


# **Buddhism and Violence**

Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia

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## 6 The Monks and the Hmong

### The Special Relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province, Thailand

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Tham Krabok Theravāda Buddhist temple in Phraphutrabat District, Saraburi Province, central Thailand, is far from typical. The Buddhist practices and teachings at Wat Tham Krabok (WTK)<sup>1</sup> are unlike those of any other Buddhist institution in Thailand. Indicative of its uniqueness—or at least its inability to gain mainstream acceptance amongst the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand—WTK is not officially a temple compound, or *wat* in Thai, according to the Thai governing body for Buddhism in the country, the Sangha National Council (*Thera Samakhom* in Thai). Instead, it is designated at a lower level, as a “Sangha residence” or *sannak song* in Thai.<sup>2</sup> The sign on the impressive cement archway entering WTK states that it is a *wat*, even if the present abbot,<sup>3</sup> Achan Boonsong Tanajaro, the fourth in the line of this particular tradition (see Illustration 6.1), acknowledges that the sign does not actually reflect its official status.<sup>4</sup> This is despite WTK covering over 300 *rai* (48 hectares), being presently home to about 120 monks and many white-clothed *mae chee* (“nuns”), containing numerous massive Buddhist images, and being occupied by monks for over half a century, since its founding in 1957.<sup>5</sup> The temple is best known for facilitating—according to WTK’s own records—the treatment of over 105,000 Thai and foreigner drug and alcohol “addicts” since 1959. Some foreigners, mainly former addicts, have been ordained there as monks.

One of the various aspects of WTK that distinguishes it from other Buddhist institutions is its special relationship with ethnic Hmong people, both from Thailand and Laos. According to the present abbot, Luang Por Yai (*Luang Mae* in Hmong), the female founder of WTK (Illustrations 6.2 and 6.3), claimed to remember a promise she made with the Hmong in a previous life, a pledge that both the Hmong and Luang Por Yai would assist each other as much as possible, a vow that she evidently took very seriously, and one that she strongly bestowed on her nephew, Luang Por Chamroon Parnchand (Solkassapa), the first abbot of WTK (see Illustration 6.4). Luang Por Chamroon was a strong supporter of the Hmong. Apparently there was no need to speak of the pledge when the Hmong met Luang Por Yai and Luang Por Chamroon for the first time. “Both sides

already understood each other,” claimed Achan Boonsong in July 2011. “If it was spoken, it would have been like lying, as nobody would have believed,” he said. Luang Por Chamroon apparently did not desire anything from the Hmong; he just wanted to help them, according to Achan Boonsong. “We have to help everyone, not just the Hmong. The sun has now set, so we do not have to understand what has passed. We should not think too much about the past, or be too connected with it, so that we can escape from suffering,” he commented. Yet it seems important to understand what happened at WTK.

This chapter explores the relationship between Tham Krabok Buddhist temple and the Hmong, including the links to the violent anti-Communist insurrection that was an important part of what brought the two together. How did this relationship develop, and what transpired that resulted in the Theravāda Buddhist temple supporting militant insurgent activities? How did the temple negotiate its involvement, considering Buddhist *vinaya* rules that prevent the perpetration of violent acts by monks, or their involvement in the arms trade? How did the Buddhist practices and anti-Communist convictions interplay with each other? This chapter is not about direct violence by Buddhist monks, but rather the indirect involvement of monks and a Buddhist institution in supporting armed anti-Communist insurgency. I focus on the circumstances that resulted in WTK providing considerable “humanitarian” and other assistance to the Hmong; particularly those involved in anti-Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) political and military operations. I begin by outlining the unusual history of WTK and its three original founders, Luang Por Yai, Luang Por Chamroon, and Luang Por Charoon (all with the last name Parnchand). I then briefly discuss the special relationship between WTK and the Hmong, and how it developed and transformed, to the point where the temple provided significant support to anti-Lao PDR government insurgents, and refugees from the same conflict. I explain the nature of WTK’s involvement in facilitating 15,658 Hmong (mainly) from Laos living on land owned by the temple to officially immigrate to the US and elsewhere in 2004–2005.<sup>6</sup>

I want to demonstrate the ways the Tham Krabok Buddhist temple, and particularly its late abbot, Luang Por Chamroon Parnchand, linked his extreme right-wing political views with particular Buddhist practices, and finally the provision of strong support to anti-Communist movements. This chapter constitutes another example of how Buddhist institutions, such as WTK, have been intricately involved with indirectly perpetrating violence by others, while at the same time advocating particular Buddhist practices, including following the typical *vinaya* rules adhered to by Theravāda Buddhist monks plus an additional ten clauses, as tools for moving closer to the ultimate goal of nirvana or enlightenment (see below for details). I also build on previous scholarship in Thailand and other parts of the Theravāda Buddhist world, particularly Sri Lanka,<sup>7</sup> Burma,<sup>8</sup> Laos,<sup>9</sup> and Thailand<sup>10</sup>, that is intent on dispelling the notion that Buddhists always support non-violent conflict resolution.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 6.1 Achan Boonsong Tanjaito, abbot in 2011 of Tham Krabok temple, Phraphutthabat District, Saraburi Province, Thailand (photo by Ian Baird).



Figure 6.3 Luang Por Yai, the co-founder of Tham Krabok temple, Thailand.



Figure 6.2 Mian Parnehand, later known as ‘Luang Por Yai’ in Thai, a self-declared *bhikkhuni* (female Buddhist monk) and co-founder of Tham Krabok temple, Thailand [complements of Tham Krabok temple].



Figure 6.4 Chamroon Parnehand or Luang Por Chamroon, the first abbot of Tham Krabok temple, Thailand, and the 1975 recipient of the Magsaysay Award [complements of Tham Krabok temple].

#### LUANG POR YAI: THE FOUNDER OF THAM KRABOK BUDDHIST TEMPLE

The key to understanding the special relationship between the Hmong and WTK is the association between Luang Por Yai and the Hmong. According to the Thai monks, this led WTK, and the temple’s abbot, Luang Por Chamroon, to provide the Hmong with special treatment and support.

The title “Luang Por Yai” is unusual in Thai language, and requires some explanation. “Luang Por” is a respectful title in front of names of senior male monks. “Yai” mean large in Thai. Thus, “Luang Por Yai” means something like “Respected Founder Father,” an extremely odd title for a woman.

The monks at WTK were not particularly keen to provide details about Mian Parnehand or Luang Por Yai’s life. Still, they do profess that she was already a very special person at birth. Some thought she was crazy as a very young girl, as she was said to have been able to deliver high-level Buddhist sermons at the age of two. As a child she claimed to remember her past lives, be able to communicate with various spirits, and predict the future. Chamroon believed that she had reached a certain level of enlightenment in a past life. For reasons not understood by her or others, however, she apparently became a normal person at the age of twelve, losing all her special abilities.

Later she experienced extreme poverty, married, and had two children, both boys, before splitting up with her husband after she became an out-of-control alcoholic while living in the Khlong Toey slum in Bangkok. She eventually ended up on the streets, where apparently nobody respected her. Then one day when she was lying at the side of the road, she allegedly miraculously started remembering her past lives again. She immediately stopped drinking and was very ashamed of her past bad acts. She apologized to her grown children; they supported her to ordain<sup>12</sup> in 1949–1950 as a *mae chee*, a white-robed Buddhist “nun,” at the Buddhist temple of Wat Khong Mao, which was located in her home village in Lopburi Province.

I asked Achan Boonsong if Luang Por Yai was considered to be a monk or a *mae chee*. He hesitated in answering, probably due to legal concerns, since *bhikkhuni*, or female monks, are not legally permitted in Thailand, even if some have emerged in recent years.<sup>13</sup> Only *mae chee*, who are not considered the female equivalents of monks, have legal status in Thailand. Achan Boonsong said that Luang Por Yai was officially ordained as a *mae chee* but was later considered to be a “*phra*” (monk). When I asked who ordained her as a monk, however, Achan Boonsong said he did not know, and after some discussion it seemed evident that she was never actually ordained as a *bhikkhuni*. It appears that people just started treating her as a monk, and she started wearing brown robes like monks, and doing long walks (*thu dong*) like male monks (this is apparently not known for female *mae chee* elsewhere, Achan Boonsong acknowledged). Achan Boonsong said that it is not important if she is known as a *phra* or a *mae chee*. It

depends how people think of her. But to them she was equivalent to a male monk, and they take all their special *satcha* (truth) teachings from her, so she is their teacher. They still frequently play her sermons (taped) to teach monks. However, no other women have followed in her footsteps, although the abbot believes that women potentially have the same abilities as men to attain enlightenment. Achan Boonsong said, however, that the temple has not considered ordaining other women at this time.

Some years earlier Luang Por Chamroon, in an interview with Thanakorn Suriyon, claimed that Luang Por Yai was "like a monk" and later lived as a monk. According to him, "she didn't feel like she was a woman." Eventually, she announced that she was a female monk named "Luang Por Yai Khetmarajja," although she was not accepted in the Thai Buddhist hierarchy. Luang Por Chamroon was quoted saying that being a monk depended on one's mind (*jai* in Thai), not on one's body or outfit. Luang Por Yai herself apparently once said that if people were still attached to the idea that a monk had to be a man, it would be hard for such a person to attain enlightenment. Her followers understand that she achieved enlightenment.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THAM KRABOK BUDDHIST TEMPLE

Luang Por Yai's nephew, Chamroon Parichand, was born in Bangli Village, Bangli Sub-District, Thawong District, Lopburi Province on April 1, 1926. His parents were named Chamlong and Lieng Parichand, and he was the second of seven children. His father was in the Royal Thai Air Force, and his mother was a farmer. However, around the time Chamroon began his education, his family moved to Bangkok (Khlong San, Thonburi) after his father was blinded in both eyes due to an explosion that occurred when he was repairing an aircraft. Therefore, he left the military and moved to Bangkok to receive medical treatment. Once there, Chamroon began his primary education at Wat Thong Thammachat. He then studied at various schools until finally graduating at Wat Saraburi Province high school. Initially he studied to be a mechanic in the Royal Thai Air Force, hoping to follow his father's example, but soon a friend convinced him to become a police officer. He graduated from the police academy and entered the Thai secret police force, *santiban* in Thai, in 1943. Chamroon worked in the political unit, where he gained considerable influence, developing many important contacts in Bangkok, especially in the police and armed forces, since he frequently coordinated discussions between these sometimes feuding institutions. When Chamroon's father was dying, he told his wife, Chamroon and Charoen's mother, to rely on his younger sisters, their aunt, Luang Por Yai, to help look after the family, which she did.<sup>15</sup>

Chamroon eventually became known as the "right-hand man" of Phao Sriyanond, the director of the police department between 1951–1957, and Chamroon also sometimes served as a body guard to Prime Minister

(formerly Field Marshall) Plaek Phibulsongkhram and members of the Thai royal family. Phao Sriyanond had strong connections with the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and was also close to Plaek Phibulsongkhram. The details of Chamroon's work as a police officer, including his rank, were secret, but he was apparently assigned to special operations ordered by Phao, including suppressing the opium trade, and pursuing Vietnamese and Chinese Communists. He had considerable power and probably worked closely with the CIA, if not for them. In 1952–1953 he was put in charge of looking after the camp of Supply Unit #4 at Erawan Air force base in Lopburi,<sup>16</sup> where he apparently "worked in places where nobody could help him [if he was to make even a small mistake]."<sup>17</sup> He never publicly acknowledged participating in missions inside Laos, although he claimed that he thrived on complicated and dangerous operations. He married and had two children.<sup>18</sup>

One anonymous source in Thailand told me that Chamroon worked in Laos as a "kicker" for Air America in early 1957, even before the first American soldiers went to Laos as part of the 'hotfoot' White Star operation in July 1959.<sup>19</sup> Air America did not, however, exist at the time. It is possible, however, that he worked with Air America's predecessor, Civil Air Transport (CAT), which was acquired by the CIA in August 1950.<sup>20</sup> After the 1954 Geneva Accords, CAT sent three planes to Udorn Thani to operate in Laos, and by July 1, 1957, CAT had a base in Laos linked to a contract with the US Embassy in Vientiane to fly to various parts of the country on missions (probably mainly for the CIA). Over the next two years the US presence in Laos increased, with CAT changing its name to Air America in March 1959.<sup>21</sup> Since Thai special operations were based at Erawan, and the Thais were working closely with the Americans, it seems plausible that Chamroon did indeed help "kick" or push supplies out of airplanes on secret missions in Laos before he entered the monkhood. This probably occurred before CAT was based in Laos in 1957. Luang Por Chamroon spoke some English (apparently less than what he wanted some to believe), and it is rumored that he went to Vientiane once before 1975 in order to meet the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma.

Although Luang Por Chamroon did not mention the role that the military coup d'état of 1957 had on him entering the monkhood in his interview with Thanakorn Suriyon,<sup>22</sup> his nephew Phra Joe Parichand told me that Chamroon's fortunes took a dramatic turn for the worse in September 1957 when Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat successfully overthrew the Plaek Phibulsongkhram government. Despite being a career soldier, Sarit installed himself as Prime Minister, a position he held until his death, due to illness, on December 8, 1963. Phao Sriyanond, being aligned with Plaek Phibulsongkhram and with the police being particularly hated by Sarit, fled the country.<sup>23</sup> Because Chamroon was close to Phao his life was believed to be in danger.<sup>24</sup> This apparently led him into the monkhood, although he had been ordained years earlier for a shorter period. It is possible that Chamroon learned a valuable

lesson from the coup, one that convinced him that his calling was as a member of the Buddhist clergy rather than as a plain-clothed secret police officer. Achan Boonsong told me that Luang Por Chamroon wanted to become a monk for a long time before then, ever since his father passed away (see Figure 6.5), which is what Chamroon claimed.<sup>25</sup>

Some, including his political opponents, were initially sceptical of the sincerity of Chamroon's turn to the monkhood, since he had been involved in undercover operations before. They assumed he was doing what many other Thais had long done when in trouble, become a monk as a way of avoiding serious problems as a lay person. In fact, that may have been his original intent; it is unclear, as recorded interviews with him make no mention of this,<sup>26</sup> but he certainly became devoted to the life of a monk, and he remained ordained right up to his death in May 1999. As Achan Boonsong

put it, "The coup d'état caused Luang Por Chamroon to understand about *satcha* (truth)."<sup>27</sup> Joe Westermeyer, who was very impressed with Luang Por Chamroon, provided the following description of him,

"He has that undefinable charisma that one occasionally sees particularly in the Orient that attracts, leads, controls and inspires devotion and dedication. He is highly intelligent, poorly educated, emphatic and a master of applied psychology. He is humble, unassuming but has complete confidence in his power for good. By his own statement this power has come to him by rigid self-discipline and adherence to the middle way."<sup>27</sup>

The next part of the story remains unclear, as not all the accounts of this period are consistent. It does appear, however, that Luang Por Chamroon started looking for a temple in which to stay. He considered Wat Yairom in Thonburi, on the outskirts of Bangkok, but eventually Luang Por Yai, Chamroon and Charoen walked to WTK, arriving in 1957. They settled down and never left.

Early on, the Hmong held little significance for the monks at WTK, as there were no Hmong living in the general area. In 1959, however, the Thai government announced that opium cultivation, trade or consumption was illegal, and soon after WTK started treating drug addicts, although there was initially no actual plan to do so.<sup>28</sup> Air Force Chief Marshal Thawee Chunnasap, with the full support of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat,<sup>29</sup> began supporting the treatment work through buying land for the temple and helping to construct a hospital and other buildings on site. The first addicts were treated in 1959, although there were initially few. By 1961, the year that Luang Por Yai identified the seven natural ingredients to the detoxifying concoction given to all patients, larger numbers of addicts were accepted for treatment, and by 1963 WTK was fully set up to admit addicts for treatment.<sup>30</sup>

Luang Por Yai passed away in 1970 at the age of 60. The new Buddhist order founded on Luang Por Yai's teachings advocated the adoption of ten additional precepts referred to as *satcha*, or truth (also referred to as *lokeknarat*), apart from the 227 all Theravāda monks must abide by. It is required that all ranking WTK monks follow the additional rules on top of the regular *vinaya*, as follows:

- (1) Those who ordain must determine in advance how long they will remain in the monkhood (how many days, months, and years).
- (2) Those who ordain are only permitted to eat one meal per day (in the morning).
- (3) Those who ordain cannot use any form of transportation (vehicle, boat, or airplane).<sup>31</sup>

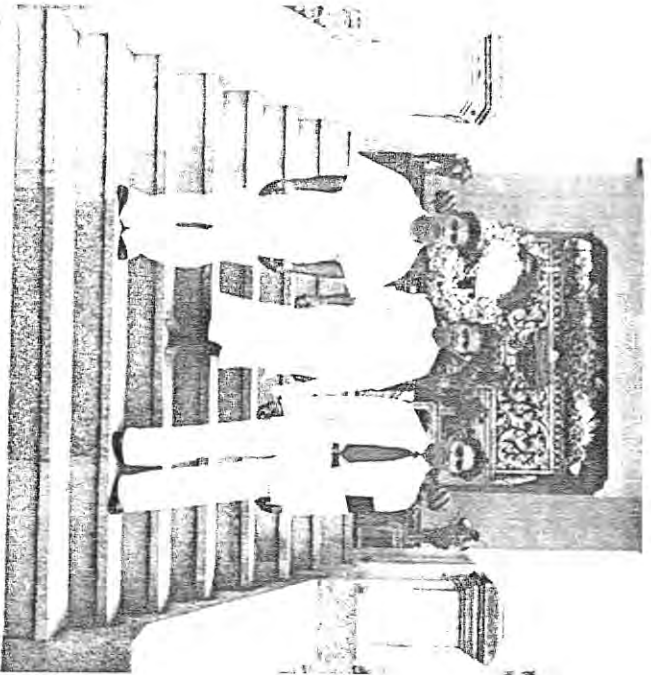


Figure 6.5 Charoen Parnehand (later Luang Por Charoen), Mian Parnehand (later Luang Por Yai), and Chamroon Parnehand (later Luang Por Chamroon) at the funeral of Chamroon and Charoen's father; early 1950s [complements of Joe Parnehand].



- (4) Those who ordain cannot cause division amongst group members, or promote dividing up into groups or factions.
- (5) Those who ordain cannot accept any gifts for personal accumulation, but will give them all to the community.
- (6) Those who ordain cannot accumulate money.
- (7) Those who ordain cannot create division and conflict.
- (8) Those who ordain cannot believe that the community will lead them in the wrong direction.
- (9) Those who ordain must meditate and/or chant during the time they are ordained for the time it takes for a predetermined number of incense sticks to burn down, over a particular period. They cannot leave their meditation or chanting until the incense sticks have burnt down completely according to what they have committed to.
- (10) Those who ordain must go on spiritual walking journeys (*thi dong* in Thai) each year, determining how many incense sticks will be burned during the trip.<sup>32</sup>

#### HMONG PERSPECTIVES

Many Hmong have different ideas about the origins of Luang Por Yai. Some claim that she was initially not a human but a deer or another wild animal that stayed in a cave near WTK, and that she later emerged from the cave



Figure 6.6 Luang Por Yai and four Hmong women from Thailand, the first time Luang Por Yai apparently met with “her people,” the Hmong, near Tham Krabok temple, Thailand, early 1960s (photo of photo by Ian Baird).

as a human. Some Hmong also believe that because she was transformed from being a wild animal, she was not actually related to Luang Por Chamroon and Luang Por Charoen. A Hmong man told me that the monks at WTK invited Luang Por Yai from the cave. The claim is that a vehicle was able to drive near the cave and that Luang Por Yai entered the vehicle, but that it could not move as long as she was in it, so she exited. She asked that “her people be summoned” and that she could only continue from the cave together with “her people:” the Hmong. She did not, however, initially refer to them as the Hmong but as people described in Thai as having “*kang keng leua, sena mai pho*” (extra big pants, and not long enough shirts), a description linked to the dress of some Hmong males in Thailand. Initially, the Thai brought some ethnic leu Mien Yao people to her, but she said that they were not the right people. Finally, Hmong were brought to her. Some Hmong claim that Luang Por Yai was able to speak Hmong with them the first time they met. To this day there is still a photo at WTK that shows Luang Por Yai together with four Hmong from Thailand. According to the Hmong, it was those Hmong who convinced her to come down (see Figure 6.6).

Another Hmong version of this story does not involve Luang Por Yai having been a deer. However, she was located in a cave near Tham Krabok. The Thai locals realized that she was a holy person and went to ask that she come down. To entice her, they supposedly built WTK and then asked her to come live at the temple, but she refused. She told them that she would only come down if they called “her people” from the mountains in Thailand to ask her to come down. They asked her who “her people” were and she allegedly said that they were simple people who were clad in black and red and green sashes. They surmised that she meant the Hmong so they asked some Hmong women to come to Tham Krabok. When the women came, Luang Por Yai finally descended from the cave. Because Luang Por Yai was believed to be a holy person, the Thai authorities tried to take her to a prestigious temple, but every time they put her in a car, it would not start. When they tried to airlift her out by helicopter, it also would not start. These were signs that she should be left at Tham Krabok, and presumably that she should not travel by vehicles or aircraft.

The monks at WTK, including the abbot, tell a different story, however. They deny that a vehicle tried to pick her up from near the cave, as there was no nearby road where the vehicle could go. They also claim that she was not able to stop vehicles from moving. Achan Boonsong claims that Luang Por Yai was just meditating at Tham Phatsoon cave near WTK with Achan Wichai, another WTK monk. They stayed there for many months. They met Hmong people along the road on their way down. It was the first time (in that life) that Luang Por Yai had met Hmong people. It was around the same time that Hmong opium addicts began being treated at WTK in 1961.<sup>33</sup> Achan Boonsong also claimed that other similar unbelievable stories had emerged. For example, he said that he sometimes walked long distances, but then people would claim that he was able to levitate and fly through the air. He said that he could definitely not fly.

Some Hmong believe that Luang Por Yai was actually Hmong, a claim that seems unlikely to be true (at least in her life as Mian Pancheand). She may have claimed, however, to have been a Hmong during a previous life. It may have been during that previous life that Luang Por Yai, as a Hmong, promised to help the Hmong.

However, other Hmong believe that Luang Por Yai or Luang Mae was a reincarnation of *Niam Nkai Nisab* (or simply *Nkai Nisab*) (Princess Jona in Hmong), the female of the cognate pair that created the world by separating land from sea and creating mountains and valleys. Her male counterpart was *Txiu Nrang Nab* (or simply, *Nrang Nab*) (Prince Dro Na in Hmong). In Hmong cosmological belief, *Nkai Nisab* and *Nrang Nab* created the world. They each had a son, since both male and female gods can have offspring. Luang Por Chamroon was a reincarnation of *Nkai Nisab*'s son. This fit with Chamroon being Mian's nephew, which is essentially equivalent to a son in the Hmong way of considering kinship relations.<sup>34</sup> No wonder they respect Luang Por Yai so much; she was considered to be one of the creators of the world, and Luang Por Chamroon was helping his mother, as would be expected.

#### THE HMONG FROM LAOS BEGIN GOING TO WAT THAM KRABOK

According to Joseph Westermeyer,<sup>35</sup> who worked extensively with WTK on addiction issues in the 1970s, a woman of Thai-Lao descent who lived in Vientiane learned about the success of the temple in treating addicts in the late 1960s, and informed her Buddhist auxiliary in Vientiane. Eventually she presented a proposal to officials at the Ministry of Social Welfare in Laos, who agreed to help facilitate the treatment of addicts from Laos at the Thai temple. The first addicts were sent to WTK from Laos in 1970, funded by private donations. In 1971 and 1972 the Ministry, impressed with the results at WTK, provided further supplementary funds, and between 1972 and 1974 the United States' Agency for International Development (USAID) provided funding for an additional 1,700 addicts. Other groups, such as the Asia Foundation, also contributed. About 3,000 opium addicts in Laos ended up being treated at WTK. Most were from "tribal groups," including the Hmong, Iu Mien, and Akha.

In late 1971 Pa Kao Her's spiritual teacher and cousin—the originator of the "Mother of Writing" Hmong script<sup>36</sup> and the spiritual leader of the "Chao Fat"—Shong Lue Yang, was assassinated. Some claim that soon after Pa Kao Her was transferred to Vientiane and assigned the task of accompanying the Hmong from Laos who traveled from Laos to Thailand for treatment.<sup>37</sup> Others close to him deny this, however, stating that fighting was heavy in the Long Tieng area at the time and Pa Kao Her would not have had the chance to leave the area. In any case, Hmong addicts from Laos were transported to WTK by large truck in groups of about 50 per trip, with one to three groups traveling to the temple in mid-1971.<sup>38</sup>

In 1975 Luang Por Chamroon was given one of Asia's most prestigious honors, the Ramon Magsaysay award, for his work with drug and alcohol detoxification.<sup>39</sup> Phra Joe Parrehand, Luang Por Chamroon's great nephew, told me that Luang Por Chamroon was also one of ten people considered as a possible nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. This apparently occurred in the mid-1990s, not many years before Luang Por Chamroon died, although I have not been able to confirm the account. Phra Joe said, "He had already won the Asian award so he could not win both awards." Luang Por Chamroon apparently told Phra Joe about his nomination.

#### THE POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF THAM KRABOK TEMPLE

Although WTK is far from orthodox, over history it has received considerable support from far right-wing police and military, and the Thai monarchy.<sup>40</sup> Some claim that Luang Por Chamroon was a member of the notorious extreme right-wing political group, NAWAPOL, which was linked to the violent oppression of left-leaning students at Thammasat University in 1976.<sup>41</sup> Others, such as Achan Boonsong, deny that Luang Por Chamroon was a member. In any case, when the WTK Foundation was established in 1989, the head of the Thai boy scouts, also well-known for its involvement in the extreme right-wing violence in 1976,<sup>42</sup> Police Major General Somkuan Haiikul, was made the deputy President of the foundation, with Luang Por Chamroon as the foundation's President. Speaking about Somkhan, Achan Vichit commented, "He had a lot of power."<sup>43</sup>

Luang Por Chamroon was apparently close to Achan Kitiwudhno, a Thai Thonburi based-monk who became famous for saying that it would not cause demerit to kill a Communist.<sup>44</sup> According to WTK monks, Kitiwudhno, an acknowledged member of NAWAPOL, visited Luang Por Chamroon frequently, because Luang Por Chamroon could not ride in vehicles to visit him, due to his special *satcha* rules.

Luang Por Chamroon once asked Luang Por Yai how to solve the "problem of Communism." Luang Por Yai provided a short response, one that influenced Luang Por Chamroon significantly. She said, "Religion can solve [the problem]." He came to believe that if people had a strong confidence in Buddhism they would be unlikely to turn to Communism. That was a key reason why he decided to remain as a monk.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL CHANGES AND ASSOCIATED CONFLICT IN LAOS

Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s Laos was embroiled in complex civil conflict with important international cold war dimensions, with the Communist Pathet Lao being supported by North Vietnam and the Soviet bloc, and the right-wing and neutralist forces receiving assistance from the

US and members of the anti-Communist Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), including Thailand and South Vietnam.

However, by the early 1970s the US government came under great pressure at home to withdraw from the Vietnam conflict, and after being pressured by the US, the RLG, in February 1973, signed a peace agreement with the Pathet Lao, which led to an on-and-off ceasefire and the establishment of a coalition government. In the beginning of 1975 the Pathet Lao began to gradually take over the government, and by mid-1975 many senior politicians and military officers had fled the country. Up to 40,000 others were sent to remote parts of Laos, especially in Vieng Xay District, Houaphanh Province, for political 're-education,' known in Lao as *semmar*. In fact, frequently little actual 're-education' was involved. Most resembled hard labor camps, where many prisoners remained in very poor conditions for over a decade without officially having been convicted, or even charged, with any crime.<sup>45</sup>

Many of those who escaped or were released crossed into Thailand and joined others who had fled from Laos to set up small militias, sometimes divided on ethnic grounds,<sup>46</sup> along the border, or inside Laos, in order to militarily and politically oppose the Lao PDR government. The Thai government also organized these Lao groups to collect intelligence along the border. The two main Hmong dominated groups were the United Lao National Liberation Front (ULNLF) (*Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat* in Lao), with General Yang Pao as its de facto leader, and the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELOL) (*Ong Kan Pot Poi Thout Xon Xat Xon Phao You Nai Lao* in Lao), inspired by the Hmong military leader Zong Zona Her and actually led by his deputy Pa Kao Her.<sup>47</sup> Vai Tswv Cim Vang Chu Chit Vue was the spiritual leader of the group,<sup>48</sup> with Vai Tswv Cim literally meaning "marked by god." Both groups were officially established in 1981–1982. Intelligence collection missions, and anti-Lao PDR government campaigns, variously continued from late 1975 until 1988 when the Chachai Choonhavan government in Thailand introduced the new policy of turning battlefields into market places (*phian samant loip pen samant kan khia* in Thai), with the desire to improve relations with the Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam governments. At this time Lao insurgent groups along the border were no longer part of Thailand's strategy, and began to disintegrate. Some in the Thai military and intelligence services continued to secretly support, or at least tolerate, insurgents from Laos, into the early and mid-1990s. Most groups, however, could no longer easily operate along the Thailand-Laos border, although some, such as the ULNLF and ELOL, managed to continue operations inside Laos well into the 1990s, and the remnants of these groups continue to hide in the forests of Laos today.

#### HMONG RESISTANCE TO LAO COMMUNISTS AND THE ROLE OF WTK

In 1975, as the RLG was gradually being overpowered by the Pathet Lao, some neutralist and right-wing politicians and members of the military

began fleeing the country, although others stayed and even willingly travelled to various re-education camps in remote parts of the country (see earlier discussion). A few thousand Hmong were hastily evacuated to Thailand with US support in May 1975, including the only Hmong general in the RLA, Vang Pao, but most Hmong were left to their own devices.<sup>49</sup> Many did not know that their leaders had fled.

In 1967, around three years before she passed away, Luang Por Yai is said to have predicted that a large number of Hmong from Laos would come to WTK after 1975.<sup>50</sup> Her prophecy fit well with reality, thus increasing her status with both the Hmong and non-Hmong.

In 1975, some Hmong panicked at the thought of their former bitter enemies, the Vietnamese, taking control of their territory through the Pathet Lao. Others tried to remain calm, hoping for a smooth transition, but within months much of the area surrounding Phou Bia—the tallest mountain in Laos—was in turmoil, and by early 1976 the Hmong, and some ethnic Khmu allies, using leftover small arms that they had hidden away in 1975, had taken control of large parts of Vientiane and Xieng Khouang Provinces, limiting the Pathet Lao forces mainly to their larger bases. The Hmong rebels were all known as "Chao Pa," or the "Lords of the Sky" by Lao PDR government officials, but in fact, only one of the two major alliances truly deserved such a title, the followers of Shong Lue Yang, Zong Zona Her, and Pa Kao Her, who were based inside Laos near Phou Bia. Later they adopted the term initially applied to them by the Lao.

The second more loosely defined group was nominally led by Hmong people previously aligned with the American CIA and especially Vang Pao, and while there were no official positions, Sai Shoua Yang is largely recognized as a key leader of this group. At this point the main objective of the Hmong was simply to maintain control of the areas where they lived through denying access to the Lao PDR government and military.

During this period the Lao PDR government found themselves losing control over various parts of the country, including Vieng Phou Kha and Na Le Districts in south-western Luang Namtha Province, northern Laos, which fell to insurgents under the command of the neutralist Khmu leader, Chanhsouk, at the beginning of 1977, and large parts of southwestern Savannakhet Province, and Champasak and Salavan Provinces, became increasingly dominated by anti-government insurgent activities. On July 18, 1977, the Lao PDR government and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam entered into a formal 25-year broad-based and widely reported on cooperation agreement,<sup>51</sup> one that the two countries hoped would legitimate the arrival of 50,000 Vietnamese troops required to help crush the strongest pockets of resistance in various parts of the country.<sup>52</sup> By late 1977 large numbers of Vietnamese troops were zeroing in on the Hmong areas of control in the mountains to the north of Vientiane. After bombarding them with heavy artillery and air attacks for a number of days, the Vietnamese were easily able to move in and regain control of large swathes of territory. Tens of thousands of Hmong fled, some towards the Mekong River and



Thailand to the west, hoping to avoid being killed or captured. Many, however, could not escape and were rounded up by the advancing Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces. Others died trying to make the strenuous journey to Thailand, either from injuries endured during the attacks, or as a result of food shortages and illness. Still others drowned or were shot as they tried to cross the Mekong River to Thailand. The Hmong experienced great suffering and hardship during this time.<sup>55</sup>

Not all of the Hmong either fled to Thailand or came under the control of the Communists. Some, including the Chao Fa under Zong Zoua Her's leadership, continued to resist the Lao PDR government from the Phou Bia area. There were also other pockets of Hmong resistance inside Laos: Pa Kao Her left Phou Bia with 15 other Hmong Chao Fa soldiers on March 3, 1978 in order to seek international support, and swam across the Mekong River to Thailand on March 17 (it is possible that these dates may be slightly incorrect). They initially went to Nong Khai refugee camp and then a little more than a month after they moved to Ban Winai refugee camp in Loei Province, northeastern Thailand, but Pa Kao Her heard from a Thai intelligence official that it was unsafe for him to stay there, and near the end of 1978, after the Hmong New Year, he traveled to WTK, where he expected to receive support for the anti-Communist struggle. His deputy, Moua Nhia Long<sup>54</sup> had already visited the temple before, and it is rumored that Achan Chamroon told him that he was supposed to meet his leader, another Hmong, and asked that this man (apparently Pa Kao Her) be brought to the temple. Moua Nhia Long was close to Pa Kao Her until they separated into two different groups much later, in around 1997.<sup>55</sup>

WTK was not a typical Buddhist temple, and therefore was not accepted by the Sangha National Council. Similarly, the Chao Fa practiced Animism<sup>56</sup> like many other Hmong, but they added particular millenarian ideas, and a special Hmong script,<sup>57</sup> thus making them unacceptable to some 'mainstream' Hmong Animists. The fact that both groups could be characterized as outcasts facilitated the relationship that would eventually develop between the Chao Fa and WTK, even if their fundamental belief systems were different.

In January 1979 Pa Kao Her and his deputy, Moua Nhia Long, with support from the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, flew to China from Bangkok for a short trip, to meet the Chinese. Soon after returning to Thailand Pa Kao Her and Moua Nhia Long led one of three groups of Hmong fighters on a 31-day walk to Muang La, Xipsongpanna, Yunnan Province China via Phongsaly Province, northern Laos. There they received military training and equipment, including arms, in support of resistance activities against the Lao PDR government and their Vietnamese allies. The Lao and especially the Vietnamese had fallen out badly with the Chinese after the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and ousted the Khmer Rouge, a close ally of China.

Moua Nhia Long stayed in China to coordinate operations there and Pa Kao Her returned to Thailand to organize military operations and coordinate with Thai intelligence services from Thailand, especially in Chiang Khong, Chiang Rai Province, a key base for anti-Lao PDR government resistance in northern Laos. There were also bases in Phayao and Nan Provinces, Thailand (see Illustrations 6.7 and 6.8). The Chao Fa moved in and out of Thailand, although they generally left their weapons hidden in Laos, since guns were frequently confiscated, or at least temporarily taken away, by Thai authorities. Many Chao Fa insurgents mainly stayed in Laos, at places like Pha Mon in the early 1980s, near the border with Thailand.

The nature of the early post-1975 relations between Luang Por Chamroon and the Hmong is not clear, but by the late-1970s Hmong refugees from Laos, especially those involved in resisting the Lao PDR government, were frequently in contact with him. In fact, it seems likely that Chamroon made arrangements for Pa Kao Her and his soldiers to travel to China to receive support, via his high-level Thai military connections.<sup>58</sup> Still, according to one informant, Luang Por Chamroon was prone to exaggerate at times, so the full extent of his role remains unclear, although he was certainly involved in a significant way. Kiritvuddho may have helped Luang Por Chamroon make contact with Chinese Embassy officials, since Kiritvuddho



Figure 6.7 Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (ELO), forces under Pa Kao Her in April 1983. According to the Lao writing on the photo, the number of soldiers were being inspected at the time the photo was taken [complements of Bee Moua/Hmong Archives].

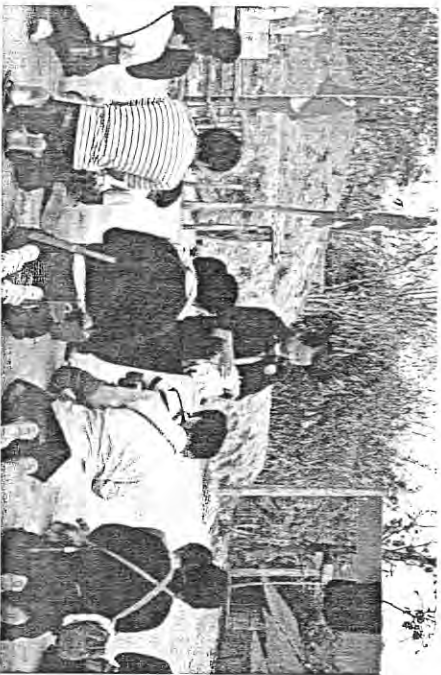


Figure 6.8 Pa Kao Her conducts an Amnist ceremony for ELOU soldiers located along the Laos-Thai land border, early 1980s [compliments of Bee Moua/Hmong Archives].

was more involved in supporting anti-Vietnamese insurgents along the Cambodian-Thai land border, whereas Luang Por Chamroon was more supportive of anti-Vietnamese groups active along the Laos-Thai land border.

In 1979 the role of WTK in relation to the Hmong took a twist when the Thai royal family apparently requested support from Luang Por Chamroon to help stop the Hmong from planting opium along the borders in northern Thailand. General Kriangsak Chomaman, who had orchestrated a successful coup in 1977, was Prime Minister at the time, and it was apparently feared that allies of Kriangsak, especially the infamous Chiang Rai, Thailand-based Shan opium trader, Khun Sa, were taking advantage of the situation to support Kriangsak, and according to some, threaten the very existence of the monarchy.<sup>59</sup> Chao Fa Ying Galyani Niwatana (commonly known as *Phaphiang*), the older sister of the ninth King of Thailand, came to WTK personally (there is a photo of her meeting with Luang Por Chamroon). According to a WTK monk, her objective in visiting was to appeal for the temple to help cure Hmong addicts, with the ultimate goal of ending opium production along the border, and thus the threat to the country and ultimately to the monarchy. Being a strong supporter of King, Luang Por Chamroon is believed to have agreed to do what he could.

Pa Kao Her did not spend extended periods in the WTK area. He came and went, usually not spending more than a day or two per trip at or near the temple. The present abbot of WTK, Achian Boonsong, did not

remember his name, but did identify him as being the leader of the Hmong when shown a photo of Pa Kao. Pa Kao probably spent most of his time in the border region, or inside Laos conducting operations. When he did come to WTK, he mainly conversed with Luang Por Chamroon personally, and possibly also with the African-American monk, Gordon Baltimore.<sup>60</sup> A former member of the Thai special forces who worked closely with Luang Por Chamroon was also intimately involved.

Most of the Thai monks at WTK who were resident during the same time as large numbers of Hmong remember surprisingly few of the names of the Hmong. They claim that it is hard to recall Hmong names. The main Hmong man who the monks remember was known as “Pracha” in Thai. Based at the temple as Pa Kao Her’s representative since 1984, after he returned from China, he acted as the liaison between the Hmong and WTK. Later, a Hmong man revealed that Pracha was none other than Moua Nhia Long.

In the mid-1980s Moua Nhia Long was resident at WTK, initially with two or three other Hmong families. Moua Nhia Long had gone to China with Pa Kao Her, but later coordinated the transfer of rice and other provisions from the temple to insurgents on the frontline. It is unclear whether there were any arms transfers or not, but it seems likely that there were. There was a bomb threat against him when Moua Nhia Long lived near the market at WTK in the 1990s. However, one of his wives noticed the bomb before it detonated, and in the end the police were able to disarm it. The culprits could well have been hired by the Lao PDR government to attack anti-government dissidents such as Moua Nhia Long.

Beginning in 1978 and continuing for the next few years, WTK assisted Hmong located at Ban Vinai refugee camp in Loi Province by sending vehicles to pick them up. According to Achian Boonsong, these Hmong were picked up for drug treatment every week or two, with over 20 being transported to WTK each trip. It would appear, however, that the vehicles were primarily, or at least partially, sent to pick up Hmong Chao Fa resistance fighters. They were transported to WTK and then later to Chiang Khong, on the Thailand-Laos border, where they organized anti-Communist resistance activities inside Laos. Many also continued from there to China for training. Getting Hmong out of Ban Vinai was not easy, but the operations were facilitated by the well-known anti-Communist *Kahng Daeng* (Red bulls) far right-wing leader and special military intelligence colonel Sutsai Hatsadin, who was also with the powerful National Internal Security Council in Thailand, and was close to Luang Por Chamroon.<sup>61</sup> Colonel Sutsai wrote out small notes of recommendation, and these were effective in ensuring that nobody obstructed operations. Thus, WTK played an important logistical role in support of Pa Kao Her and his followers. Chamroon himself also apparently advised the National Internal Security Council and Sutsai Hatsadin is considered to have been a key supporter of Pa Kao Her by his oldest son, Tou Her.<sup>62</sup>

In 1984, relations between Thailand and the Lao PDR severely deteriorated and led to serious armed conflict along the border between the two countries, which fought over three small border villages along the border between Utharadit Province, Thailand and Pak Lay District, Xayaboury Province in Laos. In particular, Pa Kao's ELOL was recruited by the Thais to take up frontline positions against the Pathet Lao. Later, in 1984–1985 large number of Hmong who had assisted the Thais in fighting against the Lao in Nan arrived at WTK. The Thai had apparently promised them Thai citizenship, if they helped, but according to a monk at WTK, "Once the fighting was over the promise was not fulfilled. This left the Hmong who had fought with nowhere to go, so Luang Por Chamroon helped them by opening up temple land to them."

In December 1987, conflict between Thailand and Laos erupted again when the Thai military decided to occupy another disputed village, Ban Rom Klaos, raising a Thai flag over it, and claiming that it was in Chat Trakan District, Phitsanulok Province, while the Lao insisted that it was in Boten District, Xayaboury Province. Once again the Hmong were recruited to support the Thais, this time by those under the command of General Chaovailit Yongchaiyudh, the adopted son (*look liang* in Thai) of the Lao Luang Phrabang prince, Chao Phetsarath. Members of Vang Paot's ULNLF were positioned on the frontline, while soldiers under the command of Colonel Lee Lao, a separate group, succeeded in sneaking into Laos and blowing up a key supply bridge. ELOL Chao Fa fighters were also apparently recruited, although negotiations occurred before the mission to block Lao supply lines inside Laos could take place. Fighting finally calmed down on February 19, 1988 when a cease-fire was agreed upon between the Thai and Lao governments.

Just a few months later, after a national election, the Chatchai Choornhaven government came to power on August 4, 1988. Thailand's foreign policy soon changed, as already discussed, and using Thai soil to fight against the Communists in Lao became increasingly difficult. It was around this time that more Hmong people started coming to WTK.

As dissident Lao military operations declined along the border in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and all the refugee camps closed down, a large number of additional Hmong arrived at WTK. In 1991 the ELOL also changed its name to the Chao Fa Democratic Party. Some came from the Ban Vinal refugee camp, which was closed in 1993. Many residents of Ban Vinal and other camps, such as Chiang Kham, Phanat Nikom, and Nakorn Phanom, who did not want to return to Laos or immigrate to a third country ended up at WTK. At that point not only Chao Fa Democratic Party supporters became based there, but also supporters of Vang Paot's ULNLF and Lee Lao as well, and later some Thai Hmong also went there to engage in business.

Just prior to the number of Hmong at WTK increasing dramatically in around 1990, the nephew of Luang Por Chamroon, Manop Parnchand

(his nickname was Piek), who was originally from Klong San, in Bangkok, returned from spending almost a decade working as a cook at a Thai restaurant in Philadelphia, USA. At the request of Luang Por Chamroon, Piek began working for the temple in order to handle affairs related to the Hmong (see Illustration 6.9). Although he apparently largely followed Chamroon's orders to help the Hmong, including condemning some who tried to cheat them, he also allegedly took advantage of the Hmong at times.<sup>63</sup> The relationship between the temple and the Hmong was complicated.

One of the aspects of the practice at WTK that at least some people in Phraburatbat District are uncomfortable about is the fact that women are allowed to make offerings and exchange things directly with men, something that is normally prohibited in Thai Theravāda Buddhism. Phra Gordon Baltimore, the American monk, even had a sexual relationship



Figure 6.9 Chamroon Parnchand with Manop Parnchand, as a child, in the 1960s, Tham Krabok temple, Thailand [complements of Joe Parnchand].

with a Hmong woman, and he fathered a child as a result.<sup>64</sup> Surprisingly, he was not forced to disrobe, possibly because of his special relationship with Chamroon.<sup>65</sup>

Pa Kao Her was not the only Hmong resistance leader to interact with Luang Por Chamroon. Others, such as Colonel Lee Lao, also visited Luang Por Chamroon frequently, and like Pa Kao, his communications were apparently almost exclusively with Luang Por Chamroon. Luang Por Chamroon also provided support, albeit much more limited, to other Hmong and non-Hmong anti-Communist Lao groups, including Vang Pao's ULNLF, which started cooperating more with Luang Por Chamroon in the late 1980s and early 1990s as support from the Thai government declined and the refugee camps in Thailand, another important source of insurgent support, began closing. Luang Por Chamroon had a lot of good contacts and helped broker various arrangements beneficial to anti-Lao PDR government groups, whether with Thai officials, the Chinese, or sympathetic resistance groups in Cambodia. In one case he helped broker the sale of some allegedly nuclear material that people who were in contact with him were trying to sell.

Luang Por Chamroon also supported the Lao People's National Liberation Front (LPNLF), a largely ethnic Lao resistance organization. Savang Vongsavath, previously a full colonel in the RLA, and the military commander of the LPNLF, told me that he visited WTK a few times. Luang Por Chamroon provided him with some food and supplies, all of which could be labeled as "humanitarian support," even though the food was supporting violent anti-Communist missions inside Laos.

In the early 1990s Khamphou Sisavady, the political leader of the LPNLF, also entered into discussions with Luang Por Chamroon in relation to WTK producing stone "phra bang" posture Buddhist images, larger ones for putting on tables and smaller ones for wearing around one's neck. Colonel Bounteout Saycoet was at WTK when Luang Por Chamroon spoke on the phone with Khamphou, and helped facilitate communications. The idea was that WTK would produce the images and send them to the LPNLF in the US, and they in turn would sell them in the Lao community to raise funds for the LPNLF. However, after initial discussions the plan did not move forward, as Khamphou heard that police or military had moved into the area shortly after their long distance telephone discussion, so he chose to not make contact again.

#### RESOLVING THE HMONG 'PROBLEM' AT WTK THROUGH RESETTLEMENT IN THE US

In the early 1990s the Hmong population at WTK may have reached as high as 40,000.<sup>66</sup> There was not, however, enough space for everyone, so many eventually settled elsewhere, including in the seventeen northern provinces of Thailand, where it was possible to integrate into Thai Hmong villages. Some younger people also went to work elsewhere, and still others stayed

out of WTK to conduct insurgent activities directed against the Lao PDR government. In 1992 many Chao Fa and their supporters, including women, children and elderly people, moved from Thailand to Xayaboury Province in northern Laos, where they continued to fight against the Lao PDR government. Luang Por Chamroon contacted Thai officials and helped to arrange for some of the Hmong to obtain Thai citizenship, especially those who had fought on behalf of the Thais in 1984 and 1987. He was, however, only partially successful, although many eventually did gain Thai citizenship.

Some Hmong dreamed of having their own place, and Luang Por Chamroon tried to help them realize their goal, but he could not finish his work. Many Hmong believe that this is why he died, because he could not complete the task of helping the Hmong. Similarly, a Hmong man told me that Luang Por Chamroon was linked with the Hmong. That is, when he became angry with a Hmong he would later suffer aching bones or other physical ailments. However, when I asked Achan Boonsong about this later, he replied that this is true for anyone, not just the Hmong. That is, the principle of karma applies to everyone, and that getting angry with someone, regardless of whether they are Hmong or not, would have karmic implications. In any case, Luang Por Chamroon was able to protect the Hmong for many years, due to his "charismatic authority," as well as his close connections, including with the Thai Royal Family.<sup>67</sup>

After Luang Por Chamroon passed away, Luang Por Charoen (Phonrat-nkassapa), who knew much less about the Hmong than his brother, was reportedly less willing and able to protect the Hmong at WTK, and in April 2003 a Thai military joint task force moved in to take control. Although Luang Por Chamroon had argued for years that the Hmong were from Thailand and not Laos, it became clear that the vast majority were actually from Laos.<sup>68</sup> There had been a lot of bad press about the Hmong at WTK. Some were accused of dealing in illegal drugs<sup>69</sup>, others were suspected of using the temple as a base to fight against the Lao PDR government. With WTK being unorthodox for most Thais, there were also other reasons for Thais to feel suspicious about the temple. Eventually this led 200 red beret-wearing soldiers to fence off the area populated by the Hmong. They then began the two-year process of screening all the inhabitants, although some escaped or were otherwise allowed to leave during this period.

One of the uncompleted tasks of WTK was the construction of an unusual concrete platform with a large rectangular rock in the center on a cement pedestal, and surrounded with 100 cement columns that looked very much like chairs (see Figure 6.11). Known as *lan chumman* in Thai, or the "hat meeting place," construction apparently began in the early 2000s. According to a Hmong informant, a Hmong at WTK, possibly from the Her clan, who later emigrated to the US, dreamed of this, and told the monks that if they constructed it, WTK would be respected by the world. The monks agreed but the project was apparently not executed correctly, and has not been completed. Each of the concrete chair-like pillars has a name. Each



pillar was expected to either serve as a seat for key Hmong people to sit during meetings, or as pedestals for statues that were never added. Many Hmong believe that WTK is experiencing problems because the structure has not been completed, and because the Hmong were sent away by Luang Por Charoen from WTK. Some would still like to see the statues erected, including the center one of *Chao Yang Chau* (*Vaj Tsav*), the messianic king of the gods, who was believed to be the father of the king of the Hmong, *Tsuh Choi*. Achan Vichit also told me that Achan Charoen had the idea to use the *lan chammam* as a means for converting the Hmong from Animism to Buddhism, by encouraging the Hmong to respect the rectangular stone in the middle rather than spirits. It does not, however, appear that his plan

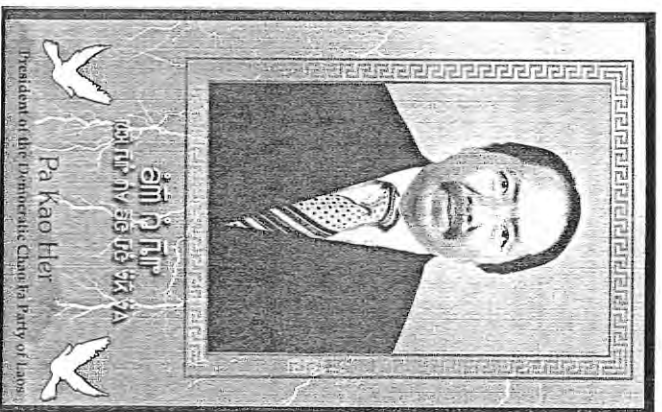


Figure 6.10 Poster of Pa Kao Her, President of the Democratic Chao Fa Party of Laos, which was created after the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos was disbanded. Notice the 'Mother of Writing' script on the poster, as well as English.

was successful, as very few of the Hmong at WTK converted to Buddhism. Still, Buddhist influences on the Chao Fa are evident.

While Luang Por Chamroon was certainly committed to helping the Hmong, there were limits to what he was willing to do. As Achan Boonsong put it, "Wat Thiam Krabok assisted the Hmong, but they only provided humanitarian support." By defining support for the Hmong as "humanitarian," such support could be discursively justified in relation to Buddhism, a point I have made elsewhere.<sup>70</sup>

#### WTK'S SPECIAL RELATION WITH THE HMONG TODAY

The special and unusual relationship between the Hmong and Thiam Krabok temple is linked to Luang Por Yai more than any others. Even today, whenever there is a ceremony related to Luang Por Yai at the temple an exceptionally large number of Hmong show up. While it can be said that a special relationship still exists between the Hmong and WTK, it is clearly not as close as it was when Luang Por Yai and Luang Por Chamroon were alive. When Luang Por Chamroon died his brother, Luang Por Charoen continued to assist the Hmong until his passing in 2008, but many believe he was less supportive

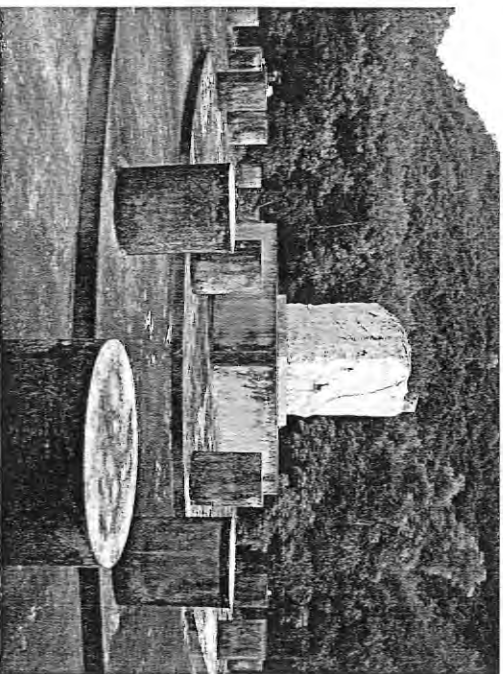


Figure 6.11 The unfinished *lan chammam* structure at Thiam Krabok temple, Thailand, 2011 [photo by Ian Baird].

of the Hmong than his brother or aunt. Achan Boonsong claims that he still has a special relationship with the Hmong. He acknowledges missing the Hmong, but he also commented, in typical Buddhist fashion, "Where ever we stay is the same, there is just a different feeling." Hmong people still visit the temple, and possibilities for building a museum for recording the history of the many years that so many Hmong spent at WTK have been discussed.<sup>71</sup> There has also been controversy at WTK regarding the digging up of the graves of Hmong people who died there.

According to Achan Boonsong, one of the things that visiting Hmong frequently ask for is petrified wood from the area. Although the monks at WTK claim not to know the significance of this wood, they have acquired it to make rings, which they give to visiting Hmong. Achan Boonsong gave me four of these rings to give to interested Hmong from WTK in Wisconsin, US, where I live. He said the wood came from Nam Na Loi Sub-district in Lophburi Province. A Hmong man told me that many Hmong believe Luang Por Yai's coffin was made of wood, and that all the wood used to make it, including the parts that were chipped off, eventually turned into stone. According to some Hmong, before passing away Luang Por Yai asked to be buried in a tree trunk. She apparently said that if the tree trunk rotted away, the Hmong would lose their chance for an independent homeland, but if the wood became petrified the Hmong would still have a chance to obtain a homeland. The link with Luang Por Yai's coffin makes the wood particularly valuable, even sacred, to the Hmong, although the monks at WTK claim that the petrified wood does not come from the coffin of Luang Por Yai. Her coffin was apparently made of teak. Today, many Hmong in the US believe that the petrified wood can protect people from misfortune.

Phra Joe Parnchand, Manop's son, told me, "I suspect that many Hmong will return to WTK in the future to show their respect for the people, like Luang Por Chamroon and my father, who helped them when they were here."

## CONCLUSIONS

One can see that Theravāda Buddhist monks were able to provide various kinds of support for militant insurgents involved in cross-border anti-government operations. Although WTK is no longer involved in assisting militant resistance movements, they were in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s when Luang Por Chamroon was abbot. While it is unclear whether he or other monks provided weapons to the Hmong insurgents, which would have violated the basic Buddhist vinaya, Luang Por Chamroon was certainly strongly anti-Communist, and he even argued in an interview with Thanakorn Suryon that it is sometimes necessary to lie in order to support more important causes.<sup>72</sup>

In any case, the so-called 'humanitarian support' provided to Pa Kao Her and Moua Nhia Long of the ELLO/Chao Fa Democratic Party, as well as other Hmong and non-Hmong anti-Communist Lao groups, was as important for the insurgents as receiving guns or other direct military support. Crucially, Luang Por Chamroon used his extensive connections in far-right wing factions of the Thai police, military and Thai intelligence services to facilitate Pa Kao Her and his colleagues traveling to China for direct military training and received weapons and other supplies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition, he provided the families of insurgents with a relatively safe place to stay, and he gave insurgents places to rest and recover after long and arduous missions inside Laos, as well as private and secure meeting places to have strategy and planning discussions, and to coordinate activities. Resistance groups also reportedly operated a small radio communications center near the temple. Crucially, he helped make connections with senior Thai military and intelligence officers, such as Sutsai Hartsadin, and even the Chinese Embassy. He lobbied for support for the Hmong insurgents. I have a photo of Pa Kao Her signing a cooperation agreement with Bounlout Saycocte, an ethnic Lao insurgent leader, and a Vietnamese anti-Communist insurgent leader, Nguyen Van Kim: the background of the photo clearly indicates that it was taken near a cave in the general vicinity of WTK. On the outskirts of the temple, insurgents also sometimes received training. In one case psychological training was provided by a Lao insurgent for Hmong soldiers working with Pa Kao Her. Clearly, the support provided by Luang Por Chamroon to dissidents, despite possibly not technically violating Buddhist vinaya, contradicted the spirit of those rules. Others, however, argue that Luang Por Chamroon's support of the anti-Communist movement was justifiable. Indeed, it is rarely easy to separate religious practices from larger societal conflicts, including political conflicts and ideas related to nationalism. Whatever one believes, this chapter has hopefully helped explain the special relationship between the Hmong and the Buddhist monks at WTK.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. Some authors have incorrectly spelt the name of the temple as "Wat Tan (or Than) Kha Bok" or "Wat Tam Kra Bok." See, for example, Joseph Westermeyer, *Poppies, Pipes, and People: Opium and Its Use in Laos* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982).
2. The monks at WTK sometimes ran into trouble with police officers when they refused rides in vehicles. Luang Por Chamroon was apparently arrested once for refusing to enter a vehicle.
3. Technically, he is not the abbot (*chaon aua* in Thai), but rather *phathan khana song* (president of the Buddhist group/order), but in reality most know him as the abbot.
4. I will periodically refer to WTK as a *nat* or 'temple,' despite its ambiguous legal status.
5. Grit Grigoleit, "Coming Home? The Integration of Hmong Refugees from War Thum Krabok, Thailand, into American Society," *Hmong Studies Journal* 7 (2006): 1–22.
6. Grigoleit, "Coming Home," 1–22; apparently members of the Her and Yang clans were particularly abundant amongst the Hmong at WTK.
7. Tessa J. Bartholomew, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (Routledge Curzon: London and New York, 2002); Tessa J. Bartholomew and Chandira R. De Silva (eds.), *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Stanley J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fracture and the Dis-mantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betwixt Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Daniel Kent, "Onward Buddhist Soldiers: Preaching to the Sri Lankan Army," in *Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 157–177; H.L. Senewarata, "Religion and Conflict: The Case of Buddhism in Sri Lanka," in *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Transjunct Realpolitik*, ed. D. Johnston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Elisabeth J. Harris, "Buddhism in War: A Study of Cause and Effect from Sri Lanka," *Culture and Religion* 2/2 (2002): 197–222; Ananda Abeysekera, "The Saffron Army, Violence, Terrorism), Buddhism, Identity, and Difference in Sri Lanka," *Buddhism, Violence and the State in Burma* (Myanmar) and Sri Lanka," in *Disrupting Violence: Religion and Conflict in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. L. Cady and S. Simon (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 51–69.
9. Ian G. Baird, "Lao Buddhist Monk Involvement in Political and Militant Resistance to the Lao People's Democratic Government since 1975," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71(3) (Forthcoming, August 2012).
10. Ibid.; Michael Jerryson, "Appropriating a Space for Violence: State Buddhism in Southern Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40:1 (2009): 33–57.
11. Michael Jerryson, "Introduction," in *Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–16; Michael Jerryson, "Militarizing Buddhism: Violence in Southern Thailand," in *Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 181–209; Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (eds.), *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
12. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk who Stops Drug Addiction," Samnak Song Tham Krabok, Phaphutabai District, Saraburi Province," (In Thai), (no

- date) p. 19, based on an extended interview with Luang Por Chamroon Parnehand.
13. Jim Piaczek, "Bhikkhuni Ordination and the Thai Forest Tradition." Abstracts, The 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies: Visions for the Future (Bangkok: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, 2011), 120; Martin Seeger, "Reversal of Female Power, Transcendentality, Supernaturality and Gender in Thai Buddhism: Hagiographies and Veneration of Thai Buddhist Female Saints." Abstracts, The 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies: Visions for the Future (Bangkok: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, 2011), 185.
  14. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk who Stops Drug Addiction" (In Thai).
  15. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk who Stops Drug Addiction" (In Thai).
  16. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk who Stops Drug Addiction" (In Thai).
  17. Phra Joe Parnehand, *pers. comm.*, July 2011.
  18. Westermeyer, *Poppies, Pipes and People*.
  19. Kenn Finlayson, "Operation White Star: Prelude to Vietnam Special Warfare," 2002, [http://www.indarticles.com/p/articles/mf\\_m0HZY/iss\\_2\\_15/at\\_89859337](http://www.indarticles.com/p/articles/mf_m0HZY/iss_2_15/at_89859337).
  20. William M. Leary, "Supporting the "Secret War" CIA Air Operations in Laos 1955–1974," 2002, <http://www.air-america.org/About/History.shtml>.
  21. Leary Supporting the "Secret War."
  22. Leary, Supporting the "Secret War."
  23. Thak Chaloenmatarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1979).
  24. Interestingly, however, it appears that Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat later purchased thirty *rai* of land and donated it to the WTK temple, indicating the old ways that politics can change in Thailand. It was not unusual for political rivals to mend relations after major political struggles.
  25. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk Who Stops Addiction" (In Thai).
  26. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk Who Stops Addiction" (In Thai).
  27. Westermeyer, *Poppies, Pipes and People*.
  28. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk Who Stops Addiction" (In Thai).
  29. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk who Stops Drug Addiction" (In Thai).
  30. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk who Stops Drug Addiction" (In Thai).
  31. There is an exception to this rule. If a monk is unconscious of otherwise unaware of his situation, the monk can be transported to a hospital by a vehicle.
  32. Although in the early years these trips were often quite long, later they became shorter, generally not more than 15 days long, since there were a lot of patients waiting for the monks at the temple (Thanakorn Suriyon, no date).
  33. "WTK: Some Information about the Monastery." <http://www.WTK-monastery.org/klosteren1.html>, accessed August 15, 2011.
  34. Man Na Lee, *pers. comm.*, November 23, 2011.
  35. Westermeyer, *Poppies, Pipes and People*.
  36. William A. Smalley, Chia Koua Yang, and Gnia Yee Yang, *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
  37. The source for this information reportedly heard the late Dr. Charles Weldon tell him about this when he was still alive. However, Pa Kao Her's eldest son, Tou Her, and one of Pa Kao's brothers claim that Pa Kao first traveled to WTK in 1978. This seems likely to be the case.
  38. Westermeyer, *Poppies, Pipes and People*.

39. WTK can even help break addiction to tobacco (Thanakorn Suriyon, no date) although some monks there do smoke cigarettes.
40. Grigolet, "Coming Home," 1–22.
41. Sombon Saksaman, "Buddhism and Politics in Thailand: A Study of Socio-Political Change and Political Activism of the Thai Sangha," *Institute of Southeast Asia Studies*, 1982).
42. Sombon Saksaman, "Buddhism and Politics in Thailand."
43. See Katherine Bowe, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
44. Charles F. Keyes, "Political Crisis and Militant Buddhism," in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma*, ed. B.L. Smith (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1978).
45. Nakhonkham Boonhanonwong, *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death. Reminution and Reeducation in Laos* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2003); Khamphanh Thammakhamy, *Get to the Trunk: Destroy the Roots: The Fall from Monarchy to Socialism* (Portland: Self-published, 2004); Christopher Keenan, *Banthon Palace: Discovering the Last Dynasty of Laos* (Sydney: Flamingo, 2003).
46. Hoorleifer Jonsson, "Wars, Orogeny: Militias and Ethnic Boundaries in Laos and Exile," *Southeast Asian Studies* 47:2 (2009): 125–149.
47. Later, the name would be changed to the Democratic Chao Fa Party of Laos (see Illustration 6.10). Pa Kao Hoi was born along the Laos-Vietnam border, in Nong Het District, Xieng Khouang Province on February 2, 1943. He always remembered his year of birth because it was the same year the Japanese took control of Laos. However, the Japanese actually took control of Laos with a *corp de force* in 1945. He was assassinated in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand on October 23, 2002. His Thai name was "Cheng Sae."
48. Vang Chu Chi Vue apparently never met Shong Lue Yang, but became the spiritual leader of the Chao Fa. He was apparently the one that invented the Chao Fa flag. He blessed Chao Fa soldiers going on dangerous missions, etc.
49. Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2009).
50. Achian Boonsong Tanataro, *pers. comm.*, August 23, 2011.
51. Christopher E. Goscha, "Revolutionizing the Indochinese Past: Communist Vietnam's 'Special' Historiography on Laos," in *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Soren Jarrsson (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), 265–295.
52. Ian G. Baird, *Various Forms of Colonialism: The Social and Spatial Reorganization of the Brao in Southern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia*, PhD dissertation (Vancouver, Canada: Department of Geography, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of British Columbia, 2008).
53. See Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*.
54. Mouna Nihia Long's sister was the second wife of Shong Lue Yang.
55. Mouna Nihia Long died of illness in Chiang Rai, Thailand in the early 2000s.
56. Note that I have specifically chosen to capitalize Animism.
57. Smalley *et al.* *Mother of Writing*.
58. For example, General Athit Kamlang Ek, the former head of Military Region 2 and was head of the overall Thai military, was photographed visiting WTK to donate money to the temple, and many other senior Thai military figures have been known to visit the temple.
59. Khun Sa was expelled Thailand in 1982 after Prem Tinsulanonda succeeded Kriangsak Chomman as Prime Minister.

60. Gordon Baltimore died at WTK in early 2011, at the age of seventy-two, after spending over thirty years at the temple as a monk. He probably assisted Luang Por Chamroon in some of his communications with the Hmong resistance. He was ranked #16 amongst monks at WTK when he passed away.
61. According to Achian Boonsong Tanataro, Sursat Hatsadin visited WTK frequently (*pers. comm.*, August 23, 2011).
62. Tou Hoi, *pers. comm.*, November 20, 2011.
63. Manop Parichand died in a car accident in 2010 at the age of fifty-nine years old. He went unconscious at the wheel of the car, apparently due to being a diabetic.
64. This has led to some Hmong to believe that monks at WTK are allowed to have "wives," provided that they do not live at the temple. There are even persistent rumors about Luang Por Chamroon having a wife who lived outside of the temple area. In fact, he was married and had two children before ordaining as a monk (Joseph Westemeyer, 1980, "Two Neo Buddhist Cults in Asia: The Influence of the Founder and the Social Context on Religious Movements," *Journal of Psychological Anthropology* 3: 143–152), but it is unclear what his relationship, if any, was with his wife after he ordained. The present abbot of WTK, Achian Boonsong, denies monks at Tham Krabok are allowed to have wives or any sexual relations when ordained. He and others point to the fact that monks have been expelled from the temple in the past for related offenses, including having sexual relations with women and consuming alcohol.
65. Gordon Baltimore, a former member of the US military (I have seen his discharge papers), allegedly came to WTK by accident after his truck had flat tires (all four apparently went flat) near the temple entrance. Gordon claimed he was going to the Thai-Cambodian border to send weapons to Cambodian insurgents along the border. He reportedly decided to stay for his life. Other observers, however, wonder if this story is "too good to be true" and suggest that Gordon was sometimes known to exaggerate. There appear to be various discrepancies regarding different versions of his personal history.
66. Grigolet, "Coming Home," 1–22.
67. Grigolet, "Coming Home," 1–22.
68. Grigolet, "Coming Home," 1–22.
69. Grigolet, "Coming Home," 1–22; Paio Lor, "A Photo Essay of the Hmong Experience at WTK in Thailand," *Hmong Studies Journal* 10 (2009): 1–41.
70. Ian G. Baird, "Lao Buddhist Monks."
71. As of July 2011, there were just over 100 people in twenty-nine Hmong families still living on WTK temple land.
72. Thanakorn Suriyon, "A Monk Who Stops Drug Addiction" (in Thai).

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