

**THE MONG ORTHOGRAPHY: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROMANIZED POPULAR (RPA) SYSTEM, IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH**

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Abstract

This article will provide an overview of the historical development of the Mong/Hmong orthography, referred to as the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system in the 1950s by American missionary linguists and a French Catholic priest, followed by attempts to reform the system in 1961, 1963, 1968, 1973, 1980, 1982, 1992, 2017, and 2025, respectively. It will also discuss the implications for reforming in terms of teaching and learning from K-16 and issues involved that will impact the community domestically and internationally, followed by suggestions for reform and for future directions in Mong research studies, recommendations, and conclusion.

Note: This article will use the spelling, Mong and Hmong, Mong/Hmong or Hmong/Mong for inclusive purposes.

**Background**

In the past, several attempts have been made to reform the RPA system, including in 1972, 1978, 1982, and most recently in 2025. This is a separate, but is directly related to the Hmong District. Without any involvement or intervention, the results in 2026 will have a profound impact on the published works completed by the Hmong District of C&MA, such as the Bible, hymnal books, and Christian literacy materials. This Hmong RPA Project seeks ways to reform the spelling of the RPA system.

## **Background of the Mong**

In the 1950s, when 5,000 Mong and 2,000 Khmu were converted to Christianity in Xieng Khouang, Laos, through the mission of the Christian and Mission Alliance (C&MA) when Rev. Ted & Ruth Andrianoff took the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Laos. The American missionaries learned that the Mong and the Khmu new Christians were illiterate in Lao, French, and in their own languages. So, they assigned two missionary linguists: Dr. G. Linwood Barney to develop a writing system for the Mong language and Dr. William A. Smalley to study the Khmu language, thereby facilitating evangelization for both ethnic groups. In the meantime, Father Yves Bertrais was a French Oblate of Mary Immaculate (OMI), worked with the Hmong Daw at *Roob Nyujqus* (Gaur's Mountain) in Luang Prabang, Laos. Together, the three developed the Mong and Hmong orthography, known as the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system to facilitate their evangelization for the Mong and Khmu in the case of C&MA, and for the Hmong in the case of the Catholic Church. Since then, several reform attempts have been in 1961, 1963, 1973, 1980, 1982, 1992, 2017, and 2025. Given this, the Mong writing system has been a subject of interest for centuries.

The Mong people have a history over 5,000 years, dating back to 2497 B.C. when they inhabited San-Wei, Southern Gansu, China (Savina, 1924). Having no writing system of their own, Mong history was recorded by Chinese and Western scholars when they inhabited San Wei, southern Gansu, China (Savina, 1924; Bernatzik, 1970; Quincy, 1988 & 1995). The Chinese made many attempts to Sinicize the Mong into the Chinese culture, but the Mong resisted and opposed assimilation and integration, so the two groups fought with each other from the Hoang-di era, from 2,497 B.C. until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Mong have a history of over 5,000 years, dating back to 2497 BC. History tells us that the Chinese made many attempts to Sinicize the Mong, but they resisted assimilation and full integration, so the Mong and the Chinese fought each other from the Hoang-di era from 2497 B.C. to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Quincy, 1988; Quincy, 1995). Due to the absence of a writing system of their own, Mongolian history has been written by Western scholars and Chinese intellectuals (Savina, 1924; Bernatzik, 1970) until the 20th century, after the Mongols had been resettled in the West and had developed their own intellectuals and begun to conduct research on their own history. However, the Mong language predated the Chinese. Arlotto (1976) considered the Mong-Mien language family as one of the pre-Sinitic languages, which are a part of the pre-Sinitic language families in Asia. Arlotto (1972) asserted that,

Within China itself, among the few remaining pre-Sinitic languages, we have the Miao-Yao family, spoken by scattered remnants of what once undoubtedly was a widespread and flourishing family (p. 52).

Despite their co-existence with the Chinese throughout history, the Mong did not have a writing system like their counterpart, the Chinese, who invented the logographic system dating back to the “early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (Olson, n.d.).

## **Legend about the Mong Writing System**

The Mong writing system has been a subject of interest for centuries. The Mong legend recounted that their original ancient writing system was lost during the time of conflict with the

Chinese and their displacement from place to place. However, the story of their orthography has been passed down through centuries of oral tradition. To preserve their writing system, history, culture, and wisdom, they were engraved and stitched into their embroidery of *Paajntaub* “Flower cloth” while their music and arts and rituals were infused into their music through *Paaj Qeeg* (messages ingrained by Mong musicians through a bamboo musical instrument called “*Qeej*” just like a Jewish flute used to perform at ritual ceremonies). The legend recounted that after the Mong crossed the Yellow River, they brought their orthography along with their history, but it was wet and soaked from swimming across the Yellow River. Given that, they dried their orthography and their history in the sun on a fence. Unfortunately, some cows ate them. That was the reason why the intestines of the cows looked like the Mong orthography and their history book. However, to cut to the chase, in terms of research, there is no historical record suggesting that the Mong had a writing system of their own before 1909.

### **Period of 1909 – 1939 ~ Development of the Pollard Script for the Flowery Miao (Mong Ahmao) in Mainland China**

In 1909, Rev. Samuel Pollard, a British missionary of the Bible Mission to China (formerly the United Methodist Mission), took the Gospel of Jesus Christ to mainland China. After a massive conversion of 30,000 Flowery Miao from Animism to Christianity in Guizhou, China, Pollard (1919) developed the Pollard Script, also known as the “Ahmao Script,” to translate the Bible into the Ahmao language (Pollard, 1919, p. 173; Hudspeth, 1939, p. 173; Shimenkan.org, n.d.).



Fig. 1. Rev. [Samuel Pollard](#) (1864-1915)

However, Pollard contracted typhoid and passed away in Guizhou, China, in 1915. Then, Rev. William H. Hudspeth continued the Bible; the “Pollard Script” was used to translate the Bible into the Ahmao language, which was completed in 1917 by Rev. William H. Hudspeth (Hudspeth, 1939, p. 173). The author obtained a specimen of a verse in the Bible in the Ahmao language from the book of John 3:16, but it is not mutually intelligible to today’s Mong language in Southeast Asia or the US.

## Other Orthographies

Other orthographies are less well-known and less used by the Mong, such as:

- (1) the *Messianic Pahawh Hmong*, a semi-syllabic script developed by Shong Lue Yang in Laos in 1959 (Smalley, Vang & Yang, 1990);
- (2) Another system, “*Ntawv Paajntaub*,” transliterating as “*Flower Cloth Writing System*” or “*Ntawv Txawj Vaag*” or “*Cher Wang Script*,” created by Rev. Cher Vang Kong for use in his church, with a connection to “*Ntawv Hmoob 92*” resembled “*Ntawv Paajntaub*” and was promoted by Nor Der Xiong (Nom Dawb Xyooj; James, 2008-2010);
- (3) Another individual by the name of Je Siong, educated in Poland, put together another script that is the least known, referred by the author as “*Siong Je’s Script*,” presented to the author in Chicago, Illinois in 1993 (J. Siong, personal communication, July 1, 1993).

In sum, the author wants to acknowledge their contributions to the development of scripts for the Mong/Hmong language. However, they are less common and are not widely used like the “Romanized Popular Alphabet” (RPA) system currently used by the Mong/Hmong in Southeast Asia and by those living in the United States today.

The following consists of an overview of the historical development of the Mong/Hmong orthography, known as the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) System, along with the attempts to revise the RPA system throughout the last four decades from 1960 to the present:

## Historical Development of the Mong Orthography, “Romanized Popular Alphabet” (RPA) System

### 1947

An American missionary couple, Rev. Ted and Ruth Andrianoff, along with their son and daughter, boarded a ship bound for Southeast Asia on July 27, 1947, to spread the Gospel of Christ in Xieng Khouang, Laos (Andrianoff, 2001).

### 1950

## Rationale for the Development of the Mong Orthography

In Laos, during the 1950s, the entry and emergence of Christianity led to the development of Mong literacy. Many Mong became Christians through the mission of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) headquartered in New York (now in Colorado Springs, Colorado). Rev. Xuxu Thao, the first Mong president of the Lao Evangelical Church, recalled and asserted in his memoirs that there were 5,000 Mong and 2,000 Khmu who were converted from animism to Christianity in the 1950s (Thao, 1997). This massive conversion took place when the Andrianoff, an American missionary couple of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), was sent to Xieng Khouang, Laos to spread the Gospel of Christ to them. For deeper insight into animism, readers are encouraged to read *Hmong animism: A Christian perspective* (Khang, 2015, *Roars of traditional leaders: Mong (Miao) American cultural practices in a conventional society* (Moua, 2012); and *The Mong oral tradition: Cultural memory in the absence of written language* (Thao, 2006).

After this massive conversion of the Mong and Khmu from animism to Christianity, one of the immediate and critical issues faced by the C&MA missionaries was the illiteracy of the Mong and Khmu tribes. Neither could they read nor write Lao, and neither could they read nor write French. Both tribes had no record of having their own writing systems. The following reflects Rev. Xeng Pao Thao's reflection on the origin of the development of Mong literacy (Thao, 1997). As a consequence, C&MA missionaries in Laos held several conferences in 1951, 1952, and 1953 respectively in Dalat and Saigon, South Vietnam. The conference resolutions assigned two missionary linguist couples the tasks of developing the orthographies for the Mong and the Khmu tribes (Thao, 1997; Thao, 1999; Thao, 1999 in C.C. Park & M.M. Chi [eds]; Thao, 2000a; Thao, 2000b; Thao, 2023). In this manner, the Bible and Christian literacy could be translated and published in both languages to facilitate their evangelization. In turn, they could comprehend the real Christian doctrines, which are the foundations of Christian faith (Thao, 1994, 1997, Thao, 2000a; Thao, 2000b; Thao, 1999 in C.C. Park & M.M. Chi [eds]; Thao, 2023). Barney (1951) acknowledged that, in June 1951, he went to Xieng Khouang, Laos to "set the task of reducing the Mong language to writing" (p. 68). Smalley (1982) also confirmed this mission with Barney in the same manner in his presentation on the history of the development of the Romanized Popular Alphabet to the Mhong<sup>1</sup> Language Council held at the University of Minnesota on August 12, 1982 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Smalley (1982) asserted that,

He went to Luang Prabang province of Laos to study Khmu language and Barney to Xieng Khouang to study Mong Leng (Smalley's presentation to the Mhong Language Council, handout, University of Minnesota, August 12, 1982).

Barney primarily learned Mong Leng from Wang Doua Hang and others, developed proficiency in the Mong language, and successfully developed a Romanized system for the consonants and vowels, except for the tone markers, using the RPA system. It is worth noting that, at the time, Barney was known to many Mong Christians as "*Thanh Mong*" or "*Mister Mong*." Today, many Mong still remember him as "*Thanh Mong*" (Thao, 2000a; Thao, 2000b). At the same time, while Barney went to Xieng Khouang, Laos to reduce the Mong language into the Romanized Popular Alphabets (RPA) in Mong Leng and Smalley to Luang Prabang to work on the Khmu language, Father Yves Bertrais "*Txivplig Nyiaj Pov*" was already researching the RPA on Hmong Daw at *Roob Nyujqus* (the Gaurs Mountain) in Luang Prabang, but he also encountered problems with the tone markers. After working on the RPA in the Khmu language, Smalley, a trained linguist, assisted Barney and Father Yves Bertrais in refining the RPA by adding tone markers to both RPA systems (Smalley, 1982, Presentation on the History of the Development of the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet). Handout to the Mhong Language Council, Minneapolis, MN, at the University of Minnesota, on August 12, 1982. Given this, the two RPA systems were both completed in 1953, one for Mong Leng and the other for Hmong Daw. Therefore, the three of them are the co-founders of the Mong/Hmong RPA system.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mhong*" is not a misspelling term, but is a term coined by the Mhong Language Council of 12 members appointed by General Vang Pao or Phraya Norapamok (six members to represent the Mong Leng and six members to represent the Hmong Daw) to be used as a compromised and unified spelling term ("*tug tsu*") at the University of Minnesota on August 8-12-1982 to represent both the Mong Leng and Hmong Daw or in another words, to represent our ethnic group.

One inquiry specifically from Toua Moua on August 20, 1997 whether the three co-founders of the RPA system know about the two Mong/Hmong groups speaking slightly at the time they developed the Hmong writing system, the author quotes:

I don't think that Smalley, Bertrais, and Barney knew or aware that there were two groups and speaking slightly [slightly] different at the time they developed the Hmong language (T. Moua, personal communication, Aug 20, 1997).

Dr. William A. Smalley responded to Toua Moua's inquiry to [hlug@geocities.com](mailto:hlug@geocities.com) with a cc copy to the author on August 21, 1997, I quote:

When we agreed on the RPA, we were well aware that there were two major Hmong/Mong dialects. (I use the difference in spelling so as not to offend many Mong Leeg who feel strongly about it.) Barney was working in Mong Leng and Bertrais in Hmong Daw.

I am convinced that, from a linguistic point of view, both dialects could use the same writing. However, unfortunately, no linguist with expertise in both dialects was present to guide the early stages, so it appears that the RPA writes only in Hmong Daw. This was not my intention. However, politically, among the Hmong/Mong, it is now probably too late not to have two partially different systems.

I am sure that by now primers have been developed in the form of the RPA, which some Mong Leeg use to reflect their dialect more closely, as they see it (William A. Smalley, personal communication, August 21, 1997).

In sum, Drs. Linwood Barney, William A. Smalley, and Father Yves Bertrais (*Txivplig Nyiaj Pov*) were the co-founders of the Romanized Popular Alphabets (RPA) for the Mong and the Hmong.



Dr. G. Linwood Barney  
1923-2003

Dr. William A. Smalley  
1923 – 1997

Father Yves Bertrais  
(*Txivplig Nyajpov*)  
1921 – 2007

Fig. 2 Images of the three co-founders of the Mong/Hmong RPA System

Dr. Smalley confirmed the statement that,

Barney was working in Mong Leng and Bertrais in Hmong Daw (Smalley, 1982, Presentation on the History of the Development of the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet). Handout to the Mhong

Language Council, Minneapolis, MN at the University of Minnesota, August 12, 1982; personal communication, August 21, 1997).

After Dr. G. Linwood Barney, Dr. Smalley, and Father Yves Bertrais (*Txivplig Nyiaj Pov*) submitted the RPA system to the Royal Lao government, the government rejected it and put it into a halt. Dr. William A. Smalley further elaborated on the Royal Lao government in that,

Soon after, however, Barney left Laos, and then the Lao government decreed that no minority language was to be written in any script but Lao. Barney's mission (Christian and Missionary Alliance) obeyed the ruling, but fortunately (from today's perspective) Bertrais did not. All of the initial published material was therefore in Hmong Daw)

## **1953**

After the Mong/Hmong RPA system was completed in 1953, it was submitted to the Royal Lao government for approval. However, the Lao government prohibited the use of the RPA and attempted to Laotianize (assimilate) the Mong/Hmong by using the Lao script. In the same year, the Communists took over Xieng Khouang, Laos, and missionaries had to leave Laos. Dr. G. Linwood Barney returned to the United States to assume the role of Dean of Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack, New York; Dr. William A. Smalley left Laos in 1954 due to the Civil War in Laos to the U.S., but continued to work primarily in Southeast Asia as a [translation consultant](#) for the American Bible Society based in the U.S. that required him to take up residence in Thailand from 1962-1967 and 1969-1972; whereas Father Yves Bertrais (*Txivplig Nyiaj Pob*) had to move from *Rooj Nyujqus* (Gaurs Mountain), Luang Prabang to Simuong, Vientiane Laos to establish a [catechist school of Vientiane](#), Laos from 1962-1975. Dr. William A. Smalley further stated that,

...Soon after, however, Barney left Laos, and then the Lao government decreed that no minority language was to be written in any script but Lao. Barney's mission (Christian and Missionary Alliance) obeyed the ruling, but fortunately (from today's perspective) Bertrais did not. All of the initial published material was therefore in Hmong Daw (Dr. William A. Smalley, personal communication, August 21, 1997, email to Toua Moua with cc to the author).

In a separate, but related to the prohibition for the use of the RPA system by the Royal Lao government back in 1953, the author conducted a presentation to a group of educators on the "Hmong/Mong Cultural and Linguistic Awareness for Mainstream Teachers" at the 1995 Iowa English as a Second Language/Bilingual Education and Refugee Concerns Conference in Des Moines, Iowa on February 8, 1995. After the presentation, a Lao colleague Dr. Phone Khoxayo, a Training and Research Specialist from the Multifunctional Resource Center 8, Southwest Educational Development, Laboratory, Austin, Texas, admitted that he served as a committee member in the Royal Lao government at that time that "decreed that no minority language was written in any script but Lao" (Dr. William A. Smalley, personal communication, August 21, 1997 & Reaffirmed by Dr. Phone Khoxayo, personal communication, Des Moines, Iowa, Feb 8, 1995).

## **1961**

There was a need for the Lao Radio Station in Vientiane, Laos, to broadcast in the Mong/Hmong language, so General Vang Pao and Phraya Touby Lyfoung decided to use the RPA temporarily to fulfill this requirement (Pha Thao, personal communication, Mong Literacy Volunteer, Inc., n.d.).

## **1967 – 1969**

### **Development of the Lao Script for the Mong/Hmong Bible Translation**

In 1967, Doris Whitelock, a missionary from the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) in Thailand visited the District Executive Committee (DEXCOM) of the Lao Evangelical Church in Vientiane, Laos and informed the Committee that in Thailand, the OMF in Thailand used the Thai script to translate the Mong/Hmong language, and the Royal Thai government approved them to do so. In addition, in 1968, Dr. William A. Smalley, with his continued consulting work with the American Bible Society in the U.S., recommended that OMF work with the Lao Evangelical Church to translate the Bible into Mong/Bible using the Lao script. Given this, [Doris T. Whitelock](#), known as “*Pajmim*,” and [Rev. Gillian Orpin](#), known as “*Maiv Yeeb*,” went to Vientiane, Laos in 1968 to translate the Bible using the Lao script. The Lao Evangelical Church appointed four pastors Rev. Yong Xeng Yang and Rev. Nha Yee Kong to help with the Mong Leng translation and Rev. Cheng Xiong and Rev. Nhia Neng Her to help with the Hmong Daw translation, so the Royal Lao government approved them to translate the book of Mark followed by a primer published in September 1969, followed by the translation of the Gospel from the book of John to the Bible Society in Thailand. In 1969, the C&MA assigned Ellen van Brumelen, a missionary from the Netherlands, and Rev. & Mrs. J. Don Scott, a missionary from Canada, to study the Mong/Hmong language using the Lao script with Rev. & Mrs. Wayne Persons (“*Kx. Paaj Tsaab Vaaj*”) (Thao, 2000a; Thao, 2000b; Djoua X. Xiong, personal communication, Dec 12, 1999; Djoua X. Xiong, Jun 27, 2025).

The first Mong/Hmong Bible translation, using the Lao script, was completed at only 40% and published in Hong Kong in 1975, when the Mong/Hmong had already sought political asylum as refugees in the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Loei, Thailand. Rev. Xeng Pao Thao received the first batch of Mong/Hmong Bible translation in Lao script in March 1977. On April 19, 1978, as the President of the Lao Evangelical Church, Rev. Xeng Pao Thao, in a meeting with Rev. Wayne Persons (*Paaj Tsaab Vaaj*) and Doris Whitelock (*Pajmim*), requested them to change the Bible translation from Lao script to the RPA system since we had left Laos already (Thao, 1997). However, the Lao Script is difficult for the Mong/Hmong to learn and write, as the Mong/ Hmong language has more consonants, vowels, and tones than the Lao language.

## **1968**

General Vang Pao called a large meeting of Mong/Hmong colonels, community leaders, students, and the Lao Evangelical Church to meet at Samosorn, at the 2nd Military Division Headquarters in Xieng Khouang, Laos. The meeting discussed what to adopt for use between those using the Lao Script and those using the RPA system. Among the participants who were

proponents of using the Lao Script were Security Officer (Tub Ceevwm) Moua Bee, Tou Sua, and Tub Xab, the son of Phraya Touby Lyfoung. Moua Lia, who was the Superintendent of schools in the Province of Xieng Khouang, Laos, and a few others, also supported the Lao script. At the time, the Lao Evangelical Church (now part of the Hmong District of C&MA) had already completed the Lao Script with approval from the Lao Royal government for teaching and learning, to which some Mong/Hmong students also attended. Vang Yi had also developed a writing system using the French language. Finally, General Vang Pao decided not to adopt Vang Yi's system, so the meeting voted to accept the RPA for the Mong/Hmong to use, but the Lao Evangelical Church continued to use the Lao script until the hymnal books and the New Testament were translated into the Lao Script and published in 1975 (Djoua X. Xiong, personal communication from a letter to Dr. Vang Shur Vangyi, Hmong Council, Inc. Education Committee in Fresno, December 12, 1991 ~ Another attempt to reform the RPA).

### **1972**

Father Yves Bertrais (*Txivplig Nyiaj Pov*) was concerned that the RPA system would be barred from the Royal Lao government, so he sought funding from Archbishop Renato R. Martino, later the apostolic nuncio to Thailand, from the Asia Foundation to publish about 100,000 copies of the Hmong Daw primers to distribute to the Mong/Hmong students living in La Foyer (building used by Mong/Hmong students) in Simuang, Vientiane, Laos, so that the RPA could be sustained (Djoua X. Xiong, personal communication from a letter to Dr. Vang Shur Vangyi, Hmong Council, Inc. Education Committee in Fresno, December 12, 1991 ~ Another attempt to reform the RPA; Djoua X. Xiong, personal communication, Milwaukee, WI, July 25, 2025).

### **1973**

Dr. Vang Shur Vangyi completed his higher education in the United States and hold a position in the Department of the Economy in Laos. The Mong Leng students, residing in "La Foyer," Simuang, Vientiane, Laos, observed that the Hmong Primer was effective for writing and reading in Hmong Daw, but not for the Mong Leng language. They formed a group and met for about a year, so they approached Father Bertrais (*"Txivplig Nyiaj Pov"*), so he agreed to add the consonants and the vowels that were still missing. The group started their task in 1974. The Committee consisted of Dr. Vang Shur Vangyi, who served as the Chair, Chang Lue, Assistant, Djoua X. Xiong, the editor of the primer, and other members, including Kue Xeng, Tou Doua Kue, Her Soua, and several others. The group produced a primer, started to type into a stencil, and was almost done, but then became refugees in Thailand. The manuscript was lost in Father Yves Bertrais' residence in Vientiane, Laos.

### **1978-1979**

#### **France**

In France, the Mong started conglomerating again. Vang Yi spearheaded the development of a writing system using the French language. However, those living in the U.S. recognized that

Vang Yi’s writing system would create problems because it deviated too much from the Hmong Der version, so the Mong in the U.S. decided not to adopt it.

**In the U.S.**

In 1978, Colonel Hang Sao migrated from France to the U.S., and we met several times to discuss our future, forming the Mong Federation, Inc. We observed that Vang Yi’s writing system is incompatible and would deviate too much from the Hmong Daw primer, so the Mong Federation, Inc. created “Rooj Ntawv Moob” or the Mong Literacy Volunteer, Inc. to discuss several versions of the Primers. The Conference voted to adopt the RPA system and elected a Committee to develop the Mong Primer, headed by Djoua X. Xiong. The Mong Primer was completed in 1981, followed by several folk fables published in 1983, and the English-Mong Mong-English dictionary (Xiong et al, 1983) (See Samples in the Display Table by Djoua X. Xiong & Pha Thao). On Sept 13, 1980, the big conference of the Moob Federation of America, Inc. met in Joliet, Illinois, and “**Rooj Ntawv Moob**” (Mong Volunteer Literacy, Inc.) voted to accept the following grapheme changes, which would be closer to the Hmong Daw graphemes as follows:

Hmoob Daw	Moob Leeg	Change to	Grapheme Voted
[ d ]	[ tl ]	→	[ dl ]
[ dh ]	[ tlh ]	→	[ dlh ]
[ nt ]	[ ntl ]	→	[ ndl ]
[ nth ]	[ ntlh ]	→	[ ndlh ]
[ ŋ ]	[ ŋ ]	→	ng

Source: Mong Literacy Volunteer, Inc. (1980, Sept 13). Minutes of the meeting, September 13, 1980, in Joliet, Illinois.

**1981**

The Hmong District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance held its Annual Conference in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1981 and adopted **the new additional graphemes reflected in the aforementioned to the revised** Mong/Hmong Primers in 1980 to translate the Bible in Mong/Hmong and promote Christian literacy in Mong/Hmong, and completed all the intended publications, such as Bible translation in both Mong/Hmong, hymnal books in Mong/Hmong, *Mong/Hmong Christian history* (Thao, 2000) in 2000.

**1982**

- On Feb. 5, **1982, General Vang Pao** (Phraya Norapramok), President of the Lao Community, Inc. in Santa Ana, California, **appointed 12 Committee members** (6 Mong Leng and 6

Hmong Daw) to form the Hmong Language Council to “setting up a committee to research and study Hmong language” (in another words to reform the RPA spelling system) through the sponsorship of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. (Letter of Appointment from General Vang Pao or Phraya Norapramok, personal communication, February 5, 1982). According to General Vang Pao, this was a result of the Hmong National Conference held at Concordia College (now Concordia University) in St. Paul, Minnesota, from June 17 to 20, 1981.

Members of the Hmong Daw	Members of the Mong Leng
Cheu Thao, Chair	Djoua X. Xiong, Secretary
Lysao Lyfoung	Dr. Vang Xeu Vangyi
Vang Riam	Dr. Paoze Thao (the author)
Vang Tou	Dr. Moua Chou Mouanoutoua
Dr. Bruce Bliatout Thao	Paoge Hang
Dr. Yang Kou	Tou Doua Kue

With four (4) American linguists serving as consultants, including:

- 1) Dr. William A. Smalley (an original co-founder of the RPA system,
- 2) Dr. Bruce Downing, University of Minnesota
- 3) Dr. Charles Johnson (University of Minnesota, and
- 4) Dr. Barbara Robson from the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.

General Vang Pao specified that the role of the Committee was to:

- 1) Study and standardize the Hmong Alphabet and
- 2) Research on Hmong words and vocabularies (lexicons) (General Vang Pao’s letter of appointment, February 5, 1982).

The twelve-member council met for 3 days at the University of Minnesota from August 12 – 14, 1982.

**On August 13, 1982**

The Committee discussed the two graphemes: “HM” and “M” and “D” and “DL” for 2 hours, but there was no resolution, so the Committee requested Dr. William A. Smalley to come up to exchange the “HM” of Hmoob Daw and “DL” of Moob Leeg to complete our RPA system. Dr. Smalley indicated that there are only 26 letters of the Roman alphabet used in the English language. The only way is to find ways to combine the 26 English consonants as follows:

**1) Issues Involving “HM” and “M” and “D” and “DL”**

Dr. William A. Smalley came up with 4 Columns (See below)

1	2	3	4
(Hmoob (Dawb)	(Moob) Leeg		Voted to Accept
M	M	M	M
HM	M	MH	MH
N	N	N	N
HN	N	NH	NH
NY	NY	NY	NY
HNY	NY	NY	NY
HNY	NY	NYH	NYH
D	DL	TL	DL
DH	DLH	TLH	DLH
NT	NDL	NTL	NDL
NTH	NDLH	NTLH	NDLH

Finally, the Committee voted to accept Column 4 as a compromise and unified to be used with both Moob Leeg and Hmoob Dawb, with 8 votes in favor of Column 4, 3 abstentions, and one absentee vote.

2) There are still problems with “NT” and “NDL” and “M” and “HM.” Given this, the following are:

Hmoob Dawb	Moob Leeg	Compromise & Unified Grapheme
MH M	M	Both use “ <b>MH</b> ,” e.g. “MHOV HAB TSHUA”
NT	NDL NT	Both use “ <b>NDL</b> ,” e.g. “DLEJ NDLAS NDLUA”
BUT		Both must write: “MOB MOB Teg” – Use “ <b>M</b> ” “NTUS NTAUB NAAV”

Given this, both Moob Leeg and Hmoob Dawb agreed on changing from Hmong and Mong -→ to a compromised and unified spelling to be used with both Moob Leeg and Hmoob Dawb. Therefore, Mhong is not a misspelling, but was coined to represent both groups as our people for the first time.

### 3) Issue of Reducing the Consonantal Blends

For the grapheme “**NG**,” the Committee agreed **to adopt the Moob Leng Primer**. After Dr. Johnson’s presentation on this topic, the issue of reducing the consonantal blends was tabled for the next meeting due to time constraints, with an 8 to 3 vote, 3 abstentions, and 1 vote absent.

### 4) Issue of Borrowing loaned words

After Dr. Barbara Robson’s presentation from language to language, she uses the following:

(1) Proper nouns like names of people, countries, and animals ~ Use after the local, write together into a word,

e.g. America -→ write Amelikas

Do not use: Asmesliskas

If wanting to write like the locals, use parentheses to enclose,

e.g. “Kuv nyob Amelikas teb (America)”

(2) For other nouns, translate into Hmong/Mong word, but enclose with parentheses,

e.g., Computer = Tshuab hlwbhlau (koos-pi-tawj)

Helicopter = Dlaav qaavtaub (Hes-li-kau-tawj)

## August 14, 1982

### 5) Mechanics of Writing (Punctuation and Capitalization)

Dr. Bruce Downing presented the mechanics of writing to the Committee, which then considered several writing mechanics, including those of the French and others. The Committee agreed that we should follow the mechanics of American writing. Given that, effective from that day on. Djoua X. Xiong accepted his recommendation pending in the near future (See the following punctuations for more details:

#	English	Ma rk	Moob Leeg	Hmoob Dawb
1	Stop or period	•	Cim nreg	Cim nres
2	Comma	,	Cim tog	Cim tos
3	Semi-Colon	;	Cim nregtog	Cim nrestos
4	Colon	:	Cim qha	Cim qhia
5	Hypen	-	Cim txuas	Cim txuas

6	Dash	—	Cim keskaab	Cim keskab
7	Ellipses	...	Cim ntevmooog	Cim ntevmus
8	Question mark	?	Cim nug	Cim nug
9	Exclamation point	!	Cim ceeb	Cim ceeb
10	Quotation Mark	“ ... ”	Cim hom	Cim hom
11	Parenthesis	()	Cim txhais (qheb hab kaw)	Cim txhais (qhib thiab kaw)
12	And	&	Cim hab	Cim thiab
13	Virgule	/	Cim pujsis	Cim pujsis
14	Percentage	%	Cim feempua	Cim feempua
15	Pound	#	Cim qha-theem	Cia qhia-theem
16	Brackets	[]	Cim kaw	Cim kaw

Source:

Thao, C. & Robson, B. (1982, Aug 12-14). Interim report. Mhong Language Council Conference Aug 12-14, 1921. University of Minnesota.

Thao, P. (1997). *Kevcai siv lug Moob* [Foundations of Mong language]. PT Publishing, p. 91-93.

Xiong, D. X. (1982, Sept. 7). Minutes of meeting of Mhong Language Council. University of Minnesota in Lao language on Aug 12 – Aug 14, 1982, p. 7).

## Comparison between English and Basic Elements of Mong/Hmong Language

### English Phonology → Basic Elements of Mong/Hmong Language

To understand the basic elements of the Mong/Hmong language, I would like to provide some background information about English phonology.

See a [Picture of the Mouth](#) in English for the Place of Articulation for Consonants.

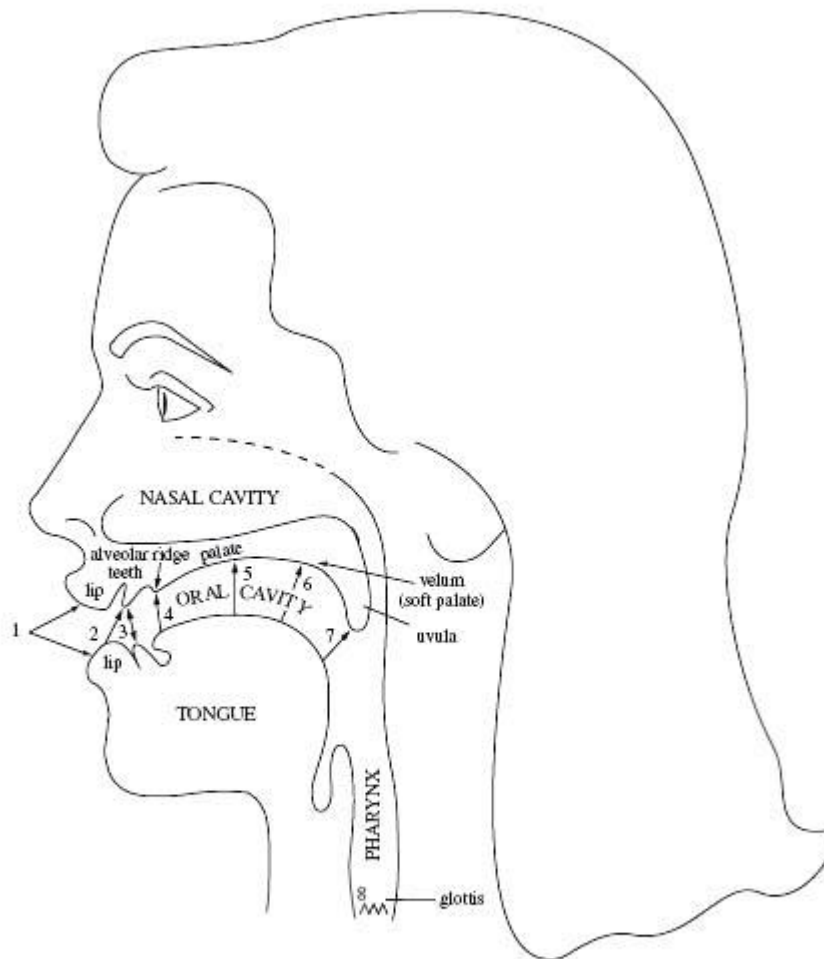
#### 1. The Airstream Mechanisms

1) Pulmonic Egressive Airstream Mechanism, e.g., English, Lao, Chinese, Mong/Hmong

2) Velaric Airstream Mechanism, e.g., Zulu

3) Glottalic Airstream Mechanism, e.g., Navajo (Ejective)

**Figure 1. Consonants: Place of Articulation**

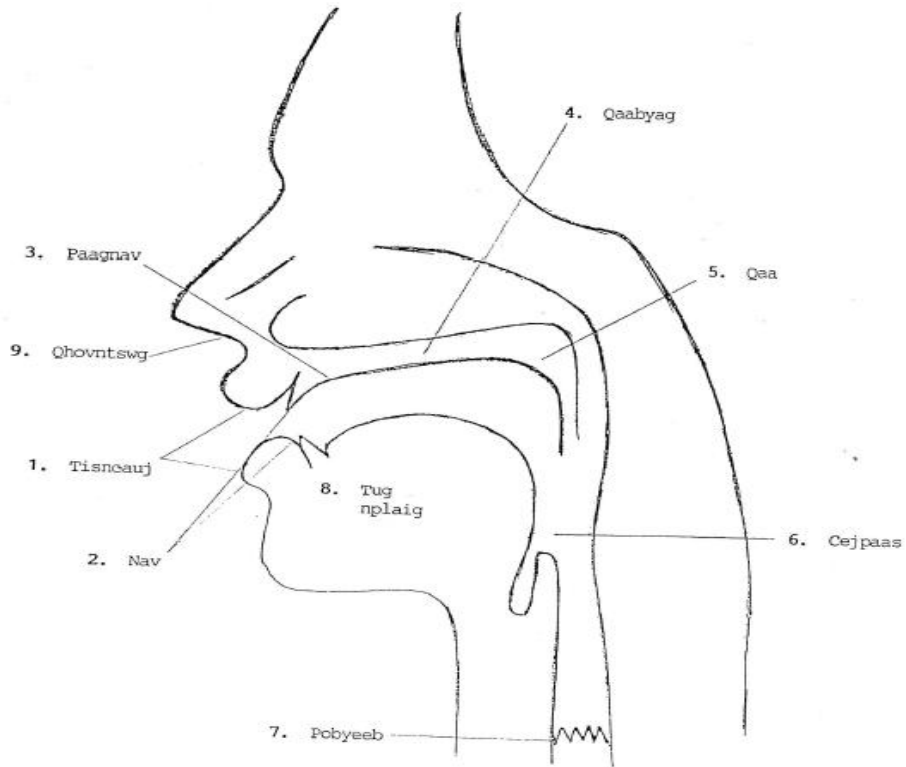


**FIGURE 6.1** | The vocal tract. Places of articulation: 1. bilabial; 2. labiodental; 3. interdental; 4. alveolar; 5. (alveo)palatal; 6. velar; 7. uvular; 8. glottal.

Source: Fromkin et al. (2017, p. 190). *Introduction to language* (11<sup>th</sup> ed). CENGAGE.

See a Picture of the Mouth in Mong/Hmong ~ Dlaim Duab Qhovncauj

Figure 2 (Dlaim Dluab 2): Lub Qhovncauj Tawmsuab (Thao, 1997, p. 12)



Dluab 1. Dluab lub qhovncauj

<sup>2</sup>G. Linwood Barney and William A. Smalley, "Report of Second Conference on Problems in Meo (Miao) Phonemic Structure and Orthography," 1952 (mimeo) & Third Report on Meo (Miao): Orthography and Grammar (mimeo).

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Amis Lyman, *Grammar of Mong Njua* (Belgium: Thomas Amis Lyman, 1979), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup>Martha Susan Ratliff, "The Morphological Functions of Tone in White Hmong," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1986, 16.

1. Consonantal Phonemes for English

See a Phonetic Symbols for Consonants for English for Place & Manners of Articulation

TABLE 6.4 Some Phonetic Symbols for American English Consonants

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Interdental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
<b>Stop (oral)</b>							
voiceless	p			t		k	ʔ
voiced	b			d		g	
<b>Nasal (voiced)</b>	m			n		ŋ	
<b>Fricative</b>							
voiceless		f	θ	s	ʃ		h
voiced		v	ð	z	ʒ		
<b>Affricate</b>							
voiceless					tʃ		
voiced					dʒ		
<b>Glide</b>							
voiceless	ɹ					ɰ	
voiced	w				j	w	
<b>Liquid (voiced)</b>							
lateral				l			
retroflex				r			

Source: Fromkin et al. (2007, p. 235). *Introduction to language* (8<sup>th</sup> ed). Thomson Wadsworth.

See Link to International Phonetic Symbols (IPA) for your reference, as of 2-12-2024. Compiled by Thao.

See Table 3 & Table 7.5 ~ Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes (Thao, 1997, p. 13; Thao, 2023, p. 132)

Table 3. Mong/Hmong Consonant Phonemes

Points of Articulation/ Manners of Articulation		Labial		Dental		Alveolar			Palatal		Velar		Glottal
		bilabial	labio-lateral release	labio- dental	apico dental	apico alveolar lateral	apico alveolar affricate	apico post alveolar	palatal	palatal affricate release	velar	back velar	glottal
Stops	vl. unaspirated	p	pl		t	(d)	ts		c	tx	k	q	?
	vl. aspirated	ph	plh		th	(dh)	tsh	rh	ch	txh	kh	qh	
Affricates	vd. unaspirated					dl**		r					
	vd. Aspirated					dih**							
	vd.* prenasal unaspirated	np	npl		nt	ndl**	nts	nr	nc	ntx	nk	nq	
	vd. prenasal aspirated	nph	nplh		nth	ndlh**	ntsh	nrh	nch	ntxh	nkh	nqh	
Fricatives	vl.			f			x		s	xv			h
	vd.			v					z				
nasal	vl.	(hm)	(hml)		(hn)					(hmv)			
	vd.	m	ml		n					ny	ng* [ŋ]		
Liquid	vl.				hl								
	vd.				l								
Glides				w***					y				

Source: Thao, P. (1997, p. 12). *Kevcai siv lug Moob*. PT Publishing.

Adapted from:

Barney, G. L. & Smalley, W. A. (1952). "Report of the second conference on problems in Meo (Miao). Phoneme structure and orthography. Orthography and Grammar (mimeo).

Lyman, T. A. (1979, pp. 4–5). *Grammar of Mong Njua*. Belgium: Thomas Amis Lyman.

Ratliff, M. S. (1986, p. 16). *The morphological functions of tone in White Hmong* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago]. ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Global.

## Phonology

There are sixty-three segmental phonemes used by both Mong Leng and Hmong Daw:

Single Consonants	Double Consonantal Blends	Triple consonantal blends	Quadruple consonantal blends	Total
19	24	16	4	63

See Table 3 for Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes

**Notes:** Please be advised that transferring the Tables back and forth should mess up the consonantal phonemes, the vowels, as well as the diacritics. In that case, please refer to Table 7.5 Mong/Hmong consonantal phonemes (Thao, 2023, p. 132 & Thao, 1997, pp. 12-11

Dluab 3. Moob/Hmoob Cov Tsjajntawv-Txiv (Thao, 1997, p. 13).

Points of Articulation/ Manners of Articulation		Tisncauj		Nav		Paagnav			Qaabyag		Qaa		Cejpaas
		Txwm Tismcaik	Tisncauj saab tso	Tisncaj nav	Ntsisnplaig nav	Ntsisnplaig paavnab saab	Ntsisnplaig paagnav tshuab kaw	Ntsisnplaig qaum paagnav	Qaabyag	Palatag tshuab tso	velar	back velar	glottal
Suab nreg  hab  Affricate	vl. unaspirated	p	pl		t	(d)	ts		c	tx	k	q	?
	vl. aspirated	ph	plh		th	(dh)	tsh	rh	ch	txh	kh	qh	
	vd. unaspirated					dl**		r					
	vd. Aspirated					dlh**							
	vd.* prenasal unaspirated	np	npl		nt	ndl**	nts	nr	nc	ntx	nk	nq	
	vd. prenasal aspirated	nph	nplh		nth	ndlh**	ntsh	nrh	nch	ntxh	nkh	nqh	
Suab tshuab	vl.			f			x		s	xv			h
	vd.			v					z				
Suab Qhov- ntswg	vl.	(hm)	(hml)		(hm)					(hmv)			
	vd.	m	ml		n					ny	ng* [ŋ]		
Suab saab	vl.				hl								
	vd.				l								
Suab nqai				w***					y				

Sources: Revised & updated 8-15-2025 by Thao, P. (1997, p. 13). *Kevcai siv lug Moob* [Foundations of Mong language]. Rev. 8-14-2025 Compiled, adapted, and updated by the author.

Ratliff, M.S. (1986). *The morphological functions of tone in white Hmong* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago]. ProQuest Dissertation & Theses Global.

Smalley, W. A. (1976). The problems of consonantal and tone: Hmong (Meo, Miao). In W.A. Smalley (ed). *Phonemes and orthography: Language planning in ten minority languages of Thailand*, pp. 85-123. (Pacific Linguistics Series C. No. 43). Canberra: Australian National University.

Remarks: \* vl. stands for voiceless and vd. Stands for voiced.  
 \*\* [ tl ] → [ dl ]  
 [ tlh ] → [ dlh ]  
 [ ntl ] → [ ndl ]  
 [ ntlh ] → [ ndlh ]  
 [ ŋ ] → sau tug ntawv (grapheme) ng

Xiong, X. D. (1980, Sept. 13). Minutes of meeting reported that the conference made the changes to the aforementioned consonantal blends and adopted the new “phoneme consonantal blends or spelling change to the primer. Joliet, IL: Mong Literacy Volunteer, Inc). Joliet, IL: Mong Literacy Volunteer, Inc. (Approved by Dr. William A. Smalley for the change.

and the Hmong District (Hauvpaug Koomhum Moob) of the Christian and Missionary Alliance adopted the primer developed in 1981 to translate the Bible and Christian literacy in their Annual Conference in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1982.

\*\*\* Phoneme addition proposed by Rev. Xeng Pao Thao in consultation with Dr. George Linwood Barney. The proposed phoneme was [vh], but the author thinks it is [w]; no official adoption has been made yet.

( ) Hmong Daw (Hmoob Dawb) siv cov suab tsajntawv-txiv nuav.

## English Vowel Phonemes

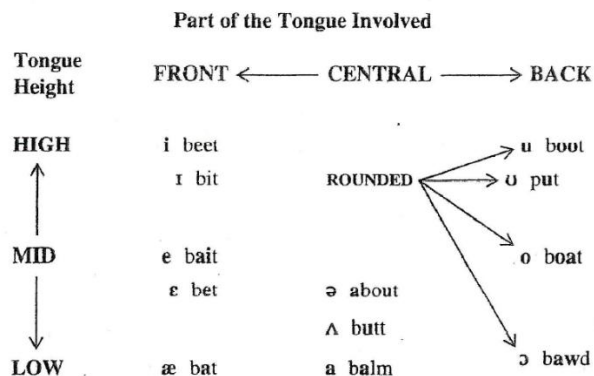


FIGURE 5.5 | Classification of American English vowels.

Source: Fromkin et al. (2017, p. 207). Introduction to language (10<sup>th</sup> ed). CENGAGE.

Table 4. Mong/Hmong Vowel Phonemes (Adapted from Thao, 2023, p. 131)

	Front		Central		Back	
	Unrounded	Rounded	Un-rounded	Rounded	Un-rounded	Rounded
High	/i/	/w/				/u/
Middle (Nasal)	/e/ /ee/ [eŋ]		/ə/			/o/ /oo/[oŋ]
Low (Nasal)					/a/ /aa/[aŋ]	

Note: Not all the vowel phonemes are displayed in Table 4

Mong language consists of sixteen (16) vowel phonemes. See the breakdown of the 10 monophthongs and six

- a) Nine-Ten (9-10) monophthongs: six (6) oral monophthongs and three (3) nasal monophthongs:
- Six oral monophthongs: /i/, /e/, /w/, /u/, /o/, /a/, (/ɔ/ (rarely used))
  - Three (3) nasal monophthongs: /ee/[eŋ], /aa/[aŋ]\*, and /oo/[oŋ] (note: used by Mong only)

b) Six (6) diphthongs:

- Three (3) open diphthongs: /ia/\*\*, /ua/, and /uɔ/ (note: \*\* used by Hmong only)
- Three (3) close diphthongs: /ai/, /aw/, and /au/

Note: \* Used by Mong Leng      \*\* Used by Hmong Daw

In the 1950s, one of the most challenging aspects for the co-founders of the RPA system, in particular for Barney and Father Yves Bertrais (*Txivplig Nyiaj Pov*), was the tone markers. See the following Chart.

One of the features that distinguishes Mong/Hmong from English is its tone. There are 8 tones in the Mong/Hmong language (See Table 5 below for more details).

Table 5. Comparison of the Tone Markers between the Mong and the Hmong

<u>RPA Symbol</u>	<u>Mong</u>	<u>Hmong</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
- <b>b</b> high	<i>cuab_</i> <i>tib</i>	<i>cuab</i> <i>tib</i>	trap to pile up
- <b>j</b> high falling	<i>cuaj</i> <i>tij</i>	<i>cuaj</i> <i>tij</i>	number nine older siblings
- <b>v</b> mid-rising	<i>cuav</i> <i>tiv</i>	<i>cuav</i> <i>tiv</i>	counterfeit to resist, to oppose, to opt against
-mid	<i>cua-</i> <i>ti-</i>	<i>cua-</i> <i>ti-</i>	wind near
- <b>s</b> mid low	<i>cuas</i> <i>tis</i>	<i>cuas</i> <i>tis</i>	father of son's wife wing, to name
- <b>g</b> mid low breathy	<i>cuag_</i> <i>tig</i>	<i>cuag_</i> <i>tig</i>	<i>to reach</i> to tum, to reverse, to spin around
- <b>m</b> low glottalized	<i>cuam</i> <u><i>tim</i></u>	<i>cuam</i> <u><i>tim</i></u>	to press together because of
- <b>d</b> predictable variant of /-m/	- <i>tid</i>	- <i>tid</i>	- there, over there

Source: Thao, P. (2023, p. 133). *Mong education at the crossroads* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Hamilton Books ~ An Imprint of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Though these two RPA systems are closed, they are distinctive in both their pronunciations and written forms. Due to its **phonemic-based** construction, a passage written in Mong Leng is entirely written in Mong Leng and can only be read in Mong.

If a passage is written in Hmong Daw, it is completely in Hmong Daw and can only be read in Hmong Daw. This is the reason why the original Mong Leng and Hmong Daw primers were developed in two versions, one in Mong Leng and another in Hmong Daw.

## Phonology

- 1) Mong Leng dialect consists of **55** consonantal phonemes: 16 single consonants, 21 double consonantal blends, 14 triple consonantal blends, and 4 quadruple consonantal blends. (See Table 1 for Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes), 14 monophthongs (single vowels), 4-5 diphthongs (See Table 2 Table 2 Mong/Hmong Vowel Phonemes), and 8 different vocal tone markers (See Table 3 Mong/Hmong Tone Markers) (Thao, 1999a & 1999b).

Whereas the Hmong Der has **57** consonantal phonemes: 17 single consonantal phonemes, 22 double consonantal blends, 15 triple consonantal blends, 3 quadruple consonantal blends (See Table 1 for Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes), 13 monophthongs (single vowels), 5 diphthongs (See Table 2 Table 2 Mong/Hmong Vowel Phonemes) and 8 tone markers (See Table 3 Mong/Hmong Tone Markers) (Thao, 1999a & 1999b).

- 2) Though these two RPA systems are closed, they are distinctive in both pronunciation and written forms. Due to its **phonemic-based construction**,<sup>2</sup>If a passage is written in Mong Leng, it is completely written in Mong Leng and can only be read in Mong Leng (See Tables 4 for more details), unlike Lao (tone)<sup>3</sup>, Vietnamese (using diacritics<sup>4</sup>), Chinese (logographic<sup>5</sup>) and Japanese (syllabary<sup>6</sup>)
- 3) If a passage is written in Hmong Daw, it is completely in Hmong Der and can only be read in Hmong Der. This is the reason why the original Mong and Hmong primers were developed in two versions, one in Mong Leng and another in Hmong Der.

## 1. Characteristics of the Mong/Hmong Language

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<sup>2</sup> refers to the process of building literacy skills, particularly in reading and writing, by focusing on phonemes. Phonemes are the smallest units of sound in a language that can change the meaning of a word. For example, the word "cat" has three phonemes: /k/, /a/, and /t/. Building literacy from the sounds up

<sup>3</sup> The Lao writing system is an abugida, a type of symbol system where consonant symbols inherently include a vowel sound, and vowel sounds are indicated by combining marks, dedicated vowel letters, or both around the consonant. This system, known as the Lao script, developed from the ancient Khmer script and is a Brahmic script, meaning it traces back to the ancient Indian scripts.

<sup>4</sup> Vietnamese writing system uses a Latin-based alphabet with an extensive system of diacritics to mark tones and modify vowel sounds, creating distinct letters and altering pronunciation. These marks are crucial for differentiating word meanings and representing the language's tonal nature.

<sup>5</sup> Each character in the Chinese writing system represents a word or a morpheme (the smallest unit of meaning), rather than a single sound as in alphabetic systems like English.

<sup>6</sup> The Japanese writing system utilizes three scripts: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Hiragana and katakana are phonetic systems that represent syllables, while kanji are logographic characters derived from Chinese, representing words or concepts. These three scripts are used together in modern Japanese writing

- Linguistic typologists classified the Mong/Hmong language as a **subgroup of the Sino-Tibetan language family** of Asia. Arlotto (1972) considered it as one of the pre-Sinitic languages and asserted that “within China itself, among the few remaining pre-Sinitic languages we have the Miao-Yao family, spoken by scattered remnants of what once undoubtedly was a widespread and flourishing family” (p. 52).
- The RPA writing system, currently and widely used by the Mong/Hmong today, was constructed or devised based upon the phonemic principle, rather than ideographic or character-based like Chinese. Therefore, the RPA system automatically dichotomizes our two dialects based on regional pronunciation differences between “Mong Leng” and “Hmong Daw” using a complete RPA system.
- The Mong/Hmong RPA writing system is easy to learn, consistent, and absolutely symmetrical, but the spellings vary from dialect to dialect and from idiolect to idiolect when speaking and writing, depending upon the geographic area in Laos where the speakers came from.
- The Mong/Hmong language shares the same sentence structure as English, SVO (Subject + Verb + Object), e.g. *Kuv hlub koj*. Kuv (subject) + hlub (verb) + koj (object) that translates into “I love you” in English.
- Notice that each word ends with a consonant. These endings are not consonantal phonemes, as in English, but rather represent tone markers. The Mong/Hmong do not use tone markers like inflectional endings in English, so derivational phonology is not an essential part of their repertoire.
- The Mong/Hmong language is a tone language<sup>7</sup> in contrast with the English language, which is an intonation language<sup>8</sup>. Although linguists classify the Mong/Hmong as a monosyllabic tonal language, this is not entirely accurate, as its lexicon contains numerous disyllabic and polysyllabic words.

## 2. Basic Elements of the Mong/Hmong Language and Implications for Students and Teachers

- The Mong/Hmong consists of five (5) basic elements of language like any other language: Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics & Pragmatics, and lexicons. Today, I only have time to cover phonology and will cover the other four elements in my next presentation.
- The consonantal phonemes for both Mong/Hmong vary from one dialect to another.

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<sup>7</sup> a language in which variations in pitch distinguish different words.

<sup>8</sup> the melodic pattern of a language, specifically how the pitch of your voice rises and falls when speaking

## Phonology

- 1) Mong Leng dialect consists of 55 consonantal phonemes: 16 single consonants, 21 double consonantal blends, 14 triple consonantal blends, and 4 quadruple consonantal blends. (See Table 1 for Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes), 14 monophthongs (single vowels), 4-5 diphthongs (See Table 2 Table 2 Mong/Hmong Vowel Phonemes), and 8 different vocal tone markers (See Table 3 Mong/Hmong Tone Markers) (Thao, 1999a & 1999b).

Whereas the Hmong Der has 57 consonantal phonemes: 17 single consonantal phonemes, 22 double consonantal blends, 13 triple consonantal blends, 3 quadruple consonantal blends (See Table 1 for Mong/Hmong Consonantal Phonemes), 13 monophthongs (single vowels), 5 diphthongs (See Table 2 Table 2 Mong/Hmong Vowel Phonemes) and 8 tone markers (See Table 3 Mong/Hmong Tone Markers) (Thao, 1999a & 1999b).

- 2) Though these **two RPA systems are closed, they are distinctive in both pronunciation and written forms**. Due to its phonemic-based construction, if a passage is written in Mong Leng, it is completely written in Mong Leng and can only be read in Mong Leng (See Tables 4, 5 for more details).
- 3) If a passage is written in Hmong Der, it is completely in Hmong Der and can only be read in Hmong Der. This is the reason why the original Mong and Hmong primers were developed in two versions, one in Mong Leng and another in Hmong Der.
- 4) In addition, the Bible, hymnal books, and other Christian literacy materials have been developed and translated into two versions as well. It is predictable that almost the entire Mong/Hmong lexicons end with tone markers represented by the letters: **-b (high tone)**, **-j (high falling tone)**, **-v (mid-rising tone)**, **-- (mid tone)**, **-s (mid low tone)**, **-g (mid low breathy tone)**, **-m (low glottalized tone)**, and **-d (predictable variant of -m low glottalized tone)** (See Table 3 Mong/Hmong Tone Markers) (Thao, 1999a and Thao, 1999b). These letters at the end of each Mong/Hmong lexicon are tone markers, and the tones are not arbitrary. The tones in Mong/Hmong are considered one of the prosodic or suprasegmental features, and the most difficult aspect of the language for non-Mong/Hmong speakers who have attempted to master it.
- 5) Unlike English, where the structure of the syllable follows the onset and rime, a typical Mong/Hmong lexicon consists of a consonant, a vowel, and a tone marker (e.g., '**Kuv**' **k** is a consonant, **u** the vowel, and **v** the tone marker).

## I. Recommendation

The author recommends that No Change is to made to the Hmong/Mong RPA System that is already in place today!

**Rationale**

American missionary linguists created the Mong/Hmong RPA system, Dr. G. Linwood Barney and Dr. William A. Smalley of the Christian and Missionary Alliance and Father Yves Bertrais of the Catholic Church to translate the Bible and Christian literature for the Mong/Hmong back in 1950s after the massive conversion of the Mong/Hmong to Christianity, so that they could read the Bible in their own language serving as the foundation of faith and that the Mong/Hmong could “gain a writing system and could use” it as well as a tool for evangelization (W.A. Smalley, Presentation from handout to the members of the Hmong Language Council, University of Minnesota, August 12-14, 1982). Given this, we cannot make changes without seeking approval from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), particularly the Hmong District of C&MA and the Catholic Church.

1. The Moob Federation of America, Inc. convened a big national conference in Joliet, Illinois, on September 13, 1980, and the conference passed a resolution changing the following phonemes.

Hmoob Dawb	Moob Leeg	Changed to	Revised Mong Leeg & approved by Dr. William A. Smalley
[ d ]	[ tl ]	→	[ dl ]
[ dh ]	[ tlh ]	→	[ dlh ]
[ nt ]	[ ntl ]	→	[ ndl ]
[ nth ]	[ ntlh ]	→	[ ndlh ]
[ ŋ ]	[ ŋ ]	→	Ng (grapheme)

Given this, the Chair of “Roov Ntawv Moob” or Mong Volunteer Literacy, Inc. had the burden of contacting Dr. William A. Smalley and seeking his approval for the change to take effect between 1979 and 1981.

2. The revised Phoo Xyum Nyeem Ntawv Moob or the Mong primer was adopted by the Hmong District of the C&MA or *Hauvpaug Koomhum Moob* in their Annual Conference held in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1982 to translate the Bible and other Christian literature in both Mong Leeg and Hmoob Dawb, e.g., hymnal song books. The Bible translated into Mong Leng and Hmong Dawb was completed and published by the American Bible Society in 2000.

It took 50 years, from 1950 to 2000, for the Mong/Hmong to complete the Bible translation and other Christian literature and have them published in both Mong Leng and Hmong Daw to 100%.

Now, we could start to see the RPA system since its inception into fruition. Today, the RPA system is the most widely used system for the Mong/Hmong Christian. Today, the Mong/Hmong Bible has been used in 115 churches of the Hmong District of the C&MA with 250 pastors, with a total membership of 36,000 in the U.S., 500,000 Mong/Hmong Christians in China, 400,000 in Vietnam, 30,000 in Laos, 12,000 in Thailand, and about 7,000 in Myanmar, Canada, France, and French Guyana, amounting to over 1 million Mong/Hmong Christians in the world. These numbers also exclude the 76,000 Hmong/Mong Catholics. The most recent revision

of the Mong/Hmong Bible was completed in 2022 (Dr. & Rev. Lantzia Thao, personal communication, August 21, 2025).

3. Dr. William A. Smalley’s statement is still echoed loud and clear in my mind today. He had a “

Fascinating experience, “an opportunity to help Hmong people gain a writing system they needed and could use. Fascinating discoveries: Especially the consonantal system of spoken Hmong – one of the most complex in the world, in some ways, beautifully consistent and logical, marvelously built up of many pieces” (p. 1). [The co-founders of the RPA] We “wanted to be practical and at the same time bring out the beauty and symmetry of the language in the writing system, often not seen by Hmong/Mong (Dr. William A. Smalley, Handout for the presentation to the Mhong Language Council, University of Minnesota, August 12, 1982).

I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. William A. Smalley and stand firm with him on this matter.

4. As a trained linguist and an educator working professionally in my disciplines for the last 30 years as a professor of linguistics and education at California State University Monterey Bay, I can attest to the fact that the RPA system has been well-researched, solidly built, and grounded on the linguistic principles of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) system. The RPA is found to be absolutely symmetrical; therefore, no changes are to be made to the current RPA system.
5. Despite its complexities, the RPA is the easiest system for us to use. It took me 15 minutes to learn from my colleague, and I could write a book, *Kevcai siv lug Moob* (Thao, 1997). I have also completed another version, *Kevcai siv lus Hmoob*, and it is ready to be published at any time should the need arise. Please refer to the copy in the binder for the course WLC 397, which is displayed on the table.
6. Parhurst (1993) referred to an article on “Smalley’s maximizing of orthography design and sign language” about the five key factors that needed to be used to design the RPA writing system, which are:

- (1) Maximizing Motivation
- (2) Maximizing Representation
- (3) Maximizing Ease of Learning
- (4) Maximizing Transfer
- (5) Maximizing Ease of Reproduction

As a member of the 12-member committee of the Mhong Language Council, I asked Dr. William A. Smalley on August 13, 1982 for the reason why he used the letters to represent as tone markers, he responded that we do not have a country, by taking his approach, the RPA system will fulfill the five key factors and accelerate the process of teaching and learning as it is compatible for new western technology.

3. In addition, the Bible, hymnal books, and other Christian literacy materials have been developed and translated into two versions as well. It is predictable that almost the entire Mong/Hmong lexicons end with tone markers represented by the letters: **-b (high tone)**, **-j (high falling tone)**, **-v (mid-rising tone)**, **-- (mid tone)**, **-s (mid low tone)**, **-g (mid low breathy tone)**, **-m (low**

**glottalized tone**), and **–d (predictable variant of –m low glottalized tone)** (See **Table 3 Mong/Hmong Tone Markers**) (Thao, 1999a and Thao, 1999b). These letters at the end of each Mong/Hmong lexicon are tone markers, and the tones are not arbitrary. The tones in Mong/Hmong are considered one of the prosodic or suprasegmental features, and the most difficult aspect of the language for non-Mong/Hmong speakers who have attempted to master it.

Given the rationale, Final Recommendation for this Spelling Reform:

**No changes are to be made to the RPA System that is currently in place.** However, the Mong has continuously used the system, and it was officially adopted by them when they arrived in the U.S. in 1976.

The Mong orthography currently in use is based on the refinement of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system, developed by American missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), G. Linwood Barney and William A. Smalley, in the 1950s. This RPA system has been devised based on the phonemic principle. Therefore, it is phonemic-based rather than ideographic-based, like the Chinese Script. It depends on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Therefore, this RPA system automatically dichotomizes the Mong language into two dialects based on regional pronunciation differences between Mong Leng (Blue Mong) and Hmong Dawb (White Hmong). However, to date, no writing system has been found that can satisfy the Mong’s desire. In other words, the RPA system remains the sole writing system that is easy to learn and to use among the Mong, not just in the United States but throughout the world. Even though the RPA system is very consistent and absolutely symmetrical, the writing and spellings vary from dialect to dialect and from ideolect to ideolect (language of the individual), depending on the geographic region from which each individual Mong comes.

**LINGUISTIC SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

In terms of linguistic mutual intelligibility between the Mong and the Hmong, Smalley (1994) observed that their lexicons “seem to be completely different” (p. 24) and “do not seem to correspond with each other at all” (pp. 98-99). The linguistic similarities and differences between Mong and Hmong (See Table 1 and Table 2, respectively) may be compared with those between Lao and Thai (See Table 3).

Table 1. Samples of Lexical Similarities between Mong and Hmong

<b>Mong</b>	<b>Hmong</b>	<b>English</b>
Has	hais	speak
Moog	mus	go
Nam	niam	mother
Lab	liab	red or monkey

Paab	pab	help
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Table 2. Samples of Lexical Differences between Mong and Hmong

<b>Mong</b>	<b>Hmong</b>	<b>English</b>
dlaim choj	daim pam	blanket
Ntsab	txhuv	rice
Pujnyaaj	phauj	aunt
Laug	hlob	uncle (father's older brother)
Paamdlev	puamhub	mint

Table 3. Samples of Lexical Similarities and Differences between Lao and Thai

<b>Lao</b>	<b>Thai</b>	<b>English</b>
pai sai?	pai nai?	go where?
tum soom	soom tum	papaya salad
khoy	poom (male) & chanh (female)	I (first person)
Hak	rak	love
Vao	pood	speak

Despite the differences, some linguists consider Mong and Hmong to be “dialects” that are mutually intelligible to some extent. However, Mong and Hmong are more accurately regarded as “sociolects.” A “sociolect” is a speech variety spoken by a group of people who share a particular social characteristic, such as socioeconomic class, ethnicity, or age (O’Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1997, pp. 686-687; O’Grady, Archibald, Aronoff & Rees-Miller, 2001, p. 728). Yule (1996) defines it “as varieties of language used by groups defined according to class, education, age, sex, and a number of other social parameters” (p. 240); Fromkin & Rodman (1993) refer to sociolect as the variety of a language spoken by a class or group (p. 516); and furthermore,

It is the variety of a language spoken by a class or group, and it refers to the variety of language spoken by a particular ethnic, religious, age, employment, or social class, which is an important means of identification. On one hand, it strengthens the feeling of ‘us’ within the group, but on the other hand, it excludes ‘non-members’ (NedWeb, 1999).

The Mong are not a subgroup of the Hmong. The population of the Mong and the Hmong groups is substantially comparable in terms of numbers in the United States (Lyman, 1974; Thao, 1999a, 1999b, & 2000). “Green Hmong or Green Mong,” “*Hmong Njua*” or “*Hmoob Ntsuab or Moob Ntsuab*” are other terms by which the Hmong Der (White Hmong) and Westerners call the Mong Leng. These terms have negative connotations. Those identified by the terms aforementioned in this paragraph find these terms objectionable and offensive, and are intimidated by their use. Historically, Green Hmong/Mong was a small Hmong/Mong group that anachronistically practiced a cult of cannibalism. It is believed that this particular group no longer exists.

## **DERIVATION OF THE SPELLING TERMS “MONG” AND “HMONG”**

Drs. G. Linwood Barney, William A. Smalley, and Father Yves Bertrais, who co-founded the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) writing system for both the Mong and the Hmong in the 1950s, introduced the two spelling terms “Mong” derived from the Mong Leng word “*Moob*” and “Hmong” derived from the Hmong Der word “*Hmoob*.” They designated the spelling term “Mong” to represent the Mong Leng (*Moob Leeg*) because it derives from the Mong Leng (“*Moob Leeg*”) language and truly reflects the Mong Leng group. They also designated the spelling term “Hmong” to represent the Hmong Der (*Hmoob Dawb*) group because it derives from the Hmong Der (“*Hmoob Dawb*”) language and truly reflects the Hmong Der group. They did not designate the terms “Mong” or “Hmong” as ethnic terms to represent both groups. Therefore, Dr. William A. Smalley had used the term “Hmong/Mong” to represent both Hmong Der and Mong Leng during our correspondence with him. Dr. William Smalley reaffirmed this designation on December 22, 1991, and on August 21, 1997. When referring to both the Hmong Der and the Mong Leng, Dr. William Smalley used the terms “Hmong/Mong” side-by-side (Smalley, 1991, December 24; and Smalley, 1997, Aug 21).

When the two spelling terms “Hmong/Mong” or “Mong/Hmong” are used and appear side-by-side, the meaning includes both groups. These two spelling terms, “Mong” and “Hmong,” will need to be used side-by-side when referring to both groups in order to show the inclusion of the two groups until a neutral spelling term is coined and will be acceptable for use as an ethnic term to show a true representation of the Mong and the Hmong. When the term “Hmong” is used, it specifically refers to the Hmong group only. Likewise, when the term “Mong” is used, it specifically refers to the Mong group.

Recently, in the United States, the use of the term “Hmong” for both the Mong and the Hmong has become a topic of discussion. Mong speakers point out that the term “Hmong,” spelled “H-m-o-n-g,” is a Hmong Der word whose equivalent term in Mong Leng is “Mong,” spelled “M-o-n-g.” The term “Hmong” therefore refers only to the Hmong Der and does not encompass the Mong Leng, who retain a distinct language and culture. Alternative spelling terms, such as “Mong/Hmong,” “Hmong/Mong,” the “Mong” and the “Hmong,” or the “Mhong,” were suggested, each with its own linguistic justification, authentic and indigenous self-identification, and by principles. These terms have been proposed by the Mong Americans who want to be inclusive, to maintain their language and culture, and to preserve the harmony and balance of the two groups.

The spelling term “Mhong” is not a misspelling, but is a neutral spelling term coined and agreed upon by the twelve-committee members (six members from the Mong community and six members from the Hmong community) of the Mhong Language Council appointed by General Vang Pao and met at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis on August 12-14, 1982, through the sponsorship of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. The role of the Council was to conduct studies to standardize the Mong and the Hmong languages. Through the committee's experience of literary search, the committee agreed that it was necessary to change the consonantal phoneme from /hm/ to /mh/ and the spelling terms “Hmong” and “Mong” to “Mhong” as an ethnic spelling term to represent both the Mong and the Hmong (Thao & Robson, 1982; Bliatout, et al, 1988, p. 74; Thao, 1999a, p. 4; and Park & Chi, 1999, p. 238). Those who support the continued use of the term “Hmong” argue that it is conventional to include both groups and downplay the differences in customs and speech between the two.

In fact, the term “Hmong” was used in the literature in 1974 (Garrett, 1974; Yang, 1975) and was not grounded in sound academic disciplines, such as linguistics, particularly phonology. Phonologically, in the articulation of the [h] sound, there is no obstruction of the airstreams in the oral cavity (a pair of brackets [ ] is used to denote phonetic symbols in phonetics). The sound [h] is classified as a voiceless glottal and is used as a consonant by itself or as a glide combining with other sounds. With the articulation of the sound [h] in English, there is an aspiration of a small puff of air that occurs immediately following the articulation of the oral stops /p/, /t/, and /k/ (a pair of slashes // is used for phonemic representation) if they are syllable initial preceding a stressed vowel as in pin [ph], tick [th], and kin [kh] and thereby are aspirated voiceless stops. If these three oral stop sounds occur after syllable initial /s/, as in spin [p], stick [t], and skin [k], they are unaspirated voiceless stops. The pairs of sounds [p] and [ph], [t] and [th], [k] and [kh] are the allophones (the predictable phonetic variants) of the same phonemes /p/, /t/, and /k/, respectively.

Because of this, linguists generally consider this aspiration a minor aspect in the American English phonology, meaning that aspiration does not change the overall phonemic representation of the phonemes /p/, /t/, /k/ within the broader phonological context (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, 1998, & 2003). By the same token, in Mong phonology, there are four pairs of nasal sounds used between the Mong and the Hmong that share the same aspiration feature as in English. These pairs of sounds consist of [m]/[hm], [ml]/[hml], [n]/[hn], and [ny]/[hny]. The Mong use the full voiced nasals [m], [ml], [n], and [ny]; whereas the Hmong articulate devoiced or voiceless nasals [hm], [hn], [hml], and [hny]. Compared to English, though the graphemes of these pairs of sounds are spelled differently by the Mong and the Hmong, they are the predictable phonetic variants or the allophones of the same phonemes /m/, /ml/, /n/, /ny/, respectively. Thus, the aspiration feature for these four pairs of sounds does not change the overall phonemic representation of those phonemes in Mong. For this reason, the spelling term “Mong” is the correct term, and it is the term that truly represents the Mong.

The decision to use the spelling term “Mong” is not new. In fact, the spelling term “Mong” (Lyman, 1962, 1968, 1969) existed even before the spelling term “Hmong” (Garrett, 1974; Yang, 1975). The term “Mong” has long existed and was used at the turn of the century. Researchers and scholars have used the spelling term “Mong” in their writings and publications (Lyman, 1962, 1968, 1969, 1974, & 1979; Xiong et al, 1983; Thao, 1994, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000;

Thao, 1995c & 1996d; Thoj, 1981, n.d.; Xiong, 1981; Thoj & Xyooj, 1984; Yang, 1999; Thao, 2002e, and see the websites for Vietnam Image de la Communaute de Groupes Ethniques, n.d.; Nhan Dang, n.d.; Vietnam Project, n.d. in the reference section). The spelling term “Mong” is firmly supported by linguistics and from the perspectives of historical and comparative methodology of linguistics. Even though the term “Mong” has not been used widely compared to the term “Hmong,” the Mong Leng have called themselves Mong and have used the spelling term “Mong” to represent them.

Furthermore, when the non-Hmong hear the word “Hmong” for the first time, they tend to spell the term “Hmong” with the initial spelling “M” as in “Mong” rather than the initial “H” for “Hmong.” In other languages, such as Lao and Thai, the Mong and the Hmong ethnic names are written with the letter “M,” as in “Mong,” but were never written with an “H” in Lao and Thai.

In addition, on July 22, 1995, in Denver, Colorado, Chee Yang, Colonel 'Bill' F. Bilodeaux, Christine Cook, and the American Tribute Committee with the cooperation from Colonel Frank Bales, Generals Harry C. Aderholt, Jim Hall, Steve Ritchie, Art Cornelius, the Mong and the Hmong veterans paid special tribute to the 40,000 Mong and Hmong soldiers who died during the Vietnam War as part of the U.S. Secret Army in Laos and to the 15,000 Mong and Hmong soldiers who were wounded in the line of duty between 1961 and 1975. This tribute was the first in the history of the United States to commemorate them. A symbolic (letter) “M” was posted on the hill in the background of the stage, and one of the generals stated that this symbolic “M” represented the “Mong” people. Colonel Hang Sao accepted the Medal of Honor on behalf of the Mong and the Hmong soldiers who fought and died in this war (Thao, Videotapes, 1995 & 1996).

In sum, for all the above reasons, the term “Mong” can be used as an ethnic term to encompass both the Mong and the Hmong.

Although the Mong population is substantially comparable in terms of numbers in the United States, of the majority in Thailand (100,000), of the majority in Vietnam (600,000) and of several millions in Mainland China (See the websites for Vietnam Image de la Communaute de Groupes Ethniques, n.d.; Nhan Dang, n.d.; Vietnam Project, n.d. in the reference section), many Hmong and others still put pressure on the Mong to give up their identity, their culture and their language, and to become the “Hmong.” They impose the term “Hmong” on the Mong. In fact, the Mong and the Hmong can be culturally and linguistically compared to the Thai and the Lao as the authors discussed previously (See Table 3). It is like someone saying to the Thai that they are not Thai, and that they must give up their identity to become Lao.

## **CONSEQUENCES FACED BY THE MONG**

Due to a lack of knowledge, misinformation, and miseducation about the Mong and the Hmong, the term “Hmong” has been widely used by the general public, particularly in the United States, to refer to both the Mong and the Hmong. This is a truly misrepresentation of the Mong, evidenced by the already significant disparity in educational programs, materials development, informational materials, and services across public and private entities, local school districts, colleges, and universities in various States in the United States between the Mong and the

Hmong. As a consequence, resources and funding have not been allocated to address the needs of the Mong. When data are collected for funding purposes, the Mong are included in the Hmong counts; however, when funds are received, they are usually used to benefit the Hmong. Using State and Federal funds (taxpayers' money), curricula, informational materials, tests, and literature have been developed and translated into Hmong to serve the Hmong-speaking population. None of the materials has been developed and translated into the Mong language to serve the Mong-speaking population. For this reason, the spelling term "Hmong" does not represent and does not include the Mong.

Back in Laos, more Hmong had the opportunity to receive formal education, which gave them greater political influence in the Lao government. Many of them knew French, and some of them had already learned English in Laos and in the refugee camps in Thailand. When they came to the United States, many worked for the school systems, social service agencies, and the private sector. They have educated the systems, Western scholars, and the American public about the Hmong, but neglected the Mong. Due to their lack of knowledge about the Mong, public and private organizations in all sectors, the systems, scholars, the Hmong, and some Mong believe that there is only one group, namely the Hmong. Many Hmong professionals have educated the general public that the term "Hmong" represents the Mong, but the fact is that the term "Hmong" only represents the Hmong and does not represent the Mong. As a consequence, the spelling term "Hmong" has been widely used by the Hmong, Western scholars, and the general public, particularly in the United States to refer to both the Hmong and the Mong. However, in reality and in practice, the spelling term "Hmong" does not represent the Mong for the following rationale:

1. When the original Hmong Primer, *Phau Xyaum Nyeem Ntawv Hmoob*, was developed, Father Yves Bertrais developed it only in Hmong for the Hmong. The Primer was not developed for the Mong. Due to the linguistic differences between the Mong and the Hmong, it was decided that G. Linwood Barney would need to develop the Mong Primer for the Mong, but he returned to the United States. Therefore, Father Bertrais informed the Mong students that they needed to develop their own primer (X. Xyooj, personal communication, 1991, December 12; W. Smalley, personal communication, 1991, December 22 & 1997, August 21).
2. In their book entitled *Handbook for Teaching Hmong-Speaking Students*, B. T. Bliatout, B.T. Downing, J. Lewis, and D. Yang (1988) indicated that the Mong people prefer the name "Moob Leeg" (Mong Leng) and the spelling "Moob" rather than "Hmoob" and "Mong" rather than "Hmong" (p. 58). Again, B.T. Bliatout and D. Yang are Hmong, and B.T. Downing and J. Lewis are Western scholars.
3. George L. Barney wrote a Foreword for *Kevcai Siv Lug Moob [Foundations of Mong Language]* (Thao, 1997). Barney used the spelling term "Mong" to represent the Mong.
4. Rev. & Mrs. Mac Sawyer (personal communication, May 29, 2003), who had been missionaries to Laos from 1950-1975, provided an electronic mail about the two distinct tribes among the "Mong," known as the Blue Mong and the White Hmong.

5. Using the spelling term “Hmong” to claim as an inclusive term to represent the Mong is truly a misrepresentation of the Mong. As a consequence of the misrepresentation and the lack of knowledge about the Mong, public and private entities in all sectors have spent State and Federal funds to serve the Hmong and not the Mong as previously discussed. The Mong had been marginalized during the U.S. Secret War in Laos, and today they continue to be marginalized in the United States. Marginalization of the Mong is likely to get worse in the future if the wrong term “Hmong” continues to be used to represent the Mong.
6. The spelling terms “Hmong/Mong” were used by Dr. William A. Smalley to be inclusive of both the Hmong and the Mong populations, as previously discussed above. Smalley further indicated in his last electronic mail message to the authors that,

Unfortunately, no linguist familiar with both dialects was present to guide the early stages, so it looks like the RPA writes only Hmong Daw. This was not my intention. However, politically, among the Hmong/ Mong, it is now probably too late not to have two partially different systems (Smalley, 1997, Aug 21).

7. Linguists have studied many different languages, and every language stands firmly based on principles of academic disciplines, such as linguistics and the indigenous epistemology of the people or how the people who speak those languages identify themselves (Gegeo, 1998, Fall; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999, March; and Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2002, Fall). Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (1999) argued that “the foundation of a people’s identity and cultural authenticity is their culturally shared indigenous epistemology, embodied in and expressed through their heritage language” (p. 22). The Mong use the term “Mong” to represent themselves and identify with it. Moreover, whether or not the term “Mong” is widely used and known to the general public, the Mong people identify with it. Therefore, the Mong argue with strong conviction that the correct term “Mong” should be used for them and not the superimposed term “Hmong.”

The Mong and the Hmong have lived in co-existence on an equal basis at the turn of the century, and it is ethically, morally, and fundamentally wrong for anyone to dictate to the Mong who they are or who they should call themselves.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

To the authors, the Mong and the Hmong value and embrace diversity, inclusion, and not division, unification and not separation, inclusiveness and equal representation. The goal of the Mong and the Hmong is for both groups to be together and to have a mutual respect with dignity for each other. For this reason, one of the following options has been suggested to be used as the correct and inclusive term to represent the two groups: a) the “Mong/Hmong” or “Hmong/Mong,” b) the “Mong” and the “Hmong,” and c) the “Mhong.”

In light of this, if someone only uses the spelling term “Hmong” to encompass the Mong and the Hmong, this is truly a misrepresentation of the Mong as he or she, in principle, privileges the Hmong over the Mong. If the individuals hold influential positions, whether in the public or private sectors, there will be serious repercussions for the Mong in terms of policy and program implementation. As a consequence, the Mong Americans will not be recognized for who they are. They will continue to be marginalized and will not receive equal treatment and equal access

to resources and information. This is discriminatory by default under the United States Constitution under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment - Equal protection of 1868, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VI (Pulliam & Van Patten, 1994; Gutek, 1992; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995), the Equal Educational Opportunity Act (EEOA) of 1974 (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995), the Lau mandates of 1974 (*Lau vs. Nichols* in 1974; Pulliam & Van Patten, 1994; Gutek, 1992), and *Castenada vs. Picard* in 1981 (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995).

Using the spelling term “Hmong” as the mainstream term to include the Mong as a subgroup of the Hmong is not acceptable. The issue of giving up the Mong identity is non-negotiable. The two spelling terms, the “Mong” and the “Hmong,” have to be used side-by-side. The Mong have the strong conviction that it is morally and ethically wrong to ask the Mong to give up their Mong identity, language, and culture in the interest of being subsumed under the Hmong.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article provides information on the Mong and the Hmong, explains the rationale why they are in the United States, clarifies the misunderstanding and the misconception about them, discusses issues regarding the misinformation, miseducation, and misrepresentation of the Mong, and probes the consequences facing the Mong in the United States followed by suggestions for inclusion.

The ethnicity of the Mong and the Hmong consists of the Mong Leng and the Hmong Der. The Mong Leng always identify themselves as Mong (*Moob*), spelled “Mong,” and the Hmong Der always identify themselves as Hmong (*Hmoob*), spelled “Hmong.” The Mong and the Hmong have co-existed at the same level at the turn of the century. The Mong are not a subgroup of the Hmong and the spelling term “Mong” or “Hmong” is not an ethnic term to represent both the Mong and the Hmong groups. Furthermore, the Hmong language is not the Mong language.

It is a given fact that culturally and linguistically the Mong and the Hmong are classified into two groups and the two spelling terms “Mong” and “Hmong” go above and beyond simply the spellings in printed media and academic publications because each term represents a group of people with distinguishable culture and language. For this reason, everyone needs to use the right term to represent the right group of people on all matters, on an equal basis at all levels, including laws, policies, and implementation of programs concerning equal access to resources, information, and services. For example, curricula, informational materials, tests, and literature need to be developed and translated into both Mong and Hmong to serve the two populations.

The Mong language and culture are very important to the Mong people because they are central to the Mong’s identity as fundamental human rights (Coulombe, 1993; Phillipson, 1989; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994). Therefore, the Mong language and culture must not be subsumed under the Hmong’s.

Readers need to understand that the Mong are Mong and the Hmong are Hmong. Again, the Mong are not a subgroup of the Hmong. Everyone should learn more about the Mong and the Hmong and provide a true picture of them to the general public and service providers, rather than a distorted picture of the Mong and the Hmong people. The terms “Mong” and “Hmong” refer

to the people as well as their languages. Readers are advised that the terms “Green Hmong or Green Mong,” “*Hmong Njua*,” or “*Hmoob Ntsuab* or *Moob Ntsuab*” must be dropped because they have negative connotations. When the two terms “Mong/Hmong” or “Hmong/Mong” or the “Mong” and the “Hmong” are used side-by-side, they represent both groups. The term “Mhong” may be used to represent both groups.

The Mong stand firmly by their principles. As Mong Americans, the issues around the term “Mong” go beyond simply the spelling. They take these issues very seriously as they involve the culture, language, and identity of the Mong people. The approach taken by people who do not know the Mong people to subsume the Mong under the general heading or label “Hmong” is tantamount to not only making the Mong a subgroup of the Hmong but also the beginning of the cultural and linguistic dissolution of Mong society. As Mong, they have survived for over five thousand years, and they continue to develop and advance as part of American society. Therefore, their commitment is to making sure that the Mong are correctly represented in society, printed media, and academic publications.

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George L. Barney, *Christianity: Innovation in Meo Culture*, MA Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1957, p. 68.

<sup>1</sup> William A. Smalley, “History of the development of the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet,” Presentation and Handout to the Hmong Language Council, Minneapolis, MN, at the University of Minnesota, August 12, 1982.

<sup>1</sup> William A. Smalley, “The Problems of Consonants and Tone: Hmong (Meo, Miao),” *Phonemes and Orthography: Language Planning in Ten Minority Languages of Thailand* (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University, 1976, 4: 85-123.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*; Thao, 1994 and 1997.

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