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For the Hmong, an enduring sense of exile

By Mai Der Vang
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Buried in a closet is a suitcase where my mother hides an heirloom from the war. I have seen it only once, by chance when she was reorganizing. It is a traditional Hmong jacket. Instead of being pristine and vibrant like the ones I wear to the Hmong New Year, it is thin, tattered and faded. This is the jacket my mother wore as a girl, growing up in the mountains of Laos. It is what she wore the night her family fled their village in fear of retribution from the Communists following the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

Underneath this jacket is another one, also old and ragged. It belonged to my mother's youngest sister. Like many others, my aunt and mother were forced to separate that fateful night. In the final seconds of good-bye, my aunt pulled off her jacket and handed it to my mother to keep in case they never met again. Eventually, they found each other in a refugee camp in Thailand, and my mother kept the jacket.

Born and raised in this country, I was not privy to the experiences of my mother's generation. I can only listen to the stories and feel the tangible remnants, such as my mother's jacket. I have come to know these remnants as objects of exile that speak of a different era and a life left behind.

These and other memories were evoked recently by the [passing](#) of Gen. [Vang Pao](#), who was venerated worldwide as the leader of the Hmong people. During the early 1960s, the U.S. government recruited Vang Pao to lead a clandestine army against communist forces in a covert war that was thrust into the lives of the hill tribe Hmong. As defeat neared and the United States abandoned Vietnam in 1975, it left behind a war-torn Laos and hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians. After years in squalid Thai refugee camps, most of them resettled in the United States.

In processing Vang Pao's death last month, I wondered whether it is more devastating for a people to lose their homeland or their most revered leader. It seemed that the loss of Laos created the need for a leader, someone who would usher the Hmong into the next migration, the next life.

Perhaps Vang Pao also personified for many Hmong the need to remember our story of exile, one that speaks of a people without a country who long to return to something that no longer exists.

Exile can be understood not merely as being banished from a place but, rather, that returning to one's place may never happen, or that it may happen but the place will never be what it was. This narrative haunts the memories and desires of many elders who long to return to Laos, yet I believe it can also

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fuel efforts to preserve who we are.

On Feb. 4, the start of a [six-day funeral](#) for Vang Pao, thousands of Hmong crowded into downtown Fresno, jostling gently to capture photos and glimpses of the horse-drawn carriage bearing his body. The procession consisted of Hmong servicemen and women. Hundreds of elders appeared impressive yet solemn in their fatigues. It was as if a long-lost ancient army had been resurrected.

My friend and I squatted on a curb and watched these veterans pass. Some moments it felt as if we were not in Fresno but in a Hmong village, two young girls bidding farewell to soldiers going off to war.

I wonder what happens to the generation of children who are born or raised in this country but whose elders came here in exile. What will happen to our sense of exile?

Somewhere in my American identity, in my fluent English and Western clothing, in my reliance on technology and my college degree, the exile lives in me, too. Writer Andre Aciman says, "Exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place, they're also seeing - or looking for - another behind it."

I inherited a sense of exile from my elders that puts me in a state of limbo. It forces me to constantly search for something I have yet to find and continually feel as though I do not belong anywhere.

Yet this narrative also calls me back and grounds me in the unwavering knowledge that I am Hmong, no matter how far I roam, how American I become or even if I choose to marry someone who is not Hmong. It ingrains within me a willingness to understand and be open to my elders, for I, too, share in the dream of seeing the idyllic homeland once again. If I lose this narrative, it is as if I lose the story of my identity and what so many before me have sacrificed to sustain.

For the Hmong, there is no country to return to, no homeland to help us preserve who we are. We are an inherently exiled people. But I believe our story of exile must help us preserve who we are. It moves us forward, even in the midst of the general's passing, and emboldens us to continue searching for those objects of exile in the suitcases of our parents or wherever else they may be buried.

The writer, a commentator for New America Media, lives in Fresno, Calif.

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