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THE MONG AND THE HMONG*Paoze Thao, Ph.D. and Chimeng Yang, M.Ed.*

Abstract

The Mong came to the United States (U.S.) since 1975. Today, they live in almost every state in the U.S., and people still do not know who they are. Due to the lack of written information about the Mong, people always refer to them as Hmong. For this reason, this article provides information, educates the public, explains why they came to the United States, and clarifies misunderstandings and misconceptions about the Mong and the Hmong. In addition, this article aims to inform the general public about misinformation, miseducation, and misrepresentation of the Mong and the consequences they face in the U.S., followed by suggestions for inclusion. The authors will shed light on the Mong and the Hmong, so that the Mong themselves, the general public, and service providers will have a true picture of the Mong people.

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Disclaimer: The findings, data, and conclusions presented in this manuscript are based on ongoing research, preliminary studies drawn from a plethora of literature, published and self-published, ethnographic interviews, social media, and eyewitness accounts available through personal communication and in the public domain. At the time of publication, the available evidence is not yet conclusive. This work is intended to contribute to current scientific dialogue and should not be considered a final, definitive statement or used as a basis for practical or clinical application. Further research and replication are required to validate these initial observations. Given that, the opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Mong Federation, Inc., California State University, Monterey Bay, and California Department of Education.

It is estimated that over 80,000 Mong and Hmong refugees have arrived in the United States since 1975 as a direct consequence of the U.S. Secret War in Laos, which was a part of the Vietnam War. The influx followed the United States' withdrawal of troops from Southeast Asia and the fall of the former Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese governments to the Communists in 1975 (Thao, 1999; Thao, 2023). Since then, the Mong and the Hmong populations have doubled to 186,310 in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Currently, the general public does not know the difference between the Mong and the Hmong people. Consequently, people often lump the Mong into the Hmong. This article is intended to provide information on the Mong and the Hmong and the rationale for why they are in the United States today, to clarify the misunderstanding and misconception about the Mong and the Hmong, and to educate the general public about the misinformation, miseducation, and misrepresentation of the Mong and the consequences they face in the United States, followed by suggestions for inclusion and a conclusion. The authors will

shed light on the Mong and the Hmong so that the Mong themselves, the general public, and service providers have a true picture of the Mong people.

The Mong and the Hmong are closely knit ethnic groups from Laos. They migrated from China, where they originated, in the eighteenth century and settled in Southeast Asia. Those in Laos assisted France during its colonial rule from 1893 to 1945 and the United States in its Secret War against the Communists during the Vietnam War between 1960 and 1975. Because of their constant massive migration from place to place and from country to country, the Mong and the Hmong have experienced a series of formative episodes: with the Chinese, with French Colonialism, with the Vietnam conflict, and with the refugee camps in Thailand during their transition to resettlement in the United States and other Western countries.

THE RATIONALE WHY THE MONG AND THE HMONG CAME TO THE U.S.

When the United States became involved in the Vietnam War, there was a lot of resistance against the Communists from the South Vietnamese and the United States troops. Because the United States' and the South Vietnamese's troops were deployed along the seventeenth parallel, it was difficult for the Communists to transport their troops, food, and ammunition to support their ground fighting squads in South Vietnam. For this reason, the Communists cut a new route to South Vietnam known as the "Ho Chi Minh Trail," zigzagging through Laos, where the Mong and the Hmong lived. By sending troops and supplies to South Vietnam through the Ho-Chi-Minh Trail, the Communists breached the Geneva Accords of 1962. It should be noted that Communist North Vietnam and the U.S. were among the twelve countries that signed the Geneva Accords of 1962 to guarantee the neutrality of Laos. Therefore, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) approached General Vang Pao to form a special force known as the "U.S. Secret Army in Laos" to perform two missions. General Vang Pao was one of the few high-ranking Hmong military officers in the Lao Royal Army at that time.

General Vang Pao outlined the two missions of the U.S. Secret War in Laos during a keynote address at a New Year Celebration on November 29, 1980, in Des Moines, Iowa. The first mission was to penetrate Communist forces strategically to reduce their troops, ammunition, and food along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The second mission was to provide general and special rescue missions to downed American pilots. General P. Vang also confirmed the same information to one of the authors during a trip to Hamilton, Indiana, to attend Edgar Pop Buell's funeral (personal communication, January 5-6, 1981).

When U.S. planes were shot down during bombing raids of North Vietnam, the pilots could either attempt to go east to the Gulf of Tonkin where they could be picked up by the U.S. forces, or they could fly west as far as possible to be rescued by the Mong and the Hmong commando units. Sometimes, the Mong and the Hmong sacrificed many lives just to save one downed American pilot. Each soldier of the U.S. Secret Army was paid two to three dollars a month for these dangerous missions. The American allies were treated with respect, dignity, and hospitality in the Mong and the Hmong homes. Although the Mong and the Hmong were poor in money, they were rich in accommodation, respect, and human dignity. As farmers, the Mong and the Hmong were self-sufficient because of their agricultural economy.

The U.S. intervention in Laos resulted in large-scale air operations over Northern Laos, especially in the province of Xieng Khouang, the home of thousands of the Mong and the Hmong. Branfman (1972) reported that over 25,000 missions were flown against the Plain of Jars ("*Plaines des Jarres*") from May 1964 through September 1969. Over 75,000 tons of bombs were dropped, and over 50,000 airmen at distant bases were involved in the bombing.

Robbins (1978) asserted that the American airmen who fought this U.S. Secret War in Laos were known as "the Ravens" and that their stories during the Vietnam conflict were locked away in classified archives and would not be revealed until after the year 2000. Bruchett (1970) reported that the tonnage of bombs dropped on Lao [Mong and Hmong] villages exceeded that dropped in any year on North Vietnam, more than on Nazi-occupied Europe in World War II.

Even though thousands of the Mong and the Hmong people were killed and wounded, and there are still remnants of enormous bomb craters at the Plain of Jars ("*Plaines des Jarres*"), the massive bombardment was kept secret from the world. If it had been publicized, the United States would have been known to have breached the 1962 Geneva Accords, which guaranteed Laos's neutrality. The province of Xieng Khouang, Laos, might have been used as a testing ground for chemical warfare, first by the United States and later by the Soviet Union during their competition for the leading role in the arms race during the Cold War. After 1975, the Soviet Union used aerial attacks on the territories where the Mong and the Hmong lived, with gas rockets of different types -- yellow, green, or red-- that caused headaches, vomiting, diarrhea, dysentery, and death to people exposed to those gases. The Mong and the Hmong called this phenomenon the "Yellow Rain." An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 17, 1992, noted that "Russian President Boris Yeltsin has explicitly confirmed that his Soviet predecessors were lying when they denied that the 1979 anthrax epidemic in Sverdlovsk was the result of an accident at a germ warfare installation and asks when we will learn the truth about the yellow rain reported by [the Mong and the Hmong] tribesmen in Laos" (*Wall Street Journal*, 1992, June 17). Hamilton-Merritt (1981, Aug) asserted that about 20,000 Mong and Hmong might have been exposed to poisonous gassing during the war. The United States Department of State documented over 13,000 people dead.

From 1960 to 1975, the number of the Mong and the Hmong casualties was enormous. Branfman (1972) estimated that ten percent or more of the population in the Northeast of Laos had either been killed or died due to war injuries that accounted for approximately 40,000 dead (p. 245). The Vietnam War was extremely detrimental to the Mong and the Hmong. Many innocent Mong and Hmong children, as young as twelve years old, were drafted and sometimes were forced to join the U.S. Secret Army in Laos to bear arms. Interestingly, there was no official record to indicate how many Mong and Hmong were killed in this fifteen-year war.

After the United States' troops withdrew from Southeast Asia, many Mong and Hmong in Laos were sent to the re-education camps (labor camps) and were persecuted for political reasons by the Communist government. Thousands of the Mong and the Hmong escaped to the jungle and found their way to Thailand to seek political asylum. In 1976, the U.S. Congress recognized that the Mong and the Hmong were the U.S. Secret Army in Laos during the Vietnam War and authorized the State Department to admit their families as refugees to the United States. However, approximately 15,000–18,000 Mong and Hmong remained in Wat Thum Krabork, Lopburi, Thailand from 1976 until 2004, when the United States government decided to bring them over to the United States. As a result, no refugees remained after 2006.

CLARIFYING THE MISCONCEPTION ABOUT THE MONG AND THE HMONG

Since 1975, the spelling term "Hmong" has been misrepresented and has overshadowed the Mong, even though the ethnicity of the two groups consists of the Mong and the Hmong. The Mong and the Hmong have co-existed from time immemorial, going back as far as the Mong and the Hmong can remember. There is still a dearth of literature on the Mong to inform the general public. The following sections provide much-needed information to debunk misunderstandings and misconceptions about the Mong and the Hmong. This article will discuss the misinformation,

miseducation, and misrepresentation, as well as the consequences facing the Mong, in detail so that the Mong themselves, the general public, and service providers have a true picture of the Mong people.

In the past, the Chinese, their neighbors, and Western scholars had used several terms to refer to the Mong and the Hmong. The term '*Miao*,' loosely translated as 'barbarian,' was historically used by the Chinese (Pollard, 1909; Hudspeth, 1939; Bernatzik, 1947; Arlotto, 1972). This term is related to the Annamese word '*Meau*,' transliterated as 'cat.' '*Mong-tse*' was also used by the Old Chinese historical work *Schudjing*, which compared the Mong and Hmong languages to the howling or cry of the hyena. Terrien explained that the Chinese character for '*Meau*' transliterates a cat's head. In agricultural contexts, the Chinese characters for '*Meau*' consist of two parts: '*Miao*' for 'plant' and the bottom part '*tse*' for 'field'; whereas '*tse*' is translated as an ethnicity. As a result, '*Meau-tse*' means the 'son of the soil, the farmers, who do not belong to the Great Nation.' Schotter referred to the Chinese province of Kweichow to designate '*Meau*' as all non-Han people (Bernatzik, 1947, p. 7). The Lao and the Thai call the Mong and the Hmong by the term '*Meo*.' As a consequence, other researchers have used the spelling of '*Meo*' as called by their hosts, the Lao and the Thai (Savina, 1924; Barney & Smalley, 1953; Binney, 1968; Haudricourt, 1972). However, all the terms mentioned above have negative connotations. The Mong prefer to be called "Mong," and the Hmong prefer to be called "Hmong," referring to themselves as two classless, egalitarian groups.

The Mong and the Hmong are an ethnic minority originating from China. Culturally and linguistically, they are classified into two groups. One group is the "*Mong Leng*" (*Moob Leeg*). Westerners also know the *Mong Leng* as "Blue Mong." Another group is the "*Hmong Daw*" (*Hmoob Dawb*). Westerners also know the *Hmong Der* as "White Hmong." The *Mong Leng* always identify themselves as Mong, spelled "M-o-n-g" with the initial "M," and the *Hmong Daw* always identify themselves as Hmong, spelled "H-m-o-n-g" with the initial "H." Moreover, the other classification of the Mong and the Hmong (e.g. Black Mong, Striped Hmong, etc.) is based on the colors of their costumes, but they all fall under the Mong and the Hmong groups. The Mong speak the Mong language, and likewise the Hmong speak the Hmong language. The Mong and the Hmong languages have co-existed at the same level for centuries. The linguistic difference between the Mong and the Hmong languages may be compared to the difference between the Lao and the Thai languages.

TRADITIONAL MONG AND HMONG COSTUMES

Regarding the difference between Mong and Hmong costumes, traditional Mong males wear loose black pants folded across the waist and secured with a cloth (usually red on ceremonial occasions) in place of a belt. Mong pants are very "full in length, having narrow opening for the ankles with a wide crotch falling mid-way between the calves and the ankles" (Lewis & Lewis, 1984, p. 114). The front of the Mong shirt extends to the sides and has buttons. The back of the Mong shirt has an embroidered cloth called "*lub laug*" in Mong. The shirt's length leaves the midriff bare. In contrast, Hmong pants are less full than the Mong's, with a higher crotch closer to the thigh. The front of the Hmong shirt has buttons straight from the neck to the waist. The Hmong shirt ends at the waist, but it does not have embroidered cloth on the back like the Mong. Traditional Mong and Hmong males wear decorated silver necklaces and moneybags (*naabnyaj*) ornamented with silver coins.

Compared to their male counterparts, Mong women's attire consists of a skirt, a blouse (Thao, 2002e), and a colorful *shae* (*sev*) (similar to an apron but longer). The blouse opens at the front and features beautiful handmade embroidery and appliqué strips in multiple colors on each side. In the back, a larger embroidered cloth connects to the collar and hangs down, with the embroidery facing

inward so it is not visible. Mong women wear knee-length pleated skirts of hand-woven hemp covered with different batik patterns drawn with beeswax and indigo dye. The bottom of the skirt is a strip of cloth bordered with bright cross-stitch embroidery and appliqué in various colors, in creative and unique styles. Despite Mong women's additional familial responsibilities, it normally takes a Mong woman a full year to complete her handmade skirt. Along with the skirts, Mong women wear a colorful cloth with beautiful handmade embroidery and appliqué, called the “*shae*” (*sev*). The *shae* (*sev*) covers the skirt in the front and the leggings. It is connected to two long red cloths. In addition, Mong women also cover their legs with black cloths, called “*chrong*” (*nrhoob*).

In contrast, most Hmong women wear black or blue pants and black blouses with blue strips on each front side. They also wear two *shae*, one in the front and one in the back, with their pants. Each *shae* connects to two long red or green nylon cloths. Some Hmong women wear blouses with black, blue, or white stripes on the sleeves. This is why some Hmong have been called “striped Hmong,” based on the colors of their costumes. Some Hmong women wear white skirts with a shawl covering the front and leggings. Both Mong and Hmong women wear decorated silver necklaces and moneybags ornamented with silver coins, and they cover their heads with headpieces in many different styles.

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 to the linguistic similarities and differences between Lao and Thai (See Table 3).

Table 1. Samples of Lexical Similarities between Mong and Hmong

Mong	Hmong	English
has	hais	speak
moog	mus	go
nam	niam	mother
lab	liab	red or monkey
paab	pab	help

Table 2. Samples of Lexical Differences between Mong and Hmong

Mong	Hmong	English
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

Lao	Thai	English
pai sai?	pai nai?	go where?
tum soom	soom tum	papaya salad
khoy	(kra) poom (male)	I (first person)

	& (dee) chanh (female)	
hak	rak	love
vao	pood	speak

Despite the differences, some linguists consider Mong and Hmong as “dialects” that are mutually intelligible to a certain extent. However, Mong and Hmong are more accurately regarded as “different languages”; some may consider them “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); but in reality, they are not, 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, or employment group, or social class, which is an important means of identification. On one hand, it strengthens the feeling of ‘us’ within the group; on the other, it excludes ‘non-members’ (NedWeb, 1999).

The Mong are not a subgroup of the Hmong. The Mong and Hmong populations are substantially comparable in size in the United States (Lyman, 1974; Thao, 1999a, 1999b & 2000). “Green Mong or Green Mong,” “*Hmong Njua*” or “*Hmoob Ntsuab or Moob Ntsuab*” are other terms by which the Hmong Daw (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 who anachronistically practiced a cult of cannibalism. This group may no longer practice this cult. They may have substituted it with something else, and perhaps it no longer exists.

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

Drs. George 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 Daw word “*Hmoob*.” They designated the spelling term “Mong” to represent the Mong Leng (*Moob Leeg*) because it is derived from the Mong Leng (“*Moob Leeg*”) language and reflects the Mong Leng group. They also designated the spelling term “Hmong” to represent the Hmong Daw (*Hmoob Dawb*) group because this term is derived from the Hmong Der (“*Hmoob Dawb*”) language, and it truly reflects and represents the Hmong Der group. They did not designate the term “Mong” or “Hmong” as an ethnic term to represent both groups. Therefore, Dr. William A. Smalley 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 Daw and the Mong Leng, Dr. William Smalley used the terms “Hmong/Mong” side-by-side (W.A. Smalley, personal communication, December 24, 1991; and Smalley, personal communication, August 21, 1997).

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 of the Hmong. When the term “Hmong” is used, it

specifically refers to the Hmong group only. Likewise, “Mong” refers specifically 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, while the 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 include 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 principles. Mong Americans who want to be inclusive, maintain their language and culture, and preserve the harmony and balance of the two groups proposed these terms.

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 meeting 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 Council's role was to conduct studies to standardize the Mong and 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 by convention to include both groups and downplay the differences in custom and speech between the two.

LINGUISTIC GROUNDING FOR THE COLLECTIVE USE OF “MONG”

The following is a discussion from a linguistic perspective for the use of the unified orthography 'Mong' that accurately serves both groups under a single ethno-linguistic designation. The initial letter used to refer to our ethnic group has consistently been “**M**” in China (such as Miao, Meau, Meau-tse), in Vietnam (Mong), and in Lao and Thai, who have called us “Meo” throughout time. However, the spelling “Hmong,” with the initial “H,” was first introduced in the literature in 1974 (Garrett, 1974; Yang, 1975), and that spelling was not based on academic disciplines, particularly linguistics, specifically phonetics and phonology.

Within academic linguistics, **phonetics** is the subfield dedicated to the scientific study of speech sounds across all human languages, focusing on their physical properties, production, and perception (Fromkin et al., 2017). This discipline is traditionally divided into three primary branches: **articulatory phonetics** (how the vocal tract physically produces sounds), **acoustic phonetics** (the physical properties of sound waves), and **auditory phonetics** (how the hearer perceives sounds). In phonetic notation, sounds are transcribed using **square brackets []** to denote their actual phonetic realization. In standard English, the phonetic inventory includes **three pairs of closely related oral stop consonants**:

$$\begin{array}{ll} [p^h] & \rightarrow [p^h t] \\ [p] & \rightarrow [sp t] \end{array}$$

- In phonetic transcription, the lexical item **pit** is realized as **[p^hit]**. The superscript [^h] denotes **aspiration**, a phenomenon characterized by a transient "puff of air" or voiceless glottal friction immediately following the release of the consonant. Rather than functioning as a full

consonantal phone, this acoustic property modifies the release phase, defining the sound as a **voiceless aspirated bilabial stop** that belongs to the same phoneme /p/, given its place and manner of articulation.

- The word **spit** is phonetically transcribed as [spɪt]. In this environment—following an initial sibilant—the /p/ phoneme is realized as an **unaspirated bilabial stop**, determined by its specific place and manner of articulation, but still operating under the same context within the same phoneme /p/. The bottom line is that [p^h] and [p] are phonetic variants of a **phoneme, or the allophones of the same phoneme /p/**. In other words, [p^h] and [p] are the same phoneme, but they are not different phonemes, meaning they are not distinctive phonemes, like /m/, /d/, /g/.
- The same scenario occurs with the word “**tick**,” phonetically transcribed as [t^hɪk], featuring an aspirated alveolar stop.

[t ^h]	→	[t ^h ɪk]
[t]	→	[stɪk]

In this production, the [^h] the brief period of post-release glottal friction, or aspiration- does not constitute a full consonantal segment but functions as a transient acoustic feature defined by its distinct place and manner of articulation under the same phoneme /t/; whereas the word “**stick**” is phonetically realized as [stɪk], demonstrating a lack of aspiration on the voiceless alveolar plosive. This **unaspirated variant [t]** is a predictable consequence of its phonotactic environment, occurring immediately after the word-initial alveolar sibilant /s/. In other words, [t^h] and [t] are the same phoneme, but they are not different phonemes, meaning they are not distinctive phonemes, like /m/, /d/, /g/.

[k ^h]	→	[k ^h ɪn]
[k]	→	[skɪn]

- The same principle applies to [k^h], and the lexical item **kin** is phonetically transcribed as [k^hɪn], where the initial voiceless velar plosive exhibits distinct aspiration. This aspirational feature is represented by the diacritic [^h], signifying a non-consonantal release phase rather than a discrete consonantal segment. Phonologically, the initial segment is classified as a voiceless aspirated velar plosive /k/; Whereas for the phonetic transcription of the lexicon, skin, [skɪn], the voiceless velar plosive /k/ is **unaspirated**, as is typical for voiceless stops occurring immediately after an initial alveolar fricative /s/. In other words, [k^h] and [k] are the same phoneme, which is /k/, meaning that they are not different phonemes, like /m/, /d/, /g/, or that they are not distinctive phonemes.
- In phonetic typology, the superscript symbol [^h], half hanging, denotes **aspiration, or a puff or air** – a transient burst of airflow – which must be structurally distinguished from the voiceless glottal fricative [h]. The latter is an independent glottal consonant produced by the airflow through an open glottis, often co-articulated with the quality of the subsequent vowel, as observed in English *house* and *hair*. The distinction between these two phonetic features became the center of a localized sociolinguistic debate during a **1984 curriculum development project** in Los Angeles, California, directed by Kim Oanh Nguyen. During this interdisciplinary linguistic conference, a colleague representing an external language group tried to call our two distinct “Mong” and “Hmong” groups by addressing the phonetic realizations of our two distinct ethnonyms, transcribing and pronouncing them as [mŏŋ] and

[^hmõŋ]. While this colleague assertion that these transcriptions represented the prescriptive phonetic and orthographic standards for the groups, the claim prompted an immediate dispute. To resolve the conflict, a local Hmong school principal requested the intervention of one of the co-authors, who is a linguist to intervene to contest the colleague's assertion, arguing from a native or localized perspective that the initial [^hmõŋ] is silent, directly countering the colleague's prescriptive demand for an explicit [^hmõŋ] pronunciation.

At the secondary level of linguistic analysis lies phonology, which investigates the cognitive organization and patterning of speech sounds. Rather than focusing on the physical mechanics of speech production, phonology examines how languages categorize sounds into abstract, mental systems based on articulatory features, such as the degree of airflow obstruction within the oral cavity. Consequently, phonology operates at a higher level of abstraction than phonetics, focusing on the underlying rules and systemic structures that govern sound patterns to generate linguistic meaning (Fromkin et al., 2017).

In phonology, the [^h], half hanging, and [h] are not the same; one represents a puff of air, and the other [h] is a voiceless glottal fricative classified as a glide produced by airflow through the open glottis and past the tongue and lips as [h] is ready to glide into the next sound, which could be a vowel as in the English words hair, who, and house, or as a consonant as in the case of Hmong, [h-m]. The bottom line is that [^h] is phonemically pronounced /monj/, but not /h-monj/; whereas [h] would be pronounced [h-m], like the other colleague from another language group who pronounced the word "Hmong" as /H-monj/, which is phonemically correct.

In phonological analysis, a distinction must be maintained between the phonetic realization of **aspiration** and the voiceless glottal fricative phoneme [h]. While the former [^h], half hanging, denotes a transient period of post-release airflow, the latter functions as a **voiceless glottal approximant (or glide)**. This segment is articulated via turbulent airflow through an open glottis, with the supraglottic vocal tract pre-configured for the subsequent phoneme.

This acoustic and articulatory distinction is highly relevant to cross-linguistic variations, such as the pronunciation of the ethnonym "**Hmong**." In the native Hmong language, the initial cluster is phonologically realized as a voiceless alveolar nasal /m̥/, meaning the term is natively pronounced /m̥õŋ/ rather than initiating with a discrete glottal fricative. Conversely, non-native speakers often map the orthographic "h" to the glottal fricative /h/, resulting in the phonemic output /^hmõŋ/. While this latter pronunciation reflects a rule-governed, orthographically driven transfer from languages like English, it deviates from the native phonological system.

At the **phonological level**, distinctive sounds are analyzed as **phonemes** and conventionally represented using **slashes** (e.g., /m/, /d/, /f/, /v/). Conversely, when considering contextual variants that do not signal a change in semantic meaning, these distinct sounds are classified as **allophones**. Allophones represent the **phonetic realizations** or variants of a single underlying phoneme, occurring either in complementary distribution or free variation within the same environment without altering the word's core meaning.

[p^h] / [p] ~ are the allophones of the same phoneme / p /
[t^h] / [t] ~ are the allophones of the same phoneme / t /
[k^h] / [k] ~ are the allophones of the same phoneme / k /

From an articulatory standpoint, the voiceless glottal fricative [h] is produced without any obstruction of the airstream within the oral cavity, functioning phonologically either as a discrete consonant or as a glide. In English phonology, this glottal gesture also characterizes the aspiration phase—a brief period of post-release voicelessness—that immediately follows the voiceless oral stops /p/, /t/, and /k/ when they occur in syllable-initial position preceding a stressed vowel (e.g., *pin* [p^hm], *tick* [t^hɪk], and *kin* [k^hm]). Conversely, when these voiceless stops are preceded by a syllable-initial alveolar fricative /s/ (e.g., *spin* [spɪn], *stick* [stɪk], and *skin* [skɪn]), they remain unaspirated. Consequently, the aspirated and unaspirated pairs—[p^h] and [p], [t^h] and [t], [k^h] and [k]—represent predictable, mutually exclusive allophones of the underlying phonemes /p/, /t/, and /k/. Unlike distinct phonemes such as /b/, /d/, or /m/, these phonetic variants do not contrast minimally and thus do not alter lexical meaning.

Within American English phonology, aspiration is widely recognized as a minor, allophonic variation rather than a contrastive feature. It does not modify the underlying phonemic status of /p, t, k/ within the language's structural inventory (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993; Fromkin et al., 1998, 2003, 2017). Analogously, Mong phonology leverages this same aspiration feature, manifesting in four distinct pairs of nasal sounds shared across the Mong and Hmong linguistic varieties.

Contemporary Mong orthography relies on a **phonemically based construction**. It utilizes the twenty-six letters of the Roman alphabet to represent phonetic values. This framework is formally designated as the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system. For further analysis regarding the unified spelling "Mong" and its collective application across subgroups, see the third rationale outlined in the introduction of Thao (2023, pp. xx–xxi, para. 3)

In phonological typology, the Mong language treats the voiceless glottal glide /h/ as a segment that can function as a semivowel within specific phonotactic environments. Conversely, in English phonology, aspiration—characterized by a brief period of post-release voiceless glottal friction—is a predictable acoustic event occurring exclusively when the voiceless oral stops /p/, /t/, and /k/ occupy a syllable-initial, stressed position. Because the production of /h/ involves no constriction or obstruction within the oral cavity, linguists categorize this aspirate feature as a non-contrastive phonetic variant (allophone) rather than a distinct phoneme. Consequently, the presence of sub-phonemic aspiration does not alter the underlying phonemic representations of /p/, /t/, and /k/ within the English sound system (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, pp. 226–227; Fromkin et al., 2017, pp. 231, 235, 243, 425). Comparative analysis reveals that while aspiration remains allophonic in English, it serves a starkly different structural role in Mong, where the phonetic realizations of acoustic aspiration operate as:

[m]	vs.	[^h m]
[n]	vs.	[^h n]
[ml]	vs.	[^h ml], and
[ny]	vs.	[^h ny]

In a phonological comparison between the Mong and Hmong languages, the variations between aspirated and unaspirated sonorants—specifically [m]/[^hm], [n]/[^hn], [ml]/[^hml], and [ny]/[^hny]—do not alter the underlying phonemic representations or semantic values of words. For example, lexical pairs such as *nub*/^h*nub* (‘sun’), *mluav*/^h*mluav* (‘smashed/bent’), and *nyuaj*/^h*nyuaj* (‘difficult’) retain identical meanings across both varieties. Consequently, these pairs of sounds function as predictable phonetic variants, or allophones, of the underlying phonemes /m/, /n/, /ml/, and /ny/, respectively. As Fromkin and Rodman (1998) note, an

allophone is defined as "a predictable phonetic variant of a phoneme" (pp. 260–261, 266, 288). Because aspiration lacks phonemic contrast in this context, it does not disrupt the core phonological framework. Applying these formal linguistic principles uniformly to both groups justify the standard academic usage of the structural term ‘Mong’ to encompass both variants.

	<u>Phonetic transcription</u>	<u>Phonemic transcription</u>	<u>Pronounced Used</u>	<u>Correct Spelling</u>
Mong	[mõŋ]	/moŋ/	/moŋ/	Mong
Hmong	[^hmõŋ]	/moŋ/	/moŋ/ , but <u>not</u> /hmoŋ/	Mong

Consequently, in linguistics, "Mong" is the accurate collective orthographic term for both groups. Critically, the phonological system of the language features specific contrastive sound pairs, which include:

<u>Mong</u>	<u>Hmong</u>
[m]	[^hm]
[ml]	[^hml]
[n]	[^hn]
[ny]	[^hny]

In the phonological systems of Mong and Hmong, a key distinction lies in how they realize nasal consonants. Specifically, Mong speakers produce fully voiced single and double nasal consonantal blends—namely **[m]**, **[ml]**, **[n]**, and **[ny]**—whereas Hmong speakers articulate their voiceless or devoiced counterparts: **[^hm]**, **[^hn]**, **[^hml]**, and **[^hny]**. While these pairs are represented by distinct orthographic graphemes, a cross-linguistic analysis reveals that they function as predictable phonetic variants, or allophones, of the underlying phonemes **/m/**, **/ml/**, **/n/**, and **/ny/**. Because aspiration (or voicelessness) does not alter the underlying phonemic representations within the Mong language, it carries no contrastive semantic weight. Consequently, from a phonemic and structural perspective, "Mong" serves as the more accurate and representative linguistic designation for this group.

The orthographic term “Hmong” was originally introduced into published literature in 1974 (Garrett, 1974; Yang, 1975), emerging independently of established linguistic or phonological frameworks. From a phonological perspective, the glottal fricative **[h]** involves no mechanical obstruction of the airstream within the oral cavity; it functions distinctively as a voiceless glottal consonant or as a glide in complex onset clusters. In English phonology, the phonetic realization of **[h]**, half hanging, manifests as aspiration—a brief period of post-release voicelessness—following the voiceless oral stops /p, t, k/ when they occupy a syllable-initial, stressed position

(e.g., *pin* [p^hm], *tick* [t^hɪk], *kin* [k^hm]). Conversely, when these plosives are preceded by a syllable-initial alveolar fricative /s/, they are realized as unaspirated voiceless stops (e.g., *spin* [spm], *stick* [stɪk], *skin* [skm]). Consequently, the phonetic pairs [p]/[p^h], [t]/[t^h], and [k]/[k^h] function as predictable allophonic variants of the underlying phonemes /p/, /t/, and /k/, respectively, and cannot replace the /p/, /t/, and /k/, so does [h], a puff of air, can never replace the phoneme [m] in the word “Mong.”

Consequently, “Mong” represents the linguistically accurate ethnonym for both collective groups, rather than the widely adopted spelling “Hmong.” For the past five decades, “Hmong” has been introduced and sustained despite lacking a rigorous phonological foundation. While this orthographic convention has been institutionalized for fifty years, contemporary linguistic science provides a compelling mandate to correct the historical record and reclaim “Mong” as the scientifically grounded designation.

Because of this, linguists generally consider aspiration a minor aspect of American English phonology, meaning it does not change the overall phonemic representation of /p/, /t/, and /k/ within the broader phonological context (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2017). 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 fully 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, aspiration in 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.

Consequently, linguists generally classify aspiration as a non-contrastive phonetic feature within American English phonology, given that it does not alter the phonemic representation of the voiceless plosives /p, t, k/ (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2017). A parallel phonetic distribution is observable in Mong phonology, which features four pairs of nasal consonants [m]/[^hm], [ml]/[^hml], [n]/[^hn], and [ny]/[^hny]—distinguished by a similar laryngeal feature. While the Mong dialect employs the fully voiced sonorants [m], [ml], [n], and [ny], the Hmong dialect realizes these as voiceless or devoiced counterparts, [^hm], [^hn], [^hml], and [^hny]. Despite the distinct orthographic representations utilized by the Mong and Hmong communities, these variants function as predictable allophones of the underlying phonemes /m, ml, n, ny/. Because aspiration and voicelessness in these nasal pairs do not establish phonemic contrasts, they do not alter the core phonological structure of the language. Therefore, from a phonemic perspective, the orthographic designation “Mong” serves as the linguistically accurate representation of the language.

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 spelling term “Mong” has long existed and has been 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 Communauté 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 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 this 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 name is written with the letter “M,” as in “Mong,” but was 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 commemorated them for the first time in U.S. history. 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

Because of a lack of knowledge, misinformation, and miseducation about the Mong and the Hmong, the spelling “Hmong” has been widely used by the general public, particularly in the United States, to refer to both the Mong and the Hmong. This misrepresents the Mong, as shown by the already huge disparity between educational programs, material development, informational materials, and services across public and private entities, local school districts, colleges, and universities 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 the Hmong language to serve the Hmong-speaking population. None of the materials have been developed or translated into the Mong language to serve the Mong-speaking population. For this reason, the spelling term “Hmong” does not represent or include the Mong.

In Laos, more Hmong had opportunities to receive formal education, so they had more political influence in the Lao government. Many knew French, and some had already learned English in Laos and in the refugee camps in Thailand. When they came to the United States, many worked in 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:

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. Because of the linguistic differences between the Mong and the Hmong, it was decided that Dr. G. Linwood Barney would 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).

The uniform application of the ethnonym "Hmong" to encompass the distinct Mong community constitutes a significant cultural and linguistic misrepresentation. This systemic oversight, compounded by a general deficit of institutional knowledge regarding the Mong, has led to a misallocation of public and private resources; state and federal funding has been disproportionately directed toward serving Hmong-specific demographics, effectively excluding the Mong population. Historically marginalized during the U.S. Secret War in Laos, the Mong continue to experience systemic disenfranchisement within the United States. Continued usage of the inaccurate, undifferentiated term "Hmong" risks exacerbating the socio-economic and political marginalization of the Mong community in the future.

Using the spelling term “Hmong” to claim it 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.

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 probably too late now to have two partially different systems (W.A. Smalley, personal communication, August 21, 1997).

RATIONALE FOR THE USE OF THE ETHNONYM “MONG”

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 spelling term “Mong” to represent themselves, and they identify this term as their identity. Moreover, whether or not the term “Mong” has been widely used and known to the general public, the Mong identify themselves with this term. Therefore, the Mong argue with strong conviction that the correct term “Mong” be used for them and not the superimposed term “Hmong.”

1. The Chinese have long called the Mong “Miao” throughout history, and the Lao have called them “Meo” in Laos. However, the spelling term **“Mong”** was credited to Dr. G. Linwood Barney, an American missionary, anthropologist, and linguist, through his personal and the Christian and Missionary Alliance archives detailing his mission in the Province of Xieng Khouang, Laos to study “Mong” (Mong Leng / Green Mong dialect) in Xieng Khouang, Laos as recorded by the Christian and Missionary Alliance archives detailing his time there in 1951 (Barney, 1957; [Wikipedia](#), 2026, June 30). Dr. William A. Smalley reconfirmed his mission to Laos with Dr. G. Linwood Barney, stating that he “went to Luang Prabang to study Khmu (W.A. Smalley, handout of presentation on the history of development of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) to the Mhong Language Council, University of Minnesota, August 12, 1982). Dr. William A. Smalley reconfirmed that Dr. G. Linwood Barney went to Xieng Khouang to study “Mong Lees [Leng]” in the same handout. Dr. G. Linwood Barney reconfirmed his mission in a Foreword statement written by himself on November 19, 1996, in *Kevcai Siv Lug Moob* (Foundations of Mong Language) (Thao, 1997). Furthermore, the first American scholar to explicitly use the spelling term “Mong” was anthropologist and linguist Thomas Amis Lyman (Lyman, 1962; Lyman, 1968; Lyman, 1969).
2. Later, in 1974, the spelling **“Hmong”** appeared for the first time in an article entitled “No Place to Run: The Hmong of Laos,” written by Wilbur E. “Bill” Garrett, editor and photographer for *National Geographic*, in January 1974. Then, in 1975, the term “Hmong” appeared in Dr. Yang Dao’s book, *Les Hmong du Laos face au développement* (The Hmong of Laos in the Vanguard of Development) (Yang, 1975). Dr. Yang Dao was the first Hmong in Laos to earn a doctoral degree in Social Science, with a focus on social and economic development, from La Sorbonne, University of Paris, in May 1972. In a [YouTube video, in a conversation with Ms. Lee on August 22, 2026](#), Dr. Yang Dao said he asked Wilbur E. Garrett, whom he met, to call the “Hmong,” rather than the Meo (Npawgtooj & New Entertainment, 2026, Aug 22).
3. **“Mong”** has long existed and has been used at the turn of the century. Researchers and scholars have used the spelling term “Mong” in their writings and publications ([LeMoine, 2013](#) in *Parlong (H)Mong*; Lyman, 1949 as cited in the Foreword of Lyman, 1962; Lyman, 1962; Lyman, 1968; Lyman, 1969; Lyman, 1974; Lyman, 1979; Xiong et al, 1983; Thao, 1994; Thao, 1997; Thao, 1999a; Thao, 1999b; Thao, 2000; Thao, 1995; Thoj, 1981, n.d.; Xiong, 1981; Thoj & Xyooj, 1984; Yang, 1999; and see the websites for Vietnam Image de la Communauté 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 perspectives of historical and comparative methodology of linguistics. Even though the term

“**Mong**” has not been used as widely as the term “Hmong,” the Mong have called themselves **Mong** and have used this spelling term “**Mong**” to represent them. The spelling of the term ‘**Hmong**’ only appeared in Laos in 1974 (The spelling of the term ‘Hmong’ only appeared in Laos after 1994 and the subsequent year 1975 (Garrett, 1974; Yang, 1975), and was based solely on socio-political and economic factors rather than on its coinage within sound academic disciplines, such as linguistics, phonetics and phonology, historical and comparative linguistics, and etymology.

Then, Lee and Tapp (2010) further exacerbated this and claimed that:

The *official spelling* system, RPA, was developed for White Hmong, who pronounced their name with a puff of initial air through the nose, pre-aspirated, which is why it is spelled “Hm.” But the Moob Ntsuab do not have this pre-aspiration of the name, so their name should really be spelled “Moob” (Note on Transliteration and Hmong names, p. xvii). “... in this book, we have generally retained the spelling “Hmong” or “Hmoob” for the Hmong people as a whole, since that is how they are generally known internationally” (p. xvii).

The authors raise three critical counterpoints regarding the historical development and terminology presented by Lee and Tapp (2010).

- (1) Lee and Tapp (2010) omitted the foundational role of Father Yves Bertrais (*Txivplig Nyiaj Pov*), a French Catholic missionary of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). Working with Hmong Daw converts at *Roob Nyujqus* (Wild Ox Mountain or Gaurs Mountains) in Luang Prabang, Laos, during the 1950s, Father Bertrais helped develop the RPA system specifically for Hmong Daw biblical translation. This contrasts with Lee and Tapp’s exclusive emphasis on American missionaries Dr. G. Linwood Barney and Dr. William A. Smalley of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, who developed the RPA variant for Mong (Mong Leng) converts in Xieng Khouang Province for distinct literacy and evangelical purposes (Thao, 1977; Thao, 2000a; Thao, 2000b; Thao, 2023).
- (2) Contrary to Lee and Tapp’s (2010, p. xvii) assertion that the Roman Popular Alphabet (RPA) was developed as a generalized system for the White Hmong, historical evidence indicates otherwise. The RPA was actually formulated between 1950 and 1954 by three co-founders—American missionary linguists Dr. G. Linwood Barney and Dr. William A. Smalley of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and French Catholic priest Father Yves Bertrais. Rather than a broad linguistic generalization, the system was specifically designed for Bible translation and Christian literacy programs, serving Mong Protestant converts in Xieng Khouang, Laos, and Hmong Catholic converts at *Roob Nyujqus* (Gaurs Mountains), Luang Prabang, Laos. Consequently, Lee and Tapp (2010) misrepresented both the historical authorship and the original theological purpose of the orthography.
- (3) Lee and Tapp (2010) justified their use of “Hmong” or “Hmoob” by citing its broad international recognition (p. xvii). However, this global convention overlooks dialectal diversity. The designation lacks universal consensus across all linguistic subgroups, as certain communities distinctively prefer the term “Mong.”

This is similar to the “Battle of Ideas” in Cuba, a socialist country. Fidel Castro, leader of Cuba from 1959-2008, had “an equally strong belief in promoting a specific discourse at the expense of others” (Breilid, 2007, p. 626) that there is an “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993), implying that there are “only certain ways of understanding the world” (Breilid, 2007, p. 626). According to Thao (2023), he argued, from the perspective of a

linguist and educator in the field, that “Mong” should be the correct spelling for “Hmong” or “Mong” (pp. xx-xxi). This should cement which spelling term to use as the standard one to truly represent our collective people once and for all. By holding on to the correct spelling term “Mong,” we should be able to trace our history back to our correct heritage.

In addition, in Lee’s 12-point-statement, we quote, “we have used the name “Green Hmong” (*Hmoob Ntsuab*) in our writings because it has never carried any negative connotation for anyone at the time we wrote our article” (Para 2).

Thao (1999 & 2023) argues that Lee and Tapp’s (2010) uncritical and insensitive use of the term “*Moob Ntsuab*” is culturally inappropriate while overlooking internal linguistics and ethno-regional distinctions. Thao (1999 & 2023) notes that it may offend people who understand the term’s specific social meanings and internal community context.

[Moob Ntsuab] (“Green Mong” that was used has a negative connotation. Those identified by the term find it objectifying and offensive, and are intimidated by its use. Historically, “Green Mong” was one of the subgroups of the Mong who anachronistically practiced a cult of cannibalism...” “...that particular subgroup of Mong is no longer in existence (if there is, they no longer practice this cult),” (Introduction, p. xix).

The authors want to refer back to the earlier discussion of the justification for using the collective spelling “Mong” for both groups presented in this article.

4. When the non-Hmong people hear the word “Hmong” for the first time, they tend to spell the term “Mong” 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 Hmong ethnic names are written with the letter “M,” as in “Mong,” and were never written with an “H.”
5. On July 22, 1995, Denver, Colorado, hosted the inaugural official United States commemoration honoring Mong and Hmong veterans of the Secret War in Laos. Orchestrated by Chee Yang, Colonel Bill F. Bilodeaux, Christine Cook, and the American Tribute Committee—in cooperation with senior military officials—the event recognized the approximately 40,000 casualties and 15,000 wounded personnel from the 1961–1975 conflict (Thao, 1995, 1996). During the proceedings, Colonel Hang Sao accepted a Medal of Honor on behalf of all combatants. Significantly, the prominent staging of the letter “M”—which a presiding general explicitly noted symbolized the Mong people—establishes a historical precedent for utilizing “Mong” as an inclusive ethnonym for both the Mong and Hmong subgroups. This linguistic and political framework aligns with Paul Hillmer’s (2010) *A People’s History of the Hmong*, which chronicles the Central Intelligence Agency’s January 1961 recruitment of Mong forces in Pa Dong, Xieng Khouang, Laos, to serve as an irregular allied militia against communist combatants.
6. While the Mong population in the United States is comparable in size to the Hmong, the Mong constitute the majority of this ethnic group in Southeast Asia and China. Demographically, they number approximately 100,000 in Thailand, 600,000 in Vietnam, and several million in mainland China (*Image de la Communauté de Groupes Ethniques*, n.d.; Nhan Dang, n.d.; Vietnam Project, n.d.). Furthermore, field estimates from an anonymous missionary couple who traveled extensively across Chinese provinces with high

concentrations of Mong Christians between 2015 and 2025 suggest that the Mong account for 6 to 7 million of the 11 million officially classified Miao individuals. Despite these demographics, the Mong face ongoing pressure from both Hmong and external groups to assimilate into a broader "Hmong" identity, effectively erasing their distinct cultural and linguistic heritage. As Table 4 shows, the cultural and linguistic relationship between the Mong and the Hmong parallels that of the Thai and the Lao. Forcing the Mong to adopt a Hmong identity is conceptually equivalent to demanding that the Thai reject their own identity and assimilate into Lao culture.

7. Dr. G. Linwood Barney, one of the three co-founders of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system back in the 1950s, wrote a Foreword for *Kevcai siv lug Moob* [Foundations of Mong language] (Thao, 1997). Barney was the first American missionary linguist to Laos back in the 1950s to develop the RPA system for Mong in the province of Xieng Khouang Laos. Barney (1997) used the spelling term "Mong" to represent the Mong;
8. Rev. & Mrs. Malcom Sawyer, 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 (Mrs. Mac Sawyer, personal communication, May 29, 2003);
9. The conjoined term "Hmong/Mong" was introduced by Dr. William A. Smalley to ensure the simultaneous inclusion of both the Mong and Hmong populations. In his final email correspondence to one of the authors, Smalley further noted 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 (William A. Smalley, personal communication, Aug 21, 1997).

10. Extensive linguistic research demonstrates that all human languages are structured upon formal academic principles and deeply intertwined with indigenous epistemologies and speaker identity (Gegeo, 1998; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999, 2002). Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (1999) assert that "the foundation of a people's identities and cultural authenticity is their culturally shared indigenous epistemology, embodied in and expressed through their heritage language" (p. 22). Consequently, the Mong people employ the endonym "Mong" as a primary marker of self-determination and cultural identity. Regardless of the term's broader public visibility or mainstream adoption, "Mong" remains the community's foundational identifier. As a result, the Mong community strongly opposed the adoption of 'Hmong,' viewing it as an imposed external exonym advocated by Lee and Tapp (2010, p. xvii).
11. The increasing prominence of the term "Mong" in Vietnam is examined by Hoang and Phan (2024) in their article, "The Representation of the Mong Ethnic Group in the Vietnamese TV Drama Series *Mua Xuan O Lai*."
12. Between 2007 and 2012, Cha (2013 & 2022) conducted a five-year regional investigation across East and Southeast Asia—including Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and mainland China—complemented by Chinese language study at Yunnan University (Cha, 2013 & 2022). Most of this fieldwork centered in mainland China and involved direct engagement with Mong communities. By synthesizing archival records with traditional indigenous perspectives, Cha established a primary-source methodology to reevaluate the historical narratives of the Mong people (Cha, 2013, 2022; personal communication, June 7, 2025). This community-engaged approach offers critical insights for Mong studies,

particularly on ongoing debates over nomenclature. Consequently, Cha (2013 & 2022) concludes that the spelling "Mong" best reflects the group's ethnic identity and collective designation.

13. In their foundational text, *Handbook for Teaching Hmong-Speaking Students*, Bliatout et al. (1988) note that the Mong community prefers the autonym "Moob Leeg" (Mong), favoring the spellings "Moob" and "Mong" over "Hmoob" and "Hmong" (p. 58). Notably, this collaborative work bridges insider and outsider perspectives, co-authored by Hmong scholars Bliatout and Yang alongside Western researchers Downing and Lewis.
14. The uncritical application of the ethnonym "Hmong" as an inclusive category actively misrepresents and obscures the distinct identity of the Mong. This categorical erasure, compounded by widespread institutional ignorance, has resulted in the diversion of public and private state and federal funding toward Hmong-specific initiatives at the expense of the Mong community. This contemporary neglect mirrors the historical marginalization the Mong endured during the U.S. Secret War in Laos. Ultimately, the continued institutional reliance on "Hmong" as an omnibus term threatens to exacerbate the socio-economic and political disenfranchisement of the Mong in the United States.
15. To ensure inclusivity toward both the Hmong and Mong populations, Dr. William A. Smalley introduced the combined term "Hmong/Mong" (Smalley, [Year]). In his final email to the authors, Smalley further noted 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 (William A. Smalley, personal communication, Aug 21, 1997).

16. In recent years, the orthographic term "Mong" has gained significant traction within Vietnam. Pham (2024) highlights this shift by examining cultural depictions in popular media in their analysis of the Vietnamese television drama series *Mua Xuan O Lai* (The Spring Stays).
17. Drawing on five years of extensive fieldwork across East and Southeast Asia—specifically Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and Mongolia—Cha (2013, 2022) synthesizes archival data with indigenous perspectives. Following advanced linguistic training in Chinese at Yunnan University, Cha (2013 & 2024) integrates primary historical records with oral histories to "present the truth about the Mong people" (Cha, 2013, p. i). This methodology informs Cha's (2022) adoption of the spelling "Mong," which the co-authors argue serves as the most culturally accurate and appropriate designation for the community (Cha, personal communication, June 7, 2025). (Courtesy of Author Cha at the following link: ["Mong China History and Heritage Preservation"](#) for more details and references).
18. Moreover, more Mong scholars and researchers are on the rise and have used the spelling term "Mong" in their writing. See the selected bibliography at www.3mong.org

In sum, to end the debate over the terms "Mong" and "Hmong," no matter how far some have gone in the opposite direction, with all due respect, it is not too late to turn back and correct it with constructive feedback for the welfare of all. In fact, the Mong and the Hmong have co-existed and have lived shoulder to shoulder on an equal basis at the turn of the century, and it is

ethically, morally, and fundamentally wrong for anyone to dictate to any of our groups any less, on who they are or whom they should call themselves.

At the turn of the century, the Mong and Hmong communities maintained peaceful coexistence and mutual equality. Consequently, any contemporary attempts to classify the Mong as merely a subgroup of the Hmong, or to externally impose ethnonyms and identity frameworks upon them, constitute a profound violation of ethical, moral, and epistemological principles.

SUGGESTIONS

The authors contend that the Mong and Hmong communities profoundly value diversity, inclusion, and unification over division and separation, advocating instead for equal representation and mutual inclusiveness. Ultimately, both populations aim to foster a unified relationship grounded in mutual respect and shared dignity. To operationalize these inclusive principles and ensure equitable representation, scholars and community advocates have proposed three nomenclature options: (a) the dual-slashed designations "Mong/Hmong" or "Hmong/Mong"; (b) the distinct but conjoined phrasing "the Mong and the Hmong"; or (c) the synthesized compound term "Mhong."

The authors contend that "Mong" constitutes a more precise and representative ethnonym for these collective groups from both phonemic and structural linguistic perspectives. Although the orthographic convention "Hmong" has been institutionalized and sustained for the past five decades, it lacks a rigorous phonological foundation. Contemporary linguistic science provides a compelling mandate to rectify this historical record, advocating for the reclamation of "Mong" as the scientifically grounded designation. At the same time, further empirical research remains essential to identify the proto-unity of our ethnic groups.

Consequently, subsuming both the Mong and Hmong sub-groups under the singular orthographic term "Hmong" misrepresents the Mong population by inherently privileging the former over the latter. When this linguistic conflation occurs among stakeholders in public or private sectors, it yields severe systemic repercussions for policy development and programmatic implementation. Ultimately, this erases the distinct identity of Mong Americans, perpetuating their structural marginalization and restricting their access to equitable resources and critical information. Such systemic exclusion arguably violates fundamental federal protections concerning equal access and civil rights. These include the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974, and foundational legal precedents such as *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) and *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) (Castaneda v. Pickard, 1981; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995; Gutek, 1992; Lau v. Nichols, 1974; Pulliam & Van Patten, 1994).

The practice of using the spelling "Hmong" as an overarching designation to include the "Mong" is unacceptable, as the preservation of Mong identity is non-negotiable. Sound sociological and anthropological frameworks require the parallel usage of both designations—"Mong" and "Hmong." From an emic perspective, the Mong community maintains a resilient conviction that absorbing their unique language, culture, and heritage into a singular "Hmong" identity is morally and ethically indefensible.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article examines the historical and socio-political context of the Mong and Hmong diasporas in the United States, clarifying persistent misconceptions while analyzing

the consequences of their systematic misrepresentation, miseducation, and misinformation. Using both phonemic and structural linguistic perspectives, this article provides rigorous empirical evidence that "Mong" is the scientifically valid ethnonym for our two collective groups. Ultimately, these linguistic insights offer a compelling mandate to rectify historical inaccuracies and reclaim "Mong" as the authoritative designation, concluding with strategic recommendations for greater institutional inclusion and future advocacy.

The broader Mong and Hmong populations comprise distinct ethnolinguistic groups—including the Mong Leng, the Hmong Daw, and several communities historically categorized under the "Miao" designation. Crucially, the Mong Leng consistently self-identify as Mong (Moob), whereas the Hmong Daw—frequently rendered as Hmong Der—uniquely identify as Hmong (Hmoob). At the turn of the century, these two groups maintained an egalitarian, co-existent relationship. Consequently, the Mong cannot be classified as a subgroup of the Hmong, nor do the orthographic variations "Mong" or "Hmong" function as umbrella terms for both populations. Furthermore, the Mong and Hmong languages remain distinct linguistic entities rather than dialects of a single tongue.

Culturally and linguistically, the Mong and Hmong are distinct populations; consequently, the orthographic distinctions between "Mong" and "Hmong" extend far beyond typographic preferences in media and literature, reflecting deeply rooted differences in identity, language, and cultural practices. To ensure institutional equity, policymakers, educators, and administrators must use these terms accurately across legal frameworks, policy design, and program implementation. Recognizing this distinction is vital for guaranteeing equitable access to public resources, information, and services. In practice, this requires developing and translating educational curricula, informational materials, standardized assessments, and literary works into both Mong and Hmong to adequately serve both communities.

The Mong language and cultural practices constitute foundational elements of Mong identity and represent fundamental human rights (Coulombe, 1993; Phillipson, 1989; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994). Consequently, the distinct linguistic and cultural heritage of the Mong must not be subsumed under the broader Hmong classification.

It is critical to distinguish between the Mong and the Hmong as separate, autonomous cultural and linguistic entities, rather than treating the Mong as a subgroup of the Hmong. Scholarly, public, and social service discourses must move away from historically distorted representations and instead foster a more accurate understanding of both groups. Crucially, the terms "Mong" and "Hmong" encompass both the populations and their respective languages. Furthermore, pejorative or outdated ethnonyms—such as "Green Hmong," "Green Mong," "Mong Njua," or "Moob Ntsuab"—should be retired due to their negative connotations. When addressing both communities collectively, the side-by-side configurations "Mong/Hmong" or "Hmong/Mong" may be used, or the overarching term "Mhong" may represent both groups.

The Mong people maintain an unwavering commitment to their distinct socio-cultural principles. Within Mong American discourse, controversies over the nomenclature "Mong" extend far beyond orthographic preference; these debates are closely tied to preserving their culture, language, and collective identity. External attempts by uninitiated parties to subsume the Mong under the generic categorization of "Hmong" effectively reduce them to a subgroup. This reductive classification threatens the systematic cultural and linguistic dissolution of Mong society. Having preserved their distinct identity for over five millennia, the Mong continue to adapt and progress within the contemporary American fabric. Consequently, they remain

dedicated to ensuring accurate representation across civic society, mass media, and scholarly literature.

Extensive linguistic research shows that all languages are anchored in distinct academic principles and indigenous epistemologies that serve as foundational pillars of speaker identity (Gegeo, 1998; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999, 2002). Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (1999) assert that "the foundation of a people's identities and cultural authenticity is their culturally shared indigenous epistemology, embodied in and expressed through their heritage language" (p. 22). Applying this framework to the Mong people, the orthography of the term "Mong" is inextricably linked to their collective identity and cultural self-determination. Regardless of the term's visibility or acceptance among the general public, the community consistently identifies as "Mong." Consequently, members of this community argue strongly that the autonym "Mong" must be used rather than the externally imposed label "Hmong."

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