scribal Writing as Personal History:  
Ying Lee**

[42]

Ying Lee was another former scribe who fought in the *Cob Fab* resistance. Lee joined the military in 1969, when he was 16 years old, after two years of schooling in a Lao village school. He was sent to Thailand for training, where he learned Morse code and how to operate a telegraph. His first military assignment was to accompany Hmong troops into the field and send back information about enemy troop movements, either by telegraph or in written reports:

You had to write to the headquarters, telling them what's going on, you know, what is happening that day. You had to send that information back to headquarters. I used a telegraph when we had an emergency situation,

you know, when the Communists were too close. But when . . . the Communists weren't too close, when they were far away, yeah, then you could write reports on paper. [\[16\]](#)

[43]

Lee was eventually promoted to officer rank in the Hmong Army, and began keeping a journal of his activities. He continued keeping his journal, he said, after 1975, when he joined the resistance:

After 1969, I became a leader, what the Americans would call a lieutenant. I became a lieutenant, and I knew I should keep my records. So I wrote down . . . what I was doing in the army, and how my leaders, my bosses, how they treated me. I kept the journal from the time I was in the military through the time when we began to join the *Cob Fab*. . . . I wrote about once a week. And sometimes, depending on if I had something new to write about, or something I'm interested in, I would write that down also. I probably wrote about 70 pages.

[44]

Where Chang Lo wrote on behalf of Hmong civilians, his fellow *Cob Fab*, and himself, Ying Lee wrote for posterity. He kept his journal, he explained, because he wanted his children to understand something of his life as a soldier. For Lee, the records of places, dates, and times noted in his journal--the application of his scribal literacy skills--were more than a spare account of his daily experiences. Rather, they represented the outlines of his personal history; notes on the meaning of his tumultuous life. Lee kept these records, he explained, in the hope that his experiences might serve as a lesson to his yet-unborn children:

I was trying to keep those records to show my kids, when my kids grew up, that what I did was good, and to help them understand my past life. And I wanted them to see that when you are young you might be poor, but your life can change in good ways.

[45]

For Ying Lee and Chang Lo, the specialized literacy skills they had practiced as military scribes, the keeping of records, lists, and accounts, were, as mentioned earlier, eventually used in ways that went beyond the purposes for writing they had learned while working as scribes in the Hmong military. For Chang Lo, writing was a means to verify his past and influence his future prospects, as well as those of his men. For Ying Lee, writing was a way of explaining his past and imparting lessons for the future. In these ways did both Chang Lo and Ying Lee appropriate the literacy skills they had learned as scribes in the Hmong military and make these their own.

### Conclusion

[46]

When we think of the writings of war, we are apt to think of great speeches, timeless poetry, or the letters written by soldiers to their families. But the testimonies of the Hmong military scribes remind us that there is another kind of writing associated with war, a much more prosaic and everyday writing. This writing was the province of the Hmong military scribe. As we have seen, the work of the scribe called for mastery of the "clerkly skills" (Driver, 1954, pp. 62, 72; quoted in Goody and Watt, 1968/1988, p. 8): the ability to create lists, fill out form letters, and write reports. While this type of writing does not invoke the timeless emotions of great speeches, poetry, or letters, it does reflect the predisposition of military powers to use literacy as a technology, a predisposition that plays a critical role in wars of conquest and liberation. The writings of the Hmong scribes serve as an illustration of this historical pattern.

[47]

More specific to the Hmong, the oral testimonies of former Hmong military scribes are important for what they suggest about the contribution of *L'Armée Clandestine* to the literacy development of a selected number of Hmong men. While the army did not teach these men to read and write, the Hmong military did provide a context in which scribes might use previously

learned literacy skills toward new and unfamiliar purposes. Beyond this, the experience of military service enabled some scribes to become proficient in literacy practices that they could later appropriate and use for their own ends.

[48]

There is still much to learn about the experiences of the Hmong military scribe. We do not know with certainty, for example, the actual number of soldiers who served as scribes in the Hmong military. We are even less certain about the number of Hmong who continued to use their scribal skills as members of the *Cob Fab*. In what ways, if any, were the specialized literacy skills of the scribe applied in the context of Thai refugee camps? In the U.S.?

[49]

These questions, in turn, need to be placed in the context of a larger history of Hmong wartime writing, one that would address the education and literacy use of Hmong soldiers generally. What sort of educational training did soldiers in *L'Armée Clandestine* receive? How did this education contribute to the soldier's broader understanding of the war? How well did it prepare soldiers for life after the war? A wider history of Hmong wartime writing would also consider the personal writing of soldiers in *L'Armée Clandestine*. How many soldiers kept diaries or wrote letters? What meaning did these writings have for soldiers and their families? How did they influence soldiers' feelings about the war and their motivations for fighting it?

[50]

The story of the gradual transition of the Hmong from a culture in which writing was not widely practiced to one in which literacy has become widespread is undoubtedly one of the most compelling in the history of reading and writing, a history that has unfolded over several centuries, across an expanse of continents, in multiple languages, and located, always, in the context of profound political, economic, religious, and military struggles among great powers. The experiences of the Hmong military scribes are a minor chapter in this larger story. Nevertheless, they part of that story

and deserve more attention than they have yet received.

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## Notes

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{1} All personal names have been changed for reasons of privacy. Quotations have been taken from the transcripts of life-history interviews with 46 Hmong men and women collected in the context of a larger study of the history of Hmong literacy as it has been experienced in one Wisconsin city (in preparation). My methodology in collecting, transcribing, and presenting interviews was as follows: Interviews were collected over a two year period from 1996 to 1998 in a community in which I had formerly lived and worked for a local Hmong association. Interviews were typically two to four hours long, were taped on audiocassette, and were subsequently transcribed. Since not all informants spoke

English, interviews were conducted in both the English and Hmong languages. In Hmong-language interviews, informants' narratives were translated twice: First by a Hmong-English speaking translator in the context of the interview, then by a second Hmong-English speaking translator working with the interview tapes. Transcripts of the interviews, in both the Hmong and English languages, have been edited for clarity and to reflect Standard English usage. While practitioners of the "new ethnography" call attention to the unequal power relations among informants and scholars and insist that scholars not tamper with informants' narratives, I side with Chan (1992) who argued that to represent fluent Hmong speakers in non-standard English is to expose adult men and women to the patronizing attitudes and overt racism directed at refugees and immigrants who are not fluent in spoken or written English. Those interested in listening to the actual interview tapes may write the author at [John.M.Duffy.27@nd.edu](mailto:John.M.Duffy.27@nd.edu), or c/o University Writing Program, B012 DeBartolo Hall, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556-5692. ([Return to text](#))

{2} I use the terms "Hmong Army" and "Hmong forces" to designate the army of General Vang Pao, commander of the 2nd Military Region in Laos, which operated under the auspices of the Royal Lao Government. While other Laotian minority peoples such as the Yao and Khmu were also represented in Vang Pao's forces, the army was made up primarily of Hmong soldiers. The Hmong Army has also been referred to as "*L'Armée Clandestine*," or the "Secret Army" and "The Vang Pao Army" (see Castle, 79-84.) Castle has argued that the Hmong Army was largely controlled and directed by the CIA (p. 81). ([Return to text](#))

{3} Paoze Thao (personal communication, 7/16/99) points out that there were three different types of military scribe, each with distinct duties. These were 1) the tus sau ntauv, literally the "one who writes," who was mainly responsible for keeping records and writing letters; 2) the nai sai, who was responsible for sending telegraphs from the field to the base and providing military intelligence to base commanders; and 3) the tug xib paub maim, who provided information to CIA and Hmong pilots attacking enemy positions or dropping supplies to Hmong soldiers in the field. Each of these positions is classified in this paper as a "military scribe,"

in that each engaged in specialized literacy activities on behalf of *L'Armée Clandestine*. Finally, there were also Hmong civil servants known as *Tus sau ntawv*, who were political figures appointed by the local *Samien Tasseng* (District Secretary) or the *Samien Chao MOUNG* (City Secretary). While these civil servants also practiced specialized forms of literacy, they did not do so in a military context and so are not discussed further in this paper. ([Return to text](#))

{4} The entire history of literacy development in Hmong culture is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, the Hmong have long been considered an "oral" or "preliterate" people, meaning that they did not have a writing system for their language, and that many Hmong were unfamiliar with the concept of literacy (see, for example, Takaki, 1989, p. 463). While this view of the Hmong is widespread, it requires so many qualifications as to be of questionable value. For example in China, where they were called the Miao, the Hmong had narratives of a "lost" and "original" writing system, said to be centuries old; tantalizing hints of this writing system have been found in the historical record (Enwall, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 45-87). Thousands of Chinese Miao, moreover, learned to read and write in one of the writing systems designed in the 19th and early 20th centuries by various Christian missionary groups operating in Southern China. The most popular of these systems was the "Pollard Script," created by the English missionary Samuel Pollard and his Chinese assistants Li Sitifan ("Steven Lee") and Li Yuehan ("John Lee") between 1904-1905 (Enwall, 102-113; Tapp, 1989, pp. 91-95). In 20th century Laos, thousands of Hmong students learned to read and write in the Laotian language in village schools (Yang, 1993, pp. 97-98). Other Hmong learned to read and write in their own language in the Christian missionary schools, which taught the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), the writing system devised in 1951-1953 by William A. Smalley, G. Linwood Barney, and Fr. Yves Bertrais. Thousands more would learn this system after 1975, when the Hmong needed an instrument for communicating with family and friends displaced by the war (Smalley, Yang, and Vang, 1990, pp. 151-154). Still other Hmong in Laos and Thailand became literate in the *Pahawh Hmong* (in White Hmong, *Phajhauj Hmoob*), the spiritual writing system created by the Hmong prophet Shong Lue Yang (Smalley, Vang and Yang). In all, Smalley, Vang, and Yang have estimated that there have been

at least fourteen major attempts to develop a writing system for the Hmong language over the past one hundred years; of these, six are known to be in current use (pp. 149-163). To these literacy activities in Laos must be added the literacy education of Hmong children in the Thai refugee camps from 1975 until the 1990s, and the education of Hmong children and adults in U.S. schools after 1975. And this does not address the literacy development of Hmong populations living in China, Vietnam, and Thailand. So, while it is true that the Hmong have rich oral tradition, and that many Hmong in Laos did not know to read and write well into the 20th century, the notion of the Hmong as a "preliterate" people perhaps deserves reconsideration. For a critique the idea of Hmong "preliteracy" from an ideological perspective, see my article "Never Hold a Pencil: Rhetoric and Relations in the Concept of 'Preliteracy,'" (forthcoming, Written Communication, January 2000). Draft copies of this article may be obtained by writing to the author. ([Return to text](#))

{5} Interviews with Hmong men in one Wisconsin city who served as military scribes indicated that for every koo phan, or battalion of approximately 500 men, there were at least 5 people who had responsibilities involving reading and writing. Thus if we count 10 scribes for each thousand troops, we arrive at approximately 400 military scribes working with the Secret Army at the height its military operations. This number, however, is speculative. ([Return to text](#))

{6} I refer to "men" deliberately; no one interviewed on this subject spoke of women scribes. ([Return to text](#))

{7} This particular literacy activity describes the work of the tus sau ntawv. [See note #3 above](#). ([Return to text](#))

{8} The recent Stephen Spielberg film about World War II, Saving Private Ryan (1998), has a scene depicting something similar. In the scene, U.S. secretaries are shown typing letters from the U.S. military command that will be sent to families informing them of the deaths of family members. ([Return to text](#))

{9} This particular literacy activity describes the work of the nai sai. See note #3 above. ([Return to text](#))

{10} Many Hmong have, of course, used their reading and writing abilities on behalf of family, relatives, friends, and communities--meaning that they acted as scribes in more and less formal settings. For a contemporary account, see Weinstein-Shr (1993). [\(Return to text\)](#)

{11} Paoze Thao (personal communication, 7/16/99) has stated that some Hmong who became scribes went through English courses in Vientiane, Laos, before entering the military. Thus, the military was not the sole point of origin for English language literacy but was one of several sites where English literacy might be introduced. The specific communicative needs of CIA operatives and Hmong soldiers, Thao suggested, provided a "crash course" in the specific forms of English "required for successful military operations." [\(Return to text\)](#)

{12} I am grateful to Yer Thao for this insight. [\(Return to text\)](#)

{13} The testimony suggests that this man was probably a tug xib paub maim, a position in which Hmong soldiers provided information to CIA and Hmong pilots attacking enemy positions. See note #3 above. The duties of Hmong soldiers working with CIA pilots is elaborated in Robbins (1995). While Robbins focuses mainly on the exploits of CIA personnel, there is also information on the role of Hmong soldiers in the CIA air war. Literacy is not a focus. [\(Return to text\)](#)

{14} Of course, Hmong people in other contexts used language and literacy for these purposes. The Hmong RPA, for example, the so-called "missionary alphabet," served as an instrument for Christian reflection as well as a tool for writing letters to distant family members. Moreover, the expressive functions of language had long been practiced in the oral traditions of the Hmong. So to say that the functions of scribal literacy were restricted is not to suggest that this was true of Hmong literacy practice in other contexts. [\(Return to text\)](#)

{15} The term "*Cob Fab*," or "Lord of the Sky," has two levels of meaning, one specific and one general. The specific meaning relates the term to the followers of Shong Lue Yang, the creator of the Pahawh Hmong writing system. Hmong

guerrilla soldiers who resisted Communism after 1975, and who adopted the writing system and its cosmologies, were called "*Cob Fab*." In the general sense, the term *Cob Fab* refers to anyone who fought in the Hmong resistance after 1975, regardless of whether they knew the Pahawh Hmong writing system or subscribed to its religious teachings. This article uses *Cob Fab* in its general sense, meaning anyone who fought in the resistance. [\(Return to text\)](#)

{16} The testimony indicates that Lee was a nai sai. See note #3 above. [\(Return to text\)](#)

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