

Article

Resettled Lives: Hmong Migration, Memory, and Diasporic Reconstruction

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Abstract

This article theorises Hmong migration through the concept of resettled histories, understood as the social and political processes through which histories of war, flight, loss, survival, and belonging are carried into new places, translated into new institutional languages, and contested across generations. Rather than approaching Hmong mobility as a linear movement from Southeast Asia to Western resettlement countries, the article situates Hmong migrations within longer histories of upland mobility, imperial and colonial governance, Cold War militarisation, refugee camps, and contemporary diasporic reconstruction. In response to scholarship on collective memory, postmemory, diasporic memory, refugee critique, digital diaspora, and Asian American studies, the article clarifies that resettled histories are not simply memories preserved after migration. They are histories that become socially active after resettlement through community organisations, veteran memorialisation, Hmong New Year celebrations, oral-history projects, clan networks, digital platforms, political mobilisation, and intergenerational debate. The article also foregrounds differences among Hmong communities by gender, generation, religion, class, political position, national location, and relations to Laos, China, Thailand, France, Australia, and the United States. By engaging contemporary Hmong scholarship and Hmong-produced archives alongside foundational migration and memory theory, the article shows how displaced communities do not merely adapt to host societies; they also struggle to have their histories recognised, narrated, and transmitted. The Hmong case demonstrates that resettlement may provide legal security without ending the historical life of displacement. It therefore offers a lens for rethinking migration as the movement and reconstruction of histories, not only the movement of people.

Keywords: Hmong migration; resettled histories; refugee memory; digital diaspora; Hmong American studies; collective memory; postmemory; transnationalism; political recognition



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1. Introduction

Migration is frequently conceptualised as a linear process of movement in which individuals depart from one location, cross territorial boundaries, arrive at a destination, and eventually settle. Although such a framing offers analytical clarity, it remains theoretically inadequate as it confines migration to an act of spatial mobility and interprets resettlement as an administrative or territorial endpoint. Contemporary migration scholarship increasingly challenges these reductionist understandings by emphasising migration as a complex and ongoing social process shaped by power relations, mobility regimes,

identity formation, and experiences of belonging and exclusion. In an era characterised by intensified global interconnectedness and uneven development, migration has become one of the defining issues of our time due to its scale, multidimensional consequences, and profound social, political, and cultural implications. More importantly, migration is fundamentally about people—their aspirations and insecurities, negotiations of identity, experiences of displacement, and processes of meaning-making across borders. As such, migration offers a critical lens through which broader questions of mobility, citizenship, home, and belonging can be understood (Massey et al. 1993; Portes 1997; Vertovec 1999). The Hmong experience makes this limitation particularly visible. Hmong migrations cannot be adequately understood as a movement from Laos, China, Thailand, or Vietnam to the United States, France, Australia, or elsewhere. They must be understood as a historically layered process produced by imperial frontiers, upland marginality, colonial knowledge, Cold War violence, refugee camps, humanitarian regimes, and diasporic reconstruction. In this sense, Hmong migration is not merely a story of departure and arrival; it is a story of history being displaced, carried, reinterpreted, and resettled.

How should Hmong migration be conceptualised if displacement is not treated as an interruption of normal national life but as a formative condition of collective identity? The central argument is that Hmong migrations reveal the limits of territorially bounded theories of identity, citizenship, and belonging. Modern political thought often assumes that people belong naturally to states, territories, and nations; refugees appear as anomalies because they disturb this “national order of things” (Malkki 1995b). Yet the Hmong case complicates this assumption further. Hmong identity was never fully contained by a single nation-state. It was historically produced across uplands, borderlands, kinship networks, imperial margins, colonial categories, military alliances, refugee camps, and diasporic settlements.

The article develops the concept of resettled histories to theorise this process. By resettled histories, we mean the social, cultural, and political processes through which displaced communities carry histories of violence, movement, and survival into new locations and reinterpret them across generations. The concept is distinct from collective memory, cultural memory, postmemory, diasporic memory, and transnational memory in three ways. First, it begins from resettlement as an institutional and geopolitical condition, not only from memory as a social practice. Second, it asks how histories become resited through refugee policy, citizenship, community organisations, memorial campaigns, digital platforms, and host-state racial formations. Third, it treats the past as contested infrastructure for claims-making: Hmong communities use memories of war, secrecy, flight, camp life, and sacrifice to demand recognition, transmit identity, debate political responsibility, and negotiate belonging in multiple national settings.

The Hmong case is theoretically important because it sits at the intersection of several major debates. It contributes to refugee studies by showing that refugeehood is not merely a legal status but a historically produced condition shaped by violence, classification, and geopolitical responsibility (Zolberg et al. 1989; Malkki 1995b; M. Vang 2020). It contributes to diaspora theory by showing that diasporic identity may exist without a singular homeland-state or a simple politics of return (Safran 1991; Chatteraj 2022; Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997; Lee 2015; Schein 2004). It contributes to transnationalism by showing that social fields include not only people, money, and institutions but also memory, obligation, digital connection, and unresolved historical claims (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Basch et al. 1994; Vertovec 1999; Brinkerhoff 2009; Diminescu 2008). It contributes to memory studies by showing how displacement is transmitted across generations through family narratives, rituals, commemorations, archives, and postmemory (Halbwachs 1992; Assmann and Czaplicka 1995; Chatteraj and Basu 2025; Hirsch 2008; Eastmond 2007; M. Vang 2020).

Methodologically, the article is conceptual and interpretive, but it is now grounded in concrete empirical illustrations drawn from published oral histories, Hmong-produced narratives, community studies, historical scholarship, refugee memoirs, and research on Hmong civic organisations and digital diasporic practices. It does not claim to present new fieldwork. Instead, it synthesises and theorises existing scholarship on Hmong migration, diaspora, refugee resettlement, identity, and memory. This approach is necessary because the Hmong case has often been approached through fragmented disciplinary lenses: as an ethnic minority question in Southeast Asian studies, as a refugee resettlement issue in American sociology, as a Cold War history in political studies, as an Asian American refugee critique, or as a cultural adaptation problem in anthropology. A more integrated theoretical account can show how Hmong migration speaks to broader questions of mobility, sovereignty, memory, digital belonging, racial incorporation, and identity beyond borders. The article is organised into sections that move from theory and historical context to Cold War displacement, refugee resettlement, resettled histories, internal diversity, digital community, comparative diaspora, and the wider implications of the Hmong case for migration theory.

2. Theoretical Framework: Migration, Diaspora, Transnationalism, and Memory

The Hmong case sits at the intersection of several theoretical traditions. Migration theory has often been shaped by economic, demographic, and policy-oriented explanations. Classical approaches explain migration through wage differentials, labour demand, household strategies, migration networks, segmented labour markets, or cumulative causation (Massey et al. 1993; Portes 1997). These approaches are important because they show that migration is not random; it is shaped by structural inequalities, social networks, and institutional conditions. Yet they are insufficient for understanding populations whose mobility is deeply entangled with war, state violence, ethnic marginalisation, historical memory, and the geopolitical ordering of mobility (Zolberg et al. 1989; Malkki 1995b; Ullah 2025; Ullah and Chattoraj 2025; M. Vang 2020). Hmong migration was not simply a rational response to economic opportunity. It was shaped by colonial histories, military alliances, forced displacement, refugee governance, and the restructuring of collective life across borders.

Refugee studies provide another important starting point. Zolberg et al. (1989) argued that refugee movements must be understood in relation to violence, state formation, and international political order. Refugees are not merely people who move; they are produced through conflicts, regimes, and systems of power. Malkki's (1995a) critique of the "national order of things" is especially useful here. She argues that refugees are often treated as anomalies because modern political thought assumes a natural relationship between people, territory, culture, and nation-state. Refugees disturb this assumed order because they expose the historical fragility of national belonging. The Hmong case confirms this insight but also extends it. Hmong displacement does not merely represent the loss of national anchoring; it reveals that Hmong identity was never fully contained by a single national frame.

Diaspora theory is equally important. Safran (1991) described diasporas through features such as dispersal, collective memory of homeland, partial incorporation into host societies, alienation, and the possibility of return. Cohen (1997) broadened the concept by distinguishing different types of diasporas, including victim, labour, imperial, trade, and cultural diasporas. Clifford (1994), however, warned against overly rigid definitions, arguing that diaspora should be understood not only through roots but also through routes. This distinction is crucial for the Hmong case. Hmong diaspora is not organised around a single universally recognised homeland-state. Instead, it is constituted through memories

of upland Asia, Laos, the Secret War, refugee camps, clan genealogies, ritual geographies, and contemporary transnational relations. Hmong diaspora therefore unsettles models that presume a singular homeland or a straightforward desire for territorial return.

Transnationalism further helps explain how dispersed communities maintain social, political, religious, and economic ties across borders. Glick Schiller et al. (1992) argued that migrants may create social fields linking societies of origin and settlement, thereby challenging the assumption that migration produces a clean break between old and new worlds. Basch et al. (1994) developed this insight further by showing how migrants may live within transnational social formations that exceed the nation-state. Vertovec (1999) conceptualised transnationalism as a condition involving multiple ties and interactions across borders. Hmong communities exemplify such cross-border social fields through kinship networks, remittances, cultural production, political activism, religious practice, digital media, and return visits. Yet Hmong transnationalism cannot be reduced to the maintenance of origin-destination links. It is also a process of historical reconstruction in which dispersed communities reinterpret the meanings of Laos, China, Thailand, America, France, Australia, and “homeland” itself.

Memory studies offer the final theoretical pillar. Collective memory is not a passive archive of the past but a social process through which groups produce identity and continuity (Halbwachs 1992). Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) distinguish between everyday communicative memory and more institutionalised cultural memory. Communicative memory circulates through family stories and interpersonal exchange; cultural memory is stabilised through texts, rituals, symbols, archives, and institutions. Hirsch’s (2008) concept of postmemory is particularly useful for thinking about second and subsequent generations who inherit traumatic histories not through direct experience but through stories, images, practices, and affective atmospheres. For Hmong diasporic communities, memories of war, flight, camp life, and resettlement are transmitted through family narratives, commemorations, oral histories, funeral rituals, community organisations, museums, literature, film, and digital media. These memories do not simply preserve the past; they shape the terms through which younger generations understand identity and belonging.

Tying these theoretical traditions together, this article argues that Hmong migration should be understood as a process of historical resettlement. Migration moves people, but it also moves histories. Refugee resettlement relocates bodies, but it also relocates political memories, moral claims, kinship obligations, cosmologies, and unresolved traumas. Diaspora is not merely dispersal; it is the reorganisation of collective identity across space and time. Transnationalism is not merely cross-border connection; it is the infrastructure through which dispersed histories remain socially active. Memory is not merely recollection; it is the medium through which displacement becomes identity. The added value of resettled histories is therefore analytical specificity: it names the post-resettlement work through which displaced histories are carried, translated, institutionalised, digitised, politicised, and contested in new social worlds.

3. Historical Mobility and the Politics of Borderlands

To understand Hmong migration, one must begin before the refugee moment. The Hmong have historically lived across upland areas of southern China and mainland Southeast Asia, including what are now Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar (Lee and Tapp 2010; Tapp 1989). These upland geographies matter because they complicate state-centred assumptions about belonging. Upland peoples have often been positioned at the margins of lowland states, imperial projects, and national administrations. Scott (2009) describes parts of mainland Southeast Asia’s uplands as zones where populations historically used mobility, dispersed settlement, and flexible identity to evade or negotiate state power. Yet

Scott's account must be read alongside Hmong-centred historical scholarship that emphasises political formation, leadership, negotiation, and aspirations for legitimacy rather than simply evasion (Lee 2015; Tapp 1989). Borderlands scholarship similarly reminds us that frontiers are not empty margins but socially produced spaces of exchange, surveillance, commerce, and competing sovereignties (van Schendel 2005; Turner 2010).

Hmong history has been shaped by repeated encounters with expanding states. In China, Hmong and related Miao populations were subject to imperial classification, rebellion, repression, and migration (Lee and Tapp 2010). In Southeast Asia, colonial and postcolonial states incorporated Hmong communities unevenly through ethnic categorisation, taxation, military recruitment, development schemes, and security surveillance (Tapp 1989; Lee 2015; Turner 2010). These processes produced Hmong identity as both culturally distinctive and politically suspect. The figure of the upland minority became a problem for states seeking territorial consolidation. In this sense, Hmong migration was not external to state formation; it was produced through state formation and through Hmong responses to it.

Colonialism intensified these dynamics. French colonial rule in Indochina governed upland populations through indirect administration, ethnic classification, and selective alliances. Colonial knowledge often represented upland peoples as tribal, martial, primitive, or resistant. Such representations were not merely descriptive; they shaped administrative practice. Ethnicity became a category through which colonial authorities organised labour, taxation, military recruitment, and political control. The Hmong were thus inserted into colonial governance as a legible minority, even while their actual social worlds remained more complex than colonial categories allowed. This dynamic reflects a wider colonial tendency to convert fluid social identities into administratively manageable categories (Scott 2020; Appadurai 1996).

This historical background is essential because it shows that Hmong migration did not begin with the Vietnam War or the 1975 communist victory in Laos. The refugee crisis was a dramatic rupture, but it occurred within longer histories of mobility, marginality, and militarised incorporation. Hmong communities had already experienced movement across mountainous borders, shifting relations with states, and the politicisation of ethnic identity (Tapp 1989; Lee and Tapp 2010). What changed in the Cold War was the scale and geopolitical meaning of displacement. Hmong mobility became linked to global ideological conflict, American military strategy, and international refugee governance.

The borderland character of Hmong history also challenges conventional ideas of homeland. In many diaspora theories, homeland is imagined as a territorial origin from which people are dispersed and to which they may symbolically or physically return (Safran 1991; Cohen 1997). For Hmong communities, however, homeland is more complex. It may refer to China as ancestral origin, Laos as the site of recent political memory, specific villages and mountains as familial landscapes, Thailand as a refugee camp space, or the diaspora itself as a new social homeland. Homeland is therefore not a fixed geographical object but a layered memory-space. It is produced through stories, rituals, genealogies, songs, political narratives, and embodied practices.

The Hmong case therefore forces migration theory to rethink the relationship between people and territory. Modern states imagine territory as bounded and exclusive. Hmong histories suggest a different spatial logic: one organised around routes, kinship, mountains, clans, refugee corridors, camps, and transnational networks. This does not mean Hmong communities lack attachment to place. Rather, it means that attachment is plural, mobile, and historically sedimented. Place matters, but it matters as remembered, narrated, ritualised, and politically contested. Hmong belonging is not absence of territory; it is belonging across multiple territorial and mnemonic fields, a point that resonates with wider

migration scholarship on passports, visas, and the uneven regulation of mobility across borders (Malkki 1992; van Schendel 2005).

4. Cold War Displacement and the Making of Refugee Diaspora

The Cold War transformed Hmong mobility into mass displacement. In Laos, many Hmong were recruited by the United States and its allies during the so-called Secret War, a covert theatre connected to the wider Vietnam War. Hmong soldiers and communities became deeply entangled in anti-communist military operations, particularly under the leadership of General Vang Pao (Chan 1994; C. Y. Vang 2010). When communist forces took power in Laos in 1975, many Hmong associated with the American war effort faced persecution, insecurity, and fear of reprisals. Thousands fled across the Mekong River into Thailand, where refugee camps became key sites of survival, waiting, classification, and eventual resettlement (Chan 1994; Faderman 1999; Hillmer 2011). Oral histories of Hmong pilots, soldiers, families, and camp residents show that this was not only military history but also a history of intimate loss, secrecy, hunger, fear, and the difficult work of making survival narratable.

This history matters for theory because it shows that refugeehood is not simply a humanitarian condition. It is also a political category produced by war, alliance, abandonment, and international governance. Hmong refugees were not merely victims of generic conflict; they were displaced through a specific geopolitical history in which a stateless or minority population became an ally of a superpower and then bore the consequences of imperial withdrawal. Their refugee status therefore carried a moral and political charge. It raised questions of obligation, betrayal, recognition, and historical responsibility. This is why Hmong refugeehood must be read alongside broader analyses of refugees as products of international political order rather than as accidental victims outside politics (Zolberg et al. 1989; Malkki 1995b).

Refugee camps in Thailand played a crucial role in transforming displacement into diaspora. Camps are often imagined as temporary spaces between flight and durable solution. Yet they are also social worlds in which identities are reorganised, histories are narrated, bureaucratic categories are imposed, and future possibilities are structured (Malkki 1995b). For Hmong refugees, camps were places of hardship and uncertainty, but also places where community institutions, educational practices, religious networks, and political narratives were reshaped (Chan 1994; Faderman 1999). The camp was not outside history; it was one of the sites where Hmong diasporic history was made.

Resettlement further transformed Hmong identity. In the United States, France, Australia, and other countries, Hmong refugees entered societies structured by race, class, welfare policy, language hierarchy, and multicultural governance. Resettlement policies often dispersed refugees geographically, expecting them to assimilate into host societies. Yet Hmong communities frequently rebuilt collective life through kinship clustering, clan associations, churches, cultural organisations, mutual assistance networks, and political mobilisation (C. Y. Vang 2010; Hein 2006). C. Y. Vang (2010) shows how Hmong Americans reconstructed community in diaspora through institutions, memory, and adaptation. Chan (1994) similarly foregrounds the lived experience of Hmong families as they moved from life in Laos to refugeehood and settlement in America.

Resettlement must therefore be understood as both incorporation and reconstruction. On the one hand, Hmong refugees had to navigate state institutions: schools, welfare offices, labour markets, legal systems, housing regimes, and citizenship procedures. On the other hand, they actively remade community life under new conditions. They did not simply assimilate, nor did they simply preserve an unchanged culture. They translated cultural practices, reworked gender and generational relations, created new forms of leadership,

and negotiated what it meant to be Hmong in societies where Hmong identity was often misunderstood, racialised, or rendered invisible (Ong 2003; C. Y. Vang 2010).

The Cold War also remained alive in diasporic politics. For some Hmong communities, memory of the Secret War became central to claims for recognition in the United States and elsewhere. Veterans' organisations, memorial campaigns, oral histories, museum exhibits, and political activism sought to make visible the sacrifices of Hmong soldiers and civilians. This politics of recognition demonstrates that displacement is not only about loss of home; it is also about the struggle to have history acknowledged. Hmong American campaigns around veterans' naturalisation, memorialisation of the Secret War, and public education about Hmong military service are concrete examples of resettled histories: histories once hidden by secrecy and geopolitical denial are reworked into civic claims within the host state (Espiritu 2014; Schlund-Vials 2012; M. Vang 2020; Xiong 2022).

This is why the concept of resettled histories is necessary. Hmong resettlement did not close the chapter of war. It relocated the unresolved meanings of war into new national contexts. The United States became not merely a host country but also a site where the memory of American military involvement in Laos could be debated, commemorated, and contested. France became not merely a destination but a space where colonial and postcolonial histories intersected with refugee life. Australia became another arena of multi-cultural incorporation and diasporic identity-making. In each context, Hmong communities resettled not only themselves but also their histories.

5. Resettled Histories: Toward a Conceptual Framework

The concept of resettled histories refers to the ways displaced communities carry, reinterpret, institutionalise, digitise, and mobilise histories across new social and political landscapes. It captures a process that is simultaneously temporal, spatial, cultural, political, and infrastructural. Histories are resettled when memories of violence, migration, and survival are translated into family narratives, community institutions, rituals, commemorations, artistic production, digital archives, political claims, and intergenerational identity. In this sense, resettlement is not merely a state-administered programme; it is a social process through which the past is reorganised in the present.

The concept builds on but also extends existing theories. Collective memory explains how groups remember; cultural memory explains how symbols and institutions stabilise remembrance; postmemory explains how later generations inherit traumatic pasts; diasporic memory explains how dispersed communities sustain historical consciousness across space; and transnational memory explains how remembrance circulates beyond national borders (Halbwachs 1992; Assmann and Czaplicka 1995; Hirsch 2008; Eastmond 2007). Resettled histories differs by foregrounding the afterlife of displacement under conditions of formal resettlement. It asks how a history produced by war, imperial secrecy, camp bureaucracy, refugee classification, racialisation, citizenship, and community rebuilding becomes active after legal arrival. The concept therefore links memory to institutions, policy categories, digital infrastructures, and political recognition.

This concept can be understood through five interrelated dimensions. First, resettled histories are carried histories. Displaced people do not arrive as blank subjects. They carry experiences of war, flight, hunger, fear, loss, kinship separation, and moral injury. For Hmong refugees, memories of Laos, the Secret War, escape to Thailand, refugee camps, and the uncertainty of resettlement travelled with them (Chan 1994; Faderman 1999; C. Y. Vang 2010; Hillmer 2011). These memories informed family authority, community expectations, political attitudes, and intergenerational obligations.

Second, resettled histories are translated histories. Histories cannot be carried unchanged across contexts. They must be translated into new languages, institutions, and

political idioms. In the United States, Hmong war memories were translated into claims about veteran recognition, refugee rights, multicultural inclusion, Asian American history, and critique of U.S. militarism (Espiritu 2014; V. T. Nguyen 2016; Schlund-Vials 2012; C. Y. Vang 2020). In France, they intersected with colonial memory and republican models of citizenship. In Australia, they entered multicultural frameworks of ethnic community representation. Translation does not mean simplification. It means that the same historical experience acquires different meanings depending on the institutional and political context in which it is narrated.

Third, resettled histories are institutionalised histories. Over time, memory becomes embedded in organisations, rituals, archives, commemorations, museums, churches, clan associations, oral-history projects, festivals, and educational initiatives. Hmong New Year celebrations, veterans' memorial events, community centres, cultural education programmes, funeral practices, storytelling projects, and Hmong-produced oral histories give social form to memories that might otherwise remain private (Her and Buley-Meissner 2012; Lee and Tapp 2010; C. Y. Vang 2010). These institutions ensure that displacement remains socially meaningful even for those who did not directly experience it.

Fourth, resettled histories are contested histories. Diasporic memory is never singular. Different generations, genders, religious communities, political factions, class positions, and national contexts may interpret the past differently. Older generations may emphasise loss, sacrifice, secrecy, and survival; younger generations may ask how Hmong identity can be articulated within broader Asian American, French, Australian, Indigenous, feminist, or decolonial politics (M. Vang 2020). Some may remember Laos as homeland; others may know it primarily as an inherited story. Some may emphasise anti-communist struggle; others may focus on healing, racial justice, gender equality, or cultural continuity. Resettled histories are therefore not unified memory but a field of negotiation.

Fifth, resettled histories are mobilised histories. They are not only preserved; they are used. Hmong American civic organisations, veterans' campaigns, local electoral mobilisation, refugee advocacy, community radio, and youth-led cultural projects show how memory can become political capacity (Wong 2017; Xiong 2022). The demand is not simply that Hmong people be included as immigrants or ethnic minorities; it is that the history of war, alliance, secrecy, displacement, and contribution be recognised as part of the moral history of the states that resettled them.

The concept of resettled histories contributes to migration theory in four ways. First, it shifts attention from movement to historical afterlife: migration does not end when people cross borders or receive citizenship. Second, it connects refugee studies with memory studies by showing that refugeehood is also a memory regime in which displacement is transmitted and transformed (Eastmond 2007; M. Vang 2020). Third, it challenges assimilationist models of incorporation because Hmong communities rework collective identity through ongoing engagement with past and present, homeland and hostland, memory and citizenship. Fourth, it foregrounds political mobilisation by showing how memory becomes a resource for recognition, civic engagement, and claims against historical erasure.

Resettled histories are particularly useful for understanding second and third generations. For younger Hmong born in the United States, France, Australia, or elsewhere, war and refugee flight may not be personal memories. Yet they may function as postmemory in Hirsch's (2008) sense: deeply transmitted histories that feel constitutive of identity despite not being directly lived. Such postmemory can generate pride, trauma, obligation, confusion, or political consciousness. Young Hmong may inherit stories of sacrifice without fully sharing the experiential world of their elders. They may also reinterpret these stories through new frameworks: racialisation, minority rights, Indigenous comparisons, decolonial critique, feminist politics, or transnational cultural revival.

6. Hmong Identity, Internal Diversity, and Belonging Beyond Borders

Hmong identity beyond borders is neither purely traditional nor simply diasporic in a celebratory sense. It is a negotiated formation produced through displacement, adaptation, memory, and power. It is shaped by clan structures, language, ritual practices, gender relations, religion, class, political memory, racialisation, education, geographic location, and national incorporation (Lee and Tapp 2010; Pfeifer et al. 2012; C. Y. Vang 2010; Yang 2003). The challenge is to avoid two opposite errors: romanticising Hmong identity as timeless cultural essence or reducing it to a product of refugee trauma. Hmong identity is historically dynamic. It has been made and remade through mobility and through internal debate.

Language provides one example. Hmong language is central to cultural continuity, oral history, ritual practice, and intergenerational transmission. Yet language maintenance becomes difficult in diaspora, especially as younger generations are educated in English, French, or other dominant languages. Language loss may produce anxiety about cultural survival, but it can also lead to new hybrid forms of expression. Hmong identity may be articulated through bilingual media, music, poetry, digital storytelling, and educational programmes. This reflects a wider diasporic condition in which culture is not simply inherited but consciously reconstructed (Clifford 1994; C. Y. Vang 2010).

Gender, generation, religion, and class are equally important. Resettlement often alters household authority, educational opportunity, labour participation, marriage patterns, religious practice, and youth autonomy. Younger Hmong women and men may challenge older expectations while still valuing collective belonging. Women may experience both new opportunities and continuing constraints. Christian conversion, shamanic practice, ancestral rituals, and secular youth cultures may produce different relationships to memory and obligation. Class position also matters: professional, working-class, rural, urban, and student experiences of Hmongness do not unfold in identical ways. Generational tensions often arise around language, marriage, education, religion, politics, and memory. These tensions are not signs of cultural breakdown alone; they are part of the normal politics of diasporic identity-making (Ong 2003; C. Y. Vang 2010).

Citizenship further complicates belonging. Formal citizenship may provide legal security, voting rights, and access to institutions, but it does not automatically resolve historical displacement. Hmong citizens of the United States, France, or Australia may still relate to Laos, China, Thailand, or a broader Hmong world through memory, kinship, and culture. Hmong communities remaining in Laos or China also occupy different positions from Hmong in Western resettlement states: they are shaped by different regimes of minority recognition, development policy, surveillance, market incorporation, and mobility constraint. Their belonging is therefore layered. A person may be legally American, culturally Hmong, historically connected to Laos, ancestrally linked to China, and transnationally connected to relatives across the world. Such layered belonging challenges nationalist models that assume one people, one territory, one identity (Malkki 1992; Vertovec 1999; Turner 2010).

The Hmong case also complicates return. In classical diaspora theory, return often occupies a central place (Safran 1991; Cohen 1997). For Hmong communities, return is ambiguous. Some may visit Laos, China, or Thailand for family, tourism, ritual, business, or healing. Others may fear return because of political histories. Still others may not know what return would mean, since the homeland itself is plural and historically fragmented. Return may be physical, symbolic, genealogical, digital, or ritual. The impossibility of simple return does not weaken Hmong diaspora; it defines its distinctive structure. Hmong diaspora is not organised around restoration of a lost nation-state but around memory,

relational belonging, mobility constraints, and historically produced attachments (Schein 2004; M. Vang 2020).

7. Digital Diaspora, Online Memory, and Contemporary Hmong Communities

Contemporary Hmong belonging is increasingly produced through digital infrastructures. Social media, video platforms, online memorial pages, community websites, digital archives, podcasts, livestreamed rituals, and transnational messaging groups allow dispersed Hmong communities to narrate history, debate identity, circulate language lessons, organise events, and maintain kinship ties across continents. Digital diaspora scholarship shows that online spaces do not replace place-based community; rather, they extend the social field through which belonging is imagined, performed, and contested (Brinkerhoff 2009; Diminescu 2008).

For Hmong communities, digital media are especially important because the histories at stake were often hidden, fragmented, or transmitted orally. Online repositories and Hmong-produced cultural projects help transform family memory into shareable public memory. Youth use digital storytelling, music, film, and social media to reinterpret war narratives, refugee journeys, language loss, gender expectations, and the meaning of Hmongness in Asian American and global contexts. These practices are not merely expressive; they are archival and political. They create spaces in which younger generations can inherit history while also questioning inherited narratives.

Digital spaces also make visible internal disagreement. Debates over veterans' memory, Laos, homeland, Christianity, shamanism, gender roles, intermarriage, language, Black-Asian solidarities, and Hmong political representation can circulate rapidly across platforms. These disagreements show that resettled histories are living histories. They move through servers, phones, videos, comments, livestreams, and online commemorations as much as through families, rituals, and community halls. Digital diaspora therefore adds a contemporary dimension to resettled histories: it shows how displaced histories remain active through technological mediation and transnational publics.

This is why the language of "beyond borders" matters. Hmong identity is not borderless in the sense of being free from state power. On the contrary, Hmong histories have been deeply shaped by borders, militaries, refugee regimes, citizenship laws, and racial states. But Hmong identity exceeds borders because it cannot be fully contained by them. Borders have divided Hmong communities across China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and the global North. Yet kinship, memory, ritual, and communication continue to connect dispersed Hmong worlds. The border is therefore both a site of separation and a condition for transnational imagination.

8. Rethinking Migration Theory Through the Hmong Case

The Hmong case makes several important contributions to migration theory, especially when read comparatively. First, it challenges linear models of migration. Movement from origin to destination does not capture the layered temporality of Hmong displacement. Hmong migration includes precolonial mobility, imperial marginalisation, colonial classification, Cold War militarisation, refugee flight, camp life, Western resettlement, digital reconnection, and contemporary transnationalism (Chan 1994; Lee 2015; Lee and Tapp 2010; C. Y. Vang 2010). These are not separate stages but overlapping historical layers. Migration theory must therefore attend to sedimented histories rather than isolated movements.

Second, the Hmong case challenges nation-centred identity frameworks. The assumption that people naturally belong to a nation-state is inadequate for communities whose histories are dispersed across uplands, borders, camps, and diasporas. Hmong identity has been shaped by states but not reducible to state membership. This supports Malkki's (1995a)

critique of the national order of things while extending it to show how some communities have long inhabited political worlds not fully organised by national territoriality.

Third, the Hmong case complicates diaspora theory. Classical diaspora models often presume a remembered homeland, dispersal, boundary maintenance, and possible return (Safran 1991; Cohen 1997). Hmong diaspora includes these elements but in unusual forms. Homeland is plural, memory is layered, return is ambiguous, and peoplehood is maintained through kinship, ritual, and political history rather than through a single territorial state. Hmong diaspora therefore supports more flexible, route-based approaches to diaspora (Clifford 1994).

Fourth, the Hmong case deepens transnationalism. Transnationalism is not only about flows of money, people, goods, or information. It is also about the circulation of memory and historical responsibility. Hmong transnationalism includes family ties, cultural exchange, political activism, digital communication, clan networks, and online memory work. It also includes the movement of unresolved histories across generations and borders. This suggests that migration studies should treat memory as a transnational practice (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Vertovec 1999; Yang 2003; Hirsch 2008; Brinkerhoff 2009; Diminescu 2008).

Fifth, the Hmong case repositions refugee resettlement. Policy language often treats resettlement as one of the durable solutions to displacement, alongside repatriation and local integration. But durability should not be confused with closure. Resettlement may provide safety, citizenship, and opportunity, yet displacement can continue as memory, trauma, inequality, and political struggle. Asian American refugee critique is especially useful here because it shows how incorporation can coexist with militarised memory, gratitude politics, racialisation, and demands for recognition (Espiritu 2014; M. T. Nguyen 2012; V. T. Nguyen 2016; Schlund-Vials 2012; M. Vang 2020). The end of legal refugeehood does not necessarily end the social life of displacement.

Finally, the Hmong case contributes to debates on sovereignty. States often claim the authority to classify populations as citizens, minorities, refugees, immigrants, or aliens. Hmong histories show how such classifications are historically contingent and politically charged. The same population may be classified as tribal minority, military ally, refugee, immigrant, ethnic community, racial minority, or transnational diaspora depending on the institutional context. These shifting labels reveal the power of states but also the instability of state categories.

9. Discussion

Memory, Power, and the Politics of Historical Belonging

The concept of resettled histories brings memory and power into the centre of migration analysis. Displaced communities do not merely remember; they remember under conditions shaped by states, institutions, and dominant narratives. Some histories are recognised; others are silenced. Some forms of suffering are memorialised; others remain private or politically inconvenient. Hmong memories of the Secret War, refugee flight, and resettlement have often had to struggle for public visibility. This struggle is not only cultural but political.

Historical belonging is therefore different from legal belonging. A Hmong refugee may become a citizen, but citizenship does not automatically incorporate Hmong history into the national story. A community may be legally included while historically marginalised. Resettled histories describe the work required to transform private memory into public recognition. This may occur through memorials, education, literature, film, museums, academic scholarship, political lobbying, or intergenerational storytelling. In this respect,

Hmong migration reveals how refugee incorporation involves the politics of historical narration as much as the politics of social integration (Espiritu 2014; C. Y. Vang 2010).

At the same time, memory can be burdensome. Younger generations may inherit histories of war and sacrifice as obligations. They may feel pressure to preserve language, respect elders, honour veterans, marry within the community, or maintain cultural practices. They may also question patriarchal authority, political nostalgia, or narratives that leave little room for alternative identities. Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory is useful because it shows that inherited memory can be powerful even when it is not directly experienced. Resettled histories are therefore productive but not always liberating. They create belonging, but they may also create conflict.

This tension is central to diasporic life. Diaspora is often celebrated as hybridity, flexibility, and transnational creativity. Yet diaspora is also shaped by grief, exclusion, racism, nostalgia, and unequal power (Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997). Hmong diaspora contains both resilience and vulnerability. It includes cultural revival, political mobilisation, educational achievement, and community creativity. It also includes poverty, marginalisation, historical trauma, and intergenerational struggle. A serious theory of Hmong migration must hold these realities together.

The Hmong case also invites comparison with other displaced peoples whose identities exceed state frameworks: Kurds, Palestinians, Rohingya, Tibetans, Armenians, and others. The comparison is useful because these groups also show how peoplehood may survive statelessness, exile, border-making, and historical violence. Yet the Hmong case is distinctive because of its combination of upland mobility, absence of a sovereign homeland-state, Cold War alliance, refugee camp life, Western resettlement, digital community formation, and transnational reconstruction. Unlike some diasporas organised around a strong project of territorial return or statehood, many Hmong claims centre on memory, recognition, kinship, cultural continuity, and historical accountability. This does not make the Hmong case less political; it reveals a different politics of diaspora.

For migration studies, the broader implication is clear: displacement should not be analysed only through causes, routes, and outcomes. It must also be analysed through historical afterlives. What happens to war after refugees are resettled? What happens to homeland when it is remembered by generations born elsewhere? What happens to identity when citizenship changes but memory remains transnational? What happens to political responsibility when imperial wars become refugee family histories? What happens when those histories move through digital platforms and youth publics? These questions move migration theory beyond mobility and toward historical justice.

10. Conclusions

Hmong migrations challenge some of the most basic assumptions in migration studies: They disrupt the conventional understanding of migration as a linear movement from origin to destination. They unsettle the assumption that resettlement constitutes the endpoint of displacement. They call into question the notion that identity is naturally rooted in the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. They reconfigure diaspora theories that remain overly dependent on the idea of a singular homeland. They expose the conceptual limitations of refugee policy frameworks that equate durable solutions with administrative closure. Above all, they demonstrate that migration is not only the movement of people across borders but also the movement of histories, memories, and identities across time and space.

We have argued that Hmong migration is best understood through the concept of resettled histories. The concept captures how histories of war, displacement, survival, and belonging are carried into new locations, translated into new political languages,

institutionalised across generations, digitised through contemporary media, mobilised in civic politics, and contested within diasporic communities. Hmong resettlement in the United States, France, Australia, and elsewhere did not simply create immigrant communities. It created new arenas in which Hmong histories could be remembered, reworked, debated, and claimed.

The theoretical contribution of the Hmong case lies in its capacity to connect refugee studies, diaspora theory, transnationalism, memory studies, Asian American refugee critique, and digital diaspora studies. Hmong identity is not merely ethnic continuity; it is historical reconstruction. It is made through the interaction of remembered homelands, refugee routes, host-state institutions, clan networks, ritual practices, racial categories, digital media, civic mobilisation, and intergenerational narratives. It is neither fully rooted nor simply routed; it is resettled.

The Hmong experience therefore invites a conceptual shift, i.e., migration should be approached not as a discrete episode of movement, but as a historically embedded condition that continues to structure collective life beyond arrival and formal resettlement. Displacement does not conclude at the border, in the refugee camp, or through the acquisition of legal status; rather, it persists through memory, kinship narratives, community institutions, political claims-making, and evolving forms of identity. The Hmong case demonstrates that the modern world is constituted not only through states, borders, and regimes of governance, but also through the historical agency of those who traverse these boundaries, endure their violence, preserve their memories, and reconstruct belonging across dispersed social worlds.

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