

The Roots of Authority within the Hmong Communities in Vietnam: A Study from Lai Châu Province, Northwestern Region of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: In the late 18th century, the Hmong migrated to Vietnam, primarily settling in the north. While recent scholarship has examined their cultural, social, and economic life, their historical political landscape remains underexplored. Lai Châu province, a major Hmong hub, offers rich insights into this area, as the community has significantly shaped local culture and history. This study investigates the origins and evolution of Hmong authority in Lai Châu, focusing on political engagement, cultural preservation, and intra- and intergroup relations.

Methodology: The research draws on the theories of Max Weber, Joseph Raz, and Hannah Arendt, employing qualitative methods—interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation—supplemented by quantitative survey data and secondary sources. Interviews were conducted with pastors, elders, and villagers, alongside questionnaires given to 44 Hmong Christian and Catholic informants. Participant observation over 2024–2025 deepened understanding of community dynamics, with data systematically organized using Google Forms.

Main Results: Historically, Lai Châu's Hmong communities were governed by traditional authority, with matriarchal kinship central to social structure. Leaders included the village chief (*thawj tswv zog*), deputy (*lwm tswv zog*), elders (*cov laug zog*), and shamans (*txiv neeb*), who oversaw ceremonies and rituals. Despite French colonial and Kinh administrative pressures, Hmong villages preserved their governance systems and even organized military groups for defense until 1954. Authority combined traditional chiefs, religious leaders, and, increasingly, diminished shamanic influence. Village chiefs and deputies were elected, fostering a democratic ethos resistant to centralized power. Modern Hmong still value political autonomy, often favoring native leaders over state-appointed officials.

Discussions: Authority within the Hmong societies of Lai Châu has evolved according to two of the three types put forward by Max Weber (1978) and is present in both traditional and modern societies. Hmong people have so far respected the authority exercised by native chiefs, the elderly, and religious dignitaries rather than formal authority wielded by other ethnic groups. The role of democracy is also important to the exercise of authority as argued by Arendt (2006). This article asserts that elements of the discourse on authority, as argued by the aforementioned researchers, are applicable to the historical evolution of Hmong authority, and is well-preserved alongside cultural heritage of the Hmong people.

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Conclusions: This article explores the evolution of authority within Hmong societies in Lai Châu province, highlighting the complex interplay of traditional and modern power structures. Traditionally, Hmong authority was centered around the village chief, elders, and shamans, with a matriarchal kinship system that persisted even during colonial rule. In modern times, authority is distributed between elected village chiefs, charismatic religious leaders, and the remnants of traditional practices, while the influence of the shaman has waned. The article also examines how Hmong communities navigate the tension between traditional leadership and the formal governance imposed by the Vietnamese state, reflecting their resistance to complete assimilation and a preference for indigenous forms of authority.

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Introduction

In Vietnam, a country with a strong emphasis on national unity, discussing the political evolution of ethnic minorities is a sensitive topic. The country comprises 54 ethnic groups, with the Kinh/Vietnamese constituting 86% of the population. This constitutes a de facto majority group, whose national history and culture represent Vietnamese people. Currently, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) actively promotes unity and seeks to limit the influence of minority groups within the dominant political conversation. However, in the face of overwhelming nationalism, the Kinh Vietnamese view ethnic minorities as the personification of poverty, lack of education, and marginalized cultures (Taylor, 2008). This commonly held narrow perception has led to a profound lack of research on the politics of ethnic minorities. They are often seen as being affiliated with anti-communist forces and a potential threat to the communist government's hegemony. However, despite these challenges, ethnic minorities have been able to preserve their traditions and identities while integrating into the broader culture and politics of the Kinh people.

The Hmong, designated as an ethnic minority by the Vietnamese Communist government and regarded as latecomers to the Southeast Asian Massif, significantly contribute to the historical and cultural environment of the northern highlands of Vietnam. According to the 2019 national census of the SRV, there are 1,393,547 Hmong persons living in various areas of Vietnam, constituting 1.45% of the total population (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019). Vietnam is home to four Hmong ethnic groups: *Hmoob Dawb* (White Hmong), *Hmoob Leeg* (Flower Hmong), *Hmoob Dub* (Black Hmong), and *Hmoob Ntsuab* (Green Hmong) (Quincy, 1995).

The Hmong people possess a detailed historical narrative about their migration to Vietnam. The Hmong, or Miao, people, rooted in mainland China, once held an autonomous state and inhabited regions in southern China about 8,000 years ago (Ratliff, 2004). Skirmishes between the Hmong and new Han settlers under the Qing dynasty prompted a large-scale movement of the Hmong in the 19th century, revealing their paths to South China and Southeast Asia at that time (Lee, 2015). Originating in the 18th century, the initial Hmong refugees settled along the Sino-Vietnamese border and inhabited the northwestern and northeastern highlands of Vietnam to pursue economic opportunities for enhancing their agricultural output. Three significant Hmong immigration waves transpired. The initial one took place in the 17th and 18th centuries when Hmong migrants established themselves in the current Hà Giang province of Vietnam, presently a border region in the northeastern region (Wiens, 1954). Subsequently, political turmoil in China throughout the 18th century accelerated the immigration of Hmong

individuals, who later migrated to northwestern Vietnam and mainland Laos (Claudine, 1972). It is presumed that Hmong resettlers established their communities in Lai Châu province during the third phase of their immigration to Vietnam (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Routes of Hmong refugees in southeast Asia

Source: Alex Yang Art

The Hmong maintain a strong sense of cultural identity and pride. The influence of Kinh (Vietnamese) culture and foreign ideologies, such as Protestantism, significantly affects perceptions of authority figures and the formation of social hierarchies within Hmong communities. Historically, however, Hmong political engagement has largely been confined to their villages, a fundamental administrative unit for many Hmong people. Over time, various Hmong factions have sought charismatic leaders to articulate a unified vision and potentially establish a Hmong-led kingdom or state. Yet, the absence of a unified political entity and a broadly supported vision for statehood has consistently hindered these efforts. Additionally, resistance from existing states, particularly the Vietnamese, along with the protracted conflicts in Indochina, has exacerbated the geographic dispersion of the Hmong and further delayed their pursuit of statehood. Consequently, Hmong authority is now primarily manifested within their own social structures and in their interactions with the formal Kinh authority.

This study focuses on Lai Châu province, a mountainous area in the northwestern region of Vietnam, known for its diverse ethnic groups, including the Kinh, Hmong, Yiao, and Tai, as well as its rich natural resources. Lai Châu shares its borders with China to the north and with other Vietnamese provinces, including Điện Biên to the west and Lào Cai and Sơn La to the east (see Figures 2 and 3). The provincial economy is primarily agricultural, but it also features rapid growth in community tourism and holds potential for hydropower development. According to the 2019 census by the SRV, the Hmong population in Lai Châu accounts for approximately 24% of the provincial population, totaling 110,323 people, with five distinct Hmong groups: Black Hmong, Flower Hmong, White Hmong, Green Hmong, and Red Hmong (Lai Châu People Committee, 2020). As a typical ethnic group in this province, the Hmong have a vibrant history of immigration and are renowned for employing unique management tools to preserve their social structures and vital traditions.

This research examines the historical practices of Hmong authority in Lai Châu, where transformations in authority occur rapidly, leading to changes in social relationships within Hmong societies. As a border province with strong ties to Hmong and Miao groups in mainland China, and limited contact with the Kinh majority, there are frequent changes in Hmong

authority, as Hmong communities have organizational structures that enable them to make independent decisions. This situation highlights a significant gap in Hmong studies in Vietnam, which largely focuses on economic livelihoods, cultural preservation, and language. In essence, the research question posed by this article asks how the development of Hmong governance in the Lai Châu province of Vietnam has developed chronologically throughout their migratory history. This is done in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Hmong's political engagement and social relationships within their ethnic group, as well as with the SRV government and policymakers.

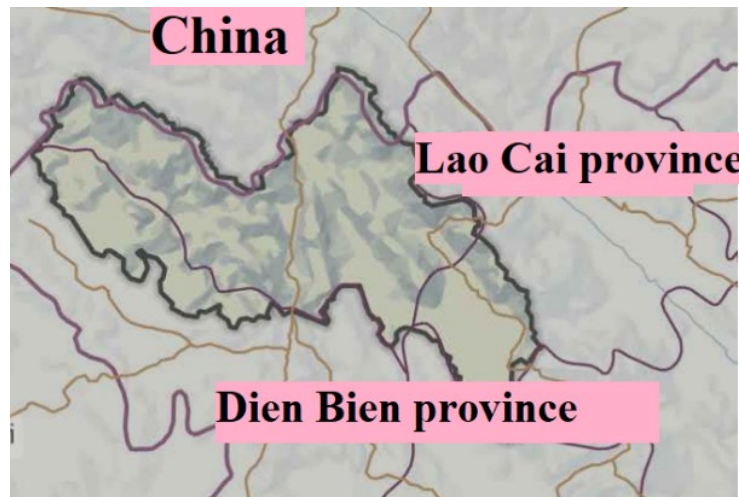


Figure 2 Map of Lai Châu Province, northwestern Vietnam

Source: Outdooractive



Figure 3 Location of Lai Châu Province within Vietnam

Source: Dia Oc Thong Thai

Literature Review

Over the past century, Hmong studies have flourished in English and other languages. Several aspects, including cultural continuity, religious conversion, and shifts in economic livelihoods, are of academic concern. Building on these studies, I focus on the work of Jean Michaud, a prominent researcher in Hmong studies. His writings elaborate on many aspects of Hmong life, including history, language, culture, and political interactions. The immigration of Hmong people originated from political turmoil in mainland China, which led to massive southward migrations. As a result, Hmong tribes were governed by the Vietnamese feudal system, as described by Culas and Michaud (1997). Until the end of the colonial period in Vietnam, the Hmong people remained a stateless society without a formal political organization. This marked the beginning of a complex relationship between the Hmong and the Tai groups, shaping the dynamics of power imbalances in northwestern Vietnam. However, in their political dealings, Hmong people still sought formal authority in the form of a "Hmong king," as argued by Lee (2015, p. 216). This pursuit also stirred political instability in Muaeng Naeh, Điện Biên Province, in 2011, as well as in earlier rebellions waged by the Hmong to oppose the authority exercised by other ethnic groups (Rumsby, 2022). In other words, Hmong groups explicitly demonstrate obedience to legitimized authorities, while maintaining political rein over their own ethnic group, and simultaneously keeping external governance of other ethnic groups at arm's length.

Hmong societies are significantly influenced by a variety of factors, including religion, the state policies of the countries in which the Hmong reside, the environment, and cultural exchanges with other ethnic groups. Within Hmong communities, Protestantism plays a vital role in transitioning traditional customs into modernity. This shift has encouraged Hmong people to adopt modern lifestyles and recognize the importance of addressing poverty and illiteracy. This complex relationship is further illustrated by the work of Lentz (2017), who examines the role of charismatic Hmong leaders like Pa Chai in appealing to their people. Through their use of supernatural powers, these leaders were able to negotiate exemptions from French opium taxes in collaboration with Tai groups. Despite these efforts, the Hmong failed to achieve official authority and were often relegated to positions of servitude in Tai families (Lentz, 2017). The consequences of this power imbalance were evident in the Hmong revolts from 1918 to 1921, which were sparked by the concentration of power in the hands of the Tai elite. As the region was referred to as 'mueang' during this time, the Hmong felt marginalized and disempowered, leading to a series of uprisings against their oppressors (Failler, 2011).

In response to this evolving landscape, many Vietnamese anthropologists have published studies examining the current conditions of Hmong Vietnamese people. For instance, Vuong (2005) suggests that Christianity has been widely adopted among the Hmong, leading to significant changes in village systems, kinship structures, and social interactions between Hmong Christians and their non-Christian counterparts. While the Hmong people continue to believe in the necessity of an exceptional leader to govern their societies—periodically recognizing such a kingship—the quest for legitimate power in Hmong history has often faced challenges.

The strength of the Hmong community lies in the roles of village chiefs, who can articulate their village history, enforce customary regulations, and serve as a bridge between the villagers and the formal authority of the state, which is often dominated by another ethnic group. The advancement of Christianity and the central theme of Rumsby (2021a, 2021b) and Tam (2016) have recognized the contributions of charismatic Hmong pastors who manage religious activities and preach Christian principles to the converted, thereby expanding their influence across many of the mountainous areas of Vietnam. This phenomenon has restructured traditional Hmong societies and established a new social class known as the clergy, which commands significant respect among the Hmong people.

Many studies have examined the historical and cultural continuities of Hmong Vietnamese in the modern sociological landscape of Vietnam. To better understand these continuities, researchers have employed multidimensional approaches to explore how Hmong groups have preserved their traditional societies and adopted external religions, such as Protestantism, which has gained widespread popularity across Hmong groups in Vietnam. However, there is a lack of in-depth anthropological analysis that elaborates on the historical continuities of Hmong authority and new forms of authority, including that from external religious intervention and interactions with other ethnic groups, together with the dominant communist state controlled by the Kinh majority. This article aims to exhibit the types of Hmong authority that embodies the types of Hmong authority that manage Hmong societies in both converted and nonconverted Hmong communities. By conducting this research, I extend my confirmation of Max Weber's interpretation in respect of types of authority existing in many modern societies and build upon existing research by Rumsby (2021), Michaud (1997), Tam (2016), and Lee (2015) regarding Hmong's attempts to establish their authority and maintain a balance with formal authority adopted by the SRV state.

Conceptual Framework

This research employs the sociological concept of 'authority,' which is widely interpreted in scholarship as the legal right of a person or group to govern a cohort of subordinates and make decisions for the community. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of this concept, I used the keyword 'authority' to gather a range of scholarly interpretations, while employing an interdisciplinary approach, including perspectives from philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. Therefore, these explanations closely relate to and reinforce the scholarly findings of this article.

Generally, the understanding of authority aligns with Karl Marx's concept, who firmly believed in the emergence of social classes and social stratification within society. Giddens (1971) cites an assumption of Marx that social order is established when a group of talented, credited, and experienced individuals is elected to execute the common will of the community and create a formal state representing a specific social class.

To achieve a holistic understanding of this definition, scientists have compared it to power and categorized it into different types. Weber (1978) identifies three distinct forms of authority: rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. Rational-legal authority transitions us from a traditional society characterized by the domination of a social class, where power efforts can often be in vain, to a society that establishes written codes and envisions democratization within a structured social order. The charismatic type of authority, on the other hand, arises from exceptional, talented, and outstanding qualities that are widely recognized by the community.

Likewise, Arendt (2006) also argues that authority is a kind of legitimation of political power that goes beyond the political climate, like the law of nature or the commands of God. This statement is similar to that of Weber (1978) in that traditional rules are instrumental in shaping folk communities. This type of authority was established and promoted across the decades before embracing the other types of authority. Although the authority perceived by Arendt illustrates a deep affinity with religion and tradition, it faces challenges in modern society where leaders find it difficult to be strictly obedient to traditional rules that may be inappropriate within a contemporary setting.

Meanwhile, Raz (1986) underscores the flexibility of authority arguing that it should belong to the subordinate rather than be manipulated by a leader who may utilize it for personal benefits. This explanation encourages the role of liberal autonomy within an organization. The relationship between leaders and subordinates should be organic and democratic so that social order is organized effectively. From these perspectives, it is clear that various types of authority

coexist in many modern societies. Historical and traditional elements blend with modern governance systems, allowing societies to preserve their conventional wisdom while embracing new forms of authority. This phenomenon is evident in marginal societies and cultures where formal legislation and non-verbal regulations are used in tandem to promote stability and order.

It is crucial to differentiate between power and authority. There is general agreement that authority is an exercised form of power and is formally concretized in spoken or written languages of the powerful. Authority can be understood as a formal outgrowth of power, representing the established way of exercising control within an organization or a society. Power, contrariwise, often stems from an individual's recognized capacity, based on a community's perception of their reputation and wealth, enabling them to influence those with fewer resources. Power can be informal, as seen in traditional societies where family influence may supersede formal state management or legal structures. For example, in feudal systems, monarchies sometimes gave leeway to ethnic minorities that were of autonomous governance under a system of lordship. In contrast, authority is a form of legitimized command, where an individual, party, or organizational leader possesses the right to render decisions and issue directives to those of low-status. Authority typically operates in a top-down manner. However, as Raz (1986) argued, effective authority is enhanced when leaders and those with less power contribute to the management process. Authority is not limited to formal state structures; it can also pervade in traditional and modern societies where people adhere to and acknowledge the leadership of specific individuals or groups. Marginalized societies often accept both formal authority (from the state) and informal authority (from village chiefs), allowing them to both preserve their cultural identities and abide by state laws.

Methods

To reflect upon the political evolution and authority of the Hmong people in Lai Châu province, Vietnam, I employed ethnographic qualitative methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews with key informants, conversations with community members, and data collection from a questionnaire. Additionally, this research benefits from documentary studies to understand the history of Hmong authority, which has been understudied due to a dearth of written Hmong sources and a lack of verbal records.

This research was conducted in several Hmong villages, referred to as 'zos,' across two primary districts of Lai Châu province: Phong Thổ and Sìn Hồ. These areas were selected primarily due to the dense population of Hmong Catholics, Christians, and non-adherents, facilitating direct data collection. The names of the field locations are as follows:

1. Txheeb Siv (in Hmong) or Sìn Suối Hồ town, Sìn Suối Hồ commune, is located in the Phong Thổ District of Lai Châu Province. This town has a 100% Hmong population and has become a tourist attraction within the province since 2013. This town has a 70% Hmong Christian population and has undergone significant transformations in terms of the economy, religion, and quality of life.
2. Sìn Hồ town, located in the Sìn Hồ District of Lai Châu province, serves as a gateway to rich cultural diversity, with approximately 35% of its population being Hmong. Compared to other areas in the province, Sìn Hồ town is more developed and has a higher number of urban residents. The Sìn Hồ Catholic parish was established in 2015 and has become a research location for Hmong Catholic communities in Lai Châu province.

Participant observation is crucial in ethnographic fieldwork because it enhances understanding of emic perspectives – how community members themselves interpret the world (Bronislaw, 1922). This allows the researcher to understand behaviors and meanings within their specific social and cultural context. In this case study, I immersed myself in Hmong

culture at research locations, minimizing my own identity to mitigate potential bias. The participant observation period lasted one year, from February 2024 to February 2025. I spent six months living within Hmong communities, actively participating in their daily activities, such as attending church, festivals, and trading. Furthermore, I attempted to learn the Hmong language, using the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), to converse with my participants in a basic form and minimize the influence of my native language and English in interactions. Throughout the participant observation, I used my smartphone to capture daily life moments of the Hmong community, recording videos and audio to refine data for this research. Additionally, I learned Hmong cultural behaviors to understand appropriate conduct within the Hmong context and demonstrate respect for their culture. This method also collaborates with textual analysis, which helps interpret previous academic findings as well as old texts written in Hmong languages to support scholarly arguments across this paper.

In-depth interviews are used within a broader context of ethnographic research, which aims to understand a culture and social group through prolonged immersion in the field (David, 2010). This method helps gain valuable insights into the complexities of human behavior, beliefs, and experiences. Before conducting interviews, I prepared clear, focused, but open-ended questions that guided the discussion. I met with Hmong pastors and community members, providing a thorough explanation of my research purposes, and obtained their voluntary and informed consent. I selected participants who engaged in Hmong spiritual activities. These included two male pastors and two village chiefs who were familiar with the history of the research locations. These individuals were between 45 and 60 years old. I also conducted interviews with villagers, including men and women, across different age groups. The interviews were bilingual, operating in both Vietnamese and Hmong languages. A Hmong native friend assisted me in bridging communication gaps with informants. This enabled me to gather accurate and in-depth information and enhance my credibility with the Hmong communities. I employed a semi-structured review method in which I both followed up on my prepared questions and allowed for the acknowledgement of other themes referred to by my informants. In this way, I could observe the interplay between their behavioral changes and their influences on Hmong authority across the decades. Formal interviews lasted 30-60 minutes, while informal conversations ranged from 15 to 30 minutes. Informants agreed to be recorded during the interviews using my smartphone. The recorded files were transcribed and anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of informants. Sufficient amounts of information were gathered as to support research findings.

In this research, I also employed a structured questionnaire, designed to gather information from both individuals and groups. I gathered basic demographic information including age, gender, occupation, and education. In addition, Hmong opinions, values, and perspectives on authority (see Appendix A) were gathered to measure the behaviors and practices from each social class within their communities. There was a total of 44 Hmong participants participating in this task, including 32 men and 12 women, living in Sìn Hò and Phong Thỏ, who had converted to Catholicism and Protestantism. In addition to multiple-choice questions, I also included open-ended questions to allow informants to express their opinions, which facilitated a more in-depth understanding of authority as viewed by participants. All questions were written in Hmong language for the benefits of the informants and in the interest of extracting as much information as possible. The questions were logically arranged and included clear instructions and introductory information. Participants provided informed consent after receiving a briefing on the standards of confidentiality that were employed. Quantitative analysis was used to describe the questionnaire results, while qualitative analysis was employed to analyze data from the open-ended questions.

This essay draws upon previous research into Hmong authority. To date, written Hmong sources regarding their authority in local contexts have been limited in academic literature. I

have examined prior research by both Vietnamese and English scholars that provide historical documentation to comprehend the cultural, social, and political contexts of the Hmong in Vietnam. This is crucial for comprehending their historical development within the Vietnamese framework. Moreover, derivative papers offer comprehensive insights into cultural practices, social structures, and interpersonal dynamics inside traditional Hmong societies, augmenting conventional anthropological methodologies.

Traditional authority of Hmong people in Lai Châu province

There is no primary source that details how the first Hmong people established their villages and developed their communities after choosing to immigrate to the mountainous areas of Vietnam and Lai Châu province. However, secondary studies have elaborated on Hmong communities as being the epitome of agricultural society. Considering the high altitude of their settlements, traditional Hmong societies in Vietnam have been relatively closed, which associates them with agricultural activities and limited access to a dynamic commercial economy.

It is important to differentiate between Hmong groups in northeastern and northwestern Vietnam. According to (Đàm & Phùng, 2010), traditional Hmong authority in the northeastern areas has been significantly influenced by the ‘Quảng’ of the Tay people. This influence is characterized by an independent regime of ethnic minorities that exists apart from the feudal systems of the Kinh people in the lowlands, allowing the mountainous chiefs to maintain a tight control over their communities.

Nevertheless, the Hmong authority in northwestern Vietnam possesses a contrasting regime that values the concept of *tus tswv av*. This regime features a strong social hierarchy with distinct roles existing within Hmong society (see Figure 4). In Lai Châu, the Hmong people manage their communities through a system called *lub zos*, which translates to ‘village’ in English. Each village typically accommodates around six families that share a common bloodline. The village chief, known as *thawj tswv zog*, is directly supported by the *lwm tswv zog*, who acts as an aide to the village chief. Due to the clear division of power within Hmong society, the role of *lwm tswv zog* is often regarded as more significant than that of *thawj tswv zog*. The *lwm tswv zog* serves as a messenger between the *thawj tswv zog* and the villagers known as *zeej neej*.

Additionally, the Hmong in Lai Châu have established an elder council (*cov laug zog*) that is widely respected and plays a crucial role in making important decisions regarding village affairs, thanks to their expertise in local history and traditions. *Cov laug zog* are often invited by officials to discuss common village matters, and their opinions typically reflect the wishes of both the villagers and the clans.

The shaman (*txiv neeb*) also holds significant importance in traditional Hmong societies, taking responsibility for spiritual activities and serving as a mediator between the villagers and a pantheon of Hmong gods. In the spiritual life of the Hmong, *txiv neeb* plays a special role, often invited to perform important rituals and preside over festivals for the villagers. In order for the mission of connecting with supernatural beings to go smoothly, *txiv neeb* must hold an annual permission ceremony, witnessed by *cov laug zog* in the area. Public property is under the control of *thawj tswv zog* while farmers are free to cultivate their own land. This arrangement has helped minimize internal conflicts and territorial disputes historically within Hmong communities in Vietnam. Although the *thawj tswv zog* wields considerable influence, they still participate in sharecropping alongside other farmers in Hmong society. The concept of birthright emphasizes the inheritance of land among farmers. Within a Hmong village, residents can cultivate both public and private land, cultivating a deep appreciation for the importance of land, forests, and fields in their survival and coexistence with nature.

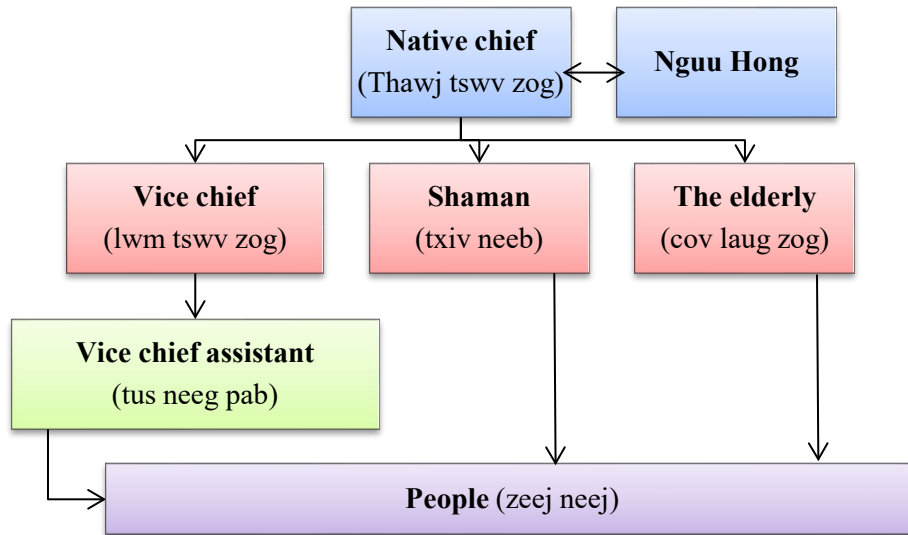


Figure 4 Traditional Hmong commune organization in Lai Châu province before the arrival of French people (before 1890).

Source: Author field trip in 2024

It is critical to note that Tai groups held significant power in northwestern Vietnam even before the onset of French colonial rule in Tonkin. The Tai were earlier occupants of this region, with a Tai lord named Nguu Hau establishing control over unclaimed areas of Thuan Chau district (modern-day Son La province), where he formed a ‘muaeng’ and paid tribute to the Vietnamese Tran dynasty in the 14th century (Cầm, 1978). When Hmong individuals immigrated to Dai Viet, vast territories were already administered by Tai groups, compelling the Hmong to settle in mountainous areas at high altitudes. Consequently, it remains uncertain whether Hmong and Tai groups had a close political connection. Neither the Hmong nor the Tai groups established their own legitimacy in Lai Châu or throughout northwestern Vietnam until the arrival of the French, who granted the Deo family (a White Tai group) numerous political privileges to build a trade network for opium, diminish the influence of the Kinh people, and secure economic interests along the Sino-Vietnamese border. During this period, Tai authority did not undermine the longstanding nonverbal traditions within Hmong culture that maintained a high regard for the native Hmong chief, allowing them to lead their communities without being governed by a non-Hmong leader.

Another challenge for the Tai groups in attempting to penetrate Hmong ethnic solidarity in Lai Châu province was that the White Tai controlled vast territories, making it difficult to extend their influence into the high-altitude Hmong societies. The necessity for the Tai to reinforce their legitimacy, combined with their reliance on Hmong people for a solid logistical base to facilitate opium trade, further limited their ability to exert political influence over the Hmong. Consequently, traditional Hmong authority continued to operate, reinforcing Hmong ethnicity in Lai Châu province.

Historically, Hmong Vietnamese people primarily focused on their internal interactions, rather than concerning themselves with political interventions from other ethnic groups in their political development. Individuals concentrated on agricultural activities, farming, and paying tribute to ancestor worship as well as to a pantheon of deities believed to bestow blessings upon the Hmong people. This worldview fostered a strong social structure within Hmong communities, and its continuity is evident in their modern lives. In Lai Châu, Hmong people have practically accepted the power of Tai groups but remain highly autonomous in their governance, following a traditional authority model interpreted by Weber (1978). This model

is legitimized by long-standing customs that emphasize patriarchy, where a powerful head possesses social influence without holding formal political power.

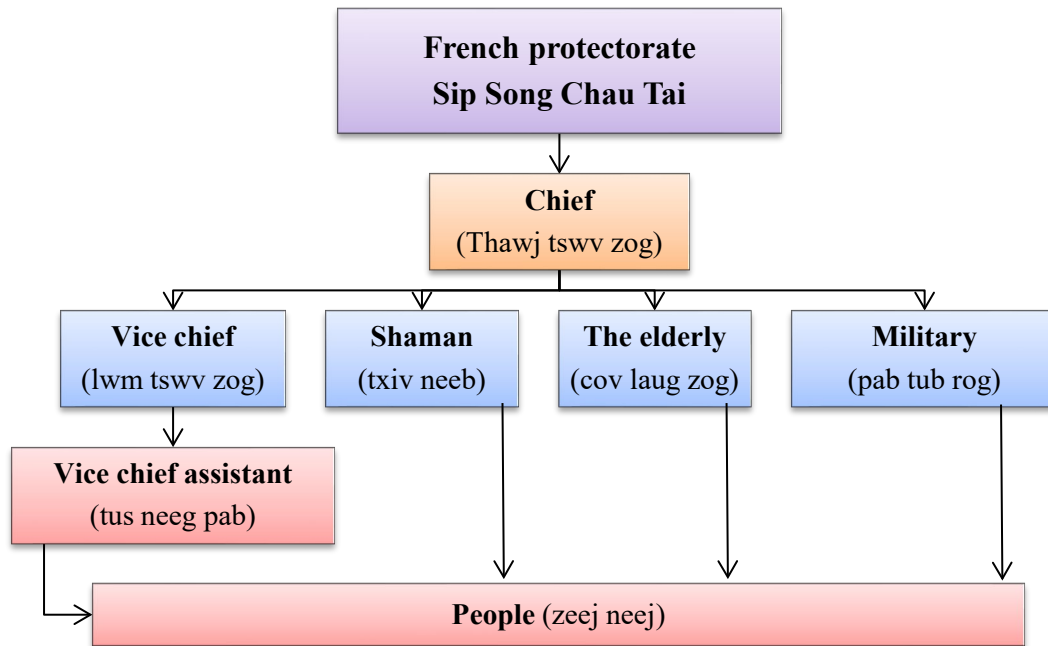


Figure 5 Traditional Hmong commune organization in Lai Châu province after the arrival of French people (1890-1954).

Source: Author field trip in 2024

As soon as the French imposed political power in Tonkin, they allowed hill tribes to preserve their own authority and regulations in order to rally the generous support of these ethnic groups against the Vietnamese people and later against the Vietnamese Communists. According to a common discourse among communist historians, this action was part of the strategic plan of ‘divide to control’ employed by the French to undermine the national solidarity of the Vietnamese people (Michaud, 1997). In light of the high autonomy characteristic of traditional Hmong society and the carte blanche offered to them, the Hmong preserved their own authority, ensuring that their traditional governance aligned with Hmong regulations and social orders. This autonomy reinforced the independence of Hmong societies. Even when the Tai people established their own state under French protection, the Tai federal regulations were only effective in managing Tai societies and did not extend their influence across the traditional Hmong groups, which were managed independently according to their own non-verbal regulations. Interactions between Tai and Hmong individuals were largely driven by mutual economic interests, particularly in opium trading and maintaining security within the federation (Failler, 2011). The Hmong in Lai Châu primarily rely on their oral customs, which experienced only minor changes across villages (The Communist Party of Phong Thổ District, 2013). Although the Tai people controlled vast territories in Lai Châu province and had authority over the Hmong people, these two ethnic groups have developed as distinct entities, with the Tai people exerting little influence on Hmong societies. Occasionally, economic inequality between the Tai and Hmong has ignited skirmishes and fueled Hmong support for the Communists, which challenged the dominant anti-communist sentiment in Vietnam during the First Indochina War (1946-1954).

The conventional laws of the Hmong people in Lai Châu province have been passed down through generations, yet no written sources exist to clarify how this system was

established or how it operates within the framework of non-verbal regulations unique to the Hmong culture. Despite limited political engagement from the Tai groups, the Hmong's efforts to preserve their cultural identity indicate that their legal customs play a significant role in reinforcing ethnic identities and ensuring internal security within Hmong societies. As elucidated in Vrong (2005), Hmong regulations are grounded in the maintenance of organic relationships among community members and aim to protect against external cultural and social influences that could dilute Hmong identity.

In Hmong communities, the voices of villagers carry substantial weight in communal matters, particularly when it comes to selecting a trustworthy and experienced leader. These leaders, known as *thawj tswv zog* and *lwm tswv zog* collaborate closely with the villagers to form a senior board that assists in consulting with them on important societal issues. Legal practices also extend to the construction of Hmong houses, which are traditionally built from wood, bamboo, and thatch for roofing, although in resource-scarce areas, stone or mud may also be used. Typically raised on stilts, these houses provide protection from flooding and pests. The elevated design also creates additional storage space or a place for livestock.

Furthermore, the roles of *thawj tswv zog* and *lwm tswv zog* include regulating customary laws that impose strict penalties for wrongdoing and mandate compensation for theft, which may involve returning stolen items or working off the debt. Landowners typically pass inheritance rights to their male offspring, reflecting the importance of familial lineage. Nature plays a pivotal role in the Hmong way of life, with regulations emphasizing the protection of water sources, forests, and wildlife as essential to survival. These non-verbal customary laws also serve critical functions in addressing issues such as burglary, divorce, marriage, and funerals, illustrating the comprehensive nature of Hmong legal traditions in Lai Châu province.

From the perspective of Weber (1978) concerning authority, it is clear that traditional authority existed and developed within Hmong societies in Vietnam before 1954. The mountainous areas still lacked formal management under the Vietnamese feudal system and retained a high degree of autonomy with the support of the French in their fierce resistance against the Communists. Historically, although the Tai groups attempted to expand their political influence and garnered much support from the French to exercise authority, they failed to tap into the traditional Hmong authority, which was deeply rooted in a strong sense of identity, language, and internal solidarity. Hmong leaders in the villages of Lai Châu gained legitimacy because these individuals were elected by the people and understood the Hmong customs and regulations governing village management. They are referred to as 'thawj tswv zog' and 'lwm tswv zog'. Even though these two types of leaders had very different personalities in different Hmong villages, tribal leadership persisted. It was based on long-standing Hmong customs and family lineage, as well as the needs of the community as a whole, rather than being too centered on one family. Thus, while the Hmong people did not establish a solid kingship, wealthy families still had a louder voice and greater influence over the community. This illustration also reinforces Raz's (1986) perspective that authority is subject to the less powerful. Traditional Hmong authority operates in this way, which helps explain why Hmong people did not encounter internal backlash, instead reinforcing their solidarity against other ethnic groups and external political influences.

Besides, there are also hidden manifestations of charismatic and legal-rational authority in traditional Hmong societies in Lai Châu province, although a sufficient account of these types of authority still persists. In particular, while Hmong legality must be based on established laws and regulations, typically associated with their bureaucratic systems, they did not compile them in written form, as the Hmong people lost their ancient script a long time ago, and the RFA script was not commonly used. When the Tai Federation was established in 1948 under the auspices of the French, the White Tai imposed their conventional laws upon other groups, including the Hmong. However, there is no evidence that the Hmong people in

Lai Châu adopted this official law, and it is suspected that these groups continued to follow their tribal rules to manage Hmong villages across the province (Lê, 2006). The shaman, known as 'txiv neeb' in the Hmong language, became an influential figure in traditional Hmong societies. This person could perform rituals to heal critical diseases and help people pay tribute to a system of Hmong gods, and is also considered an example of charismatic authority. Weber (1978) assumes that such a person can mobilize and inspire community members through their vision, personality, and ability to connect with the people's aspirations. The shaman embodies these qualities and earns great respect from the Hmong people. However, while the shaman plays a critical role in Hmong spiritual life, they do not exercise political leadership, and their power is also challenged by 'thawj tswv zog' and 'lwm tswv zog'.

In sum, traditional Hmong authority in Lai Châu offers a lens through which we can appreciate the roles of various social classes within Hmong society. It reveals that while social divisions are evident, they do not carry the volatile potential to spark civil unrest between high-status and low-status groups. Despite the rugged terrain that results in a sparse population distribution, the internal social relationships among the Hmong remain organically interconnected, characterized by distinct non-verbal cues and a clear division of labor. Attempts by other ethnic groups to impose their authority over the Hmong have largely proven ineffective, largely due to the ingrained political autonomy of the Hmong and their societies' inherent insularity, shaped by geographical factors. This autonomy has fostered a burgeoning sense of democracy within Hmong communities, emphasizing collective will and adherence to common norms over the arbitrary exercise of power by village chiefs. Such perspectives reject the prevailing narrative, often propagated by Kinh discourse, that the Hmong are subjugated to a regime of oppression under the authority of their village chiefs. This aligns with Hannah Arendt (2006)'s argument that power, when abused, ultimately proves ineffective. Although traditional authority—conceptualized by Weber (1978)—remains prominent in Hmong society, other forms of authority subtly unfold through the roles of elders and shamans, who are indispensable to the fabric of traditional Hmong culture.

Modern authority of Hmong people in Lai Châu province

The social structure of Hmong communities in northern Vietnam also changed significantly after 1954. The Communists took control of North Vietnam in accordance with the Geneva Accords of 1954 and rearranged the political landscape of the mountainous regions under a communist regime. As a bastion of anti-communist ethnic minorities, the former Tai Federation transitioned into the autonomous region of the Tai-Miao groups from 1955 to 1962, before being renamed the 'Northwestern Autonomous Region' from 1962 to 1975 (Luong, 2003). Following these political upheavals, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) government implemented a series of programs aimed at motivating mountainous tribes to participate in communist building and establishing a new economic zone to strengthen North Vietnam and support the war effort in South Vietnam. The new policies continued to encourage Hmong autonomy in their political, social, and cultural development, gradually convincing them to relinquish backward customs, disestablish traditional authority, and collaborate with the Kinh people in economic development.

The formation of contemporary forms of Hmong power is contingent upon this ethnic community adopting their new ideological system. Catholicism and Protestantism emerged as two predominant religions, significantly influencing the worldview, perceptions, and modernity of the Hmong people. Missionary activity in Hmong communities in Vietnam is stagnant due to the absence of both native and foreign pastors who are actively engaged in their outreach efforts in remote Hmong villages. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Hmong community was introduced to the gospel via a Christian radio transmission. Initially, there was official persecution due to a strong belief that Protestantism was linked to reactionary forces

seeking to destabilize the Communist's rule. Nevertheless, this concern dissipated over time, and the proportion of Hmong Christians has increased significantly over the past 30 years due to the presence of unrestricted missionary activities and the emergence of native Hmong pastors committed to their mission in the northwestern provinces of Vietnam. This presents a beneficial circumstance for the Hmong population in Lai Châu province to reorganize their social structure, resulting in alterations in the roles of social classes within their community (Vuong, 2005). Quite different from Protestantism, the presence of Catholicism was evident in colonial time in Lai Châu. Catholics in lower regions of North Vietnam were mobilized and migrated into Lai Châu followed by the governmental call for socialist construction in northwestern Vietnam. In Lai Châu, there are a total of seven active Catholic parishes, which are centered around the township. However, the number of Hmong Catholics is noticeably lower than the number of Protestants in the entire province.

After 1955, the involvement of Kinh authorities has served as a palpable illustration of rational-legal authority in Hmong communities in Lai Châu, where Hmong groups were naturalized and granted Vietnamese citizenship. As a result, all Hmong individuals were forced to obey the legality established by the DRV and subsequently by the SRV. The insularity of Hmong villages transformed into a cooperative model, whereby individuals or groups work together to achieve common goals, often emphasizing mutual benefit and shared resources.

The traditional *lub zos* regime was transformed into 'bản', 'làng', and 'thôn', which are basic agricultural administrative units for Kinh people, and these units fall under the purview of SRV management (Figure 6). The provincial head assigns managerial tasks to district and ward heads, who remain connected to villagers through the village head, referred to as 'trưởng bản' in Vietnamese and 'tswv zog' in Hmong. In essence, the 'bản' of the Hmong still adopts the regime of *lub zos*, and each social class within a village has a specific role in village management. In many Hmong villages in Lai Châu province, people elect a *tswv zog* and a *lwm tswv zog*, who are two prominent individuals considered to be the head and deputy head of the village. The person receiving more votes than the other serves as the *tswv zog*, while the other becomes the *lwm tswv zog*. Importantly, these two individuals should have a strong command of the Kinh/Vietnamese language and must be endorsed by the division head. This type of authority also proves that Arendt's (2006) interpretation of authority is persuasive, since authority should not depend on coercion, but comes from a shared understanding or agreement between people and leaders.

"Every five years, our village hosts a general election. This year, we selected two esteemed and seasoned candidates who received great approval from my neighbors. We vote freely for someone who merits the position. The other candidate appoints the deputy village chief. These two people enable us to communicate with local officials, and they have to be good at Vietnamese language." (interview with a 48-year-old Hmong male, Phong Thổ district, Lai Châu province, February 22, 2024)

Besides, *tswv zog* also performs a parallel application of his/her rational-legal authority as prescribed by the SRV Ministry of Home Affairs regarding responsibilities and rights to become a village head, including:

1. Convening and chairing village and residential group conferences; organizing the implementation of tasks within the scope of the village and residential group that have been discussed and decided by the people; ensuring the activities of the village and residential group.
2. Mobilizing and organizing people to effectively implement grassroots democracy and uphold village and residential group conventions approved by competent authorities.

3. Collecting, reflecting, and requesting the commune-level authorities to address the legitimate petitions and aspirations of the people in the village and residential groups, and providing timely reports to the People's Committee at the commune level about violations of the law in these groups.
4. Preparing minutes of the results discussed and directly decided by the people of the village and residential group regarding their work; making minutes of the results discussed and voted on by the people of the village and residential group concerning matters at the commune level; reporting these results to the Chairman of the People's Committee at the commune level.
5. Coordinating with the Front Working Committee and socio-political organizations in villages and residential groups to mobilize people to participate in movements and campaigns launched by these organizations.
6. Reporting work results to the village and residential group conferences every six months and at the end of the year.

As such, in addition to traditional authority, the village chief is now seen as a bridge between the formal authority of Lai Châu Province and the Hmong people. As Weber (1978) interpreted, the *tswv zog* formally exercises rational-legal authority, which grants him/her a formal structure of power and the ability to distribute power from the central government of Lai Châu Province. The *tswv zog* and *lwm tswv zog* have a deep understanding of the legal codes of the Vietnamese government and attempt to disseminate them within Hmong communities. Moreover, the *tswv zog* and *lwm tswv zog* also combine legal codes with the traditional customs of the Hmong people so that their authority complies with legal provisions while also embracing their cultural practices. In essence, many Hmong people receive news from governmental agencies through *tswv zog* and *lwm tswv zog* who can communicate in Vietnamese with such agencies effectively. Then, these two individuals' message local officials in terms of their community situation and people's wishes. It also extends the perspective of Arendt (2006), in that authority is linked to historical continuity that emphasizes the importance of legacies and traditions of old Hmong societies.

"In my village, in addition to promoting the legal codes of the Vietnamese government, the village chief should understand our village traditions and advise villagers not to build houses according to the architecture of the Kinh people. To adapt to modern life, the village chief also advises us to maintain hygiene and keep cattle from wandering on the roads. Some of our outdated customs, such as religious rituals, shamanism, and bride kidnapping, are also considered practices we should leave behind" (interview with a 55-year-old Hmong female, Sin Hò district, Lai Châu province, June 30, 2024)

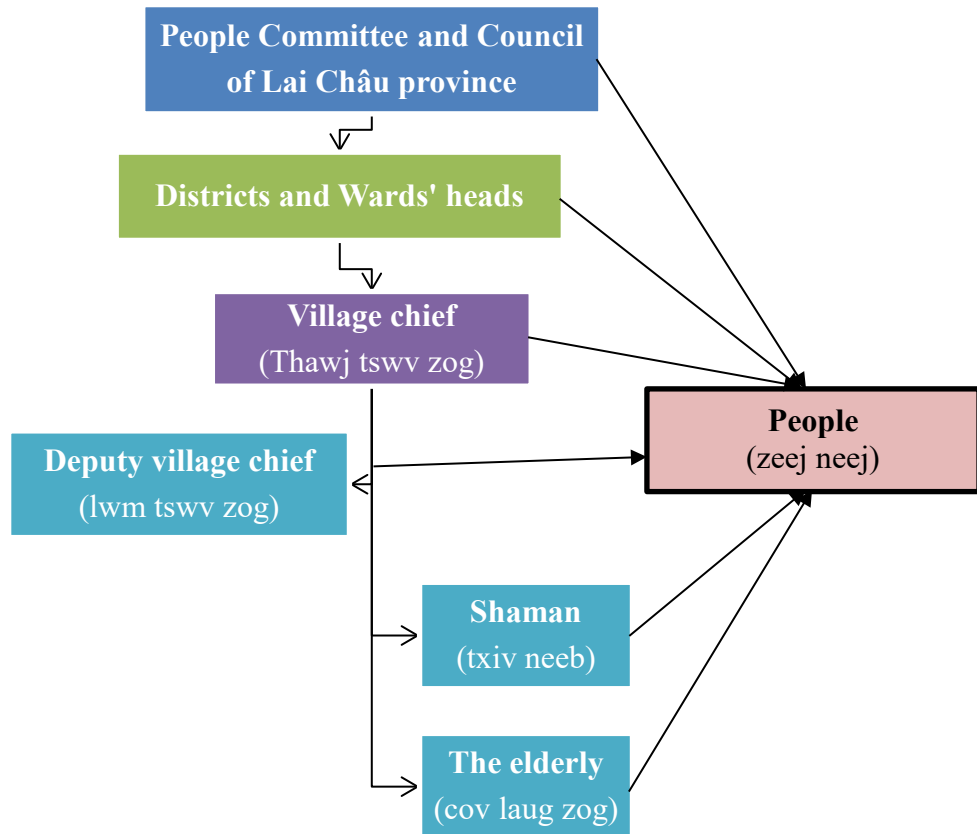


Figure 6 Commune organization of Hmong people in Lai Châu province, Vietnam
 Source: Ha (2025, p. 8) and author field trip in 2024

In the modern authority of the Hmong people in Lai Châu province, there is a difference in the level of influence between shamans and the elderly. Although shamans still exert their religious influence by performing rituals and assisting in the life cycles of the Hmong people, their role is now diminishing. In some villages, the scarcity of shamans indicates that they no longer play a vital role in the spiritual life of the Hmong people in this province. This suggests that there is a shift in spiritual values, as increased access to education and information has led to a greater understanding of diverse cultures. The superstitious belief in the role of a system of ghosts to protect the Hmong from diseases, natural disasters, and poverty has become negligible.

“In my village, we have to employ a shaman from a distant village to come here and perform his rituals. To be honest, we only seek his help for our Lunar New Year, housewarming parties, childbirth, weddings, and funerals. In the past, we used to depend on his rituals weekly. However, now we only ask for his help a few times a year. When our family members suffer from illnesses, we go to the hospital to seek doctors’ help.” (interview with a 53-year-old Hmong female, Sin Hồ district, Lai Châu province, July 1, 2024).

In contrast, the role of the elderly (*cov laug zog*) in Hmong communities in Lai Châu province continues to be significant because these individuals are considered custodians of Hmong culture, traditions, and language, passing them down to younger generations and ensuring cultural continuity. While *tswv zog* and *lwm tswv zog* execute their rational-legal authority, *cov laug zog* tend to traditional practices that embrace customs alongside legal codes

in a subtle way. They play advisory roles thanks to their life experiences, which grant them wisdom, and they are frequently consulted in decision-making processes pertaining to family matters and community issues. By building an organic relationship between villagers and chiefs, the elderly also partake in family labor, including caring for grandchildren, passing down their labor experiences to the younger generation, and performing ceremonies during important events for both their family and their village. In modern Hmong life, the elderly embody two forms of authority: charismatic and traditional. Senior individuals possess personal magnetism that inspires people, especially in Hmong traditions, and they sometimes offer guidance and emotional support to preserve their native identities.

Differences have emerged among the Hmong converted groups in Lai Châu province, as their spiritual beliefs have transitioned from polytheism to Catholicism and Protestantism (see Figure 7). This shift has led to the rising prominence of priests and pastors within Hmong communities, who are gradually replacing traditional shamans. These religious leaders now play a central role in guiding religious activities and ceremonies. While Protestantism has gained greater traction in Hmong communities than Catholicism, it is noteworthy that Catholicism’s presence in the region predates that of Protestantism. In 2005, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s government sanctioned Protestant missionary activities among ethnic minorities and prompted religious groups to register with local authorities. Consequently, Protestantism has spread rapidly, establishing itself as the predominant faith among the Hmong people in northwestern Vietnam, particularly in Lai Châu province.

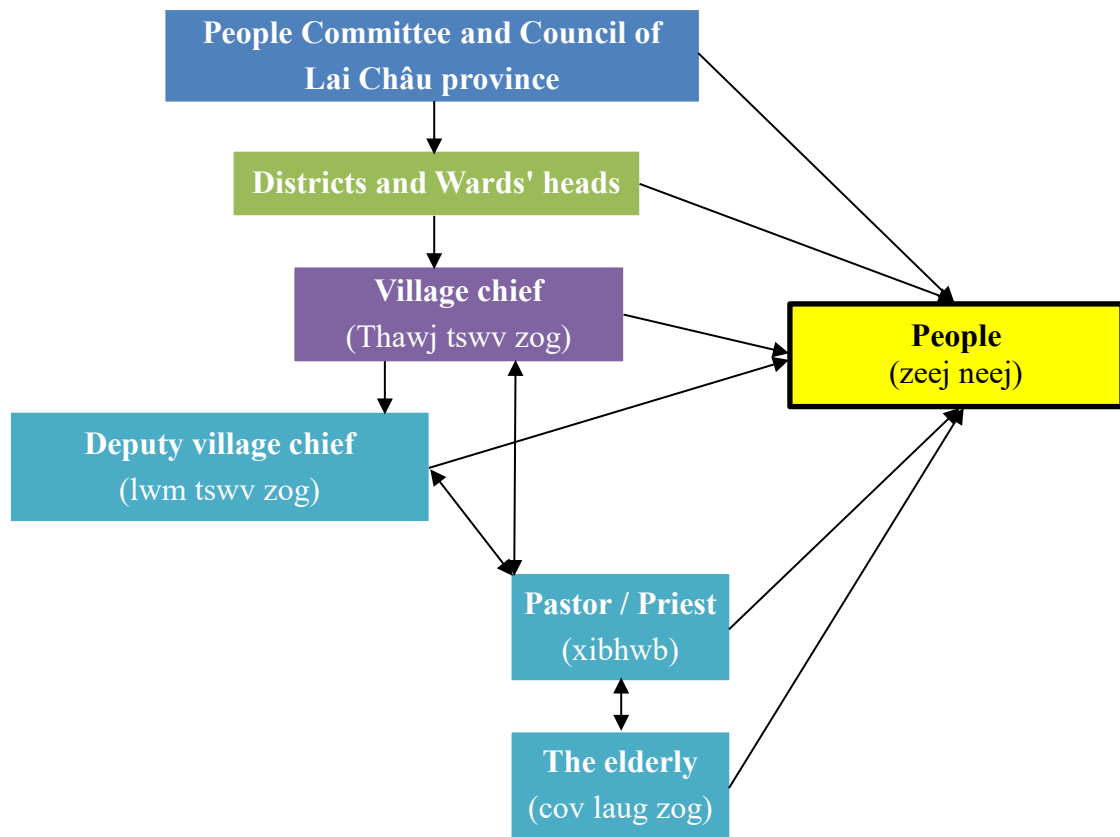


Figure 7 Commune organization of Hmong christian communities in Lai Châu province, Vietnam

Source: Author field trip, 2024

With the declining role of shamans, who are seen as typical examples of superstitious figures, Hmong pastors are increasingly providing spiritual guidance, serving as role models, and helping their congregations develop a deeper understanding of Christian teachings and values. They lead worship services, preach sermons, and facilitate prayer. In many districts of Lai Châu province, the Hmong have built simple churches, transforming them into places of religious activities instead of using communal houses for the unconverted. The growing number of converts demonstrates that native pastors also act as mediators and counselors within the community, addressing conflicts, providing marriage counseling, and offering emotional and spiritual support in times of grief or crisis. They play a key role in evangelistic efforts, reaching out to non-believers and encouraging conversion experiences. This includes organizing outreach events or programs to share the gospel with the broader community.

Thaum koj daws tej teeb meem loj, koj yiaiv nug leej twg?
 (When you need some advice, who will you ask for?)
 Unit: %

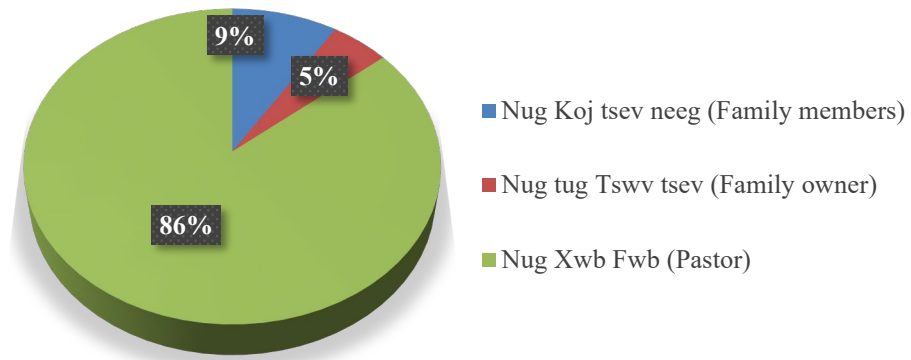


Figure 8 The percentage of Hmong converted individuals who will ask pastors for some advice in Lai Châu province.
 Source: Author field trip, 2024

When asking the 44 Hmong participants a question about whom they ask for advice from if needed, 86% of informants supposed that they tend to seek the pastor’s advice. This was so that this person could guide them with the Bible and enlighten them with useful teachings from God (Figure 8).

Tus xwbfwb lub luag hauj lwm uas muab lug qhuab ntuas muaj nuj qis li cas rua koj?
 (How important is the role of pastors to you?) Unit: %

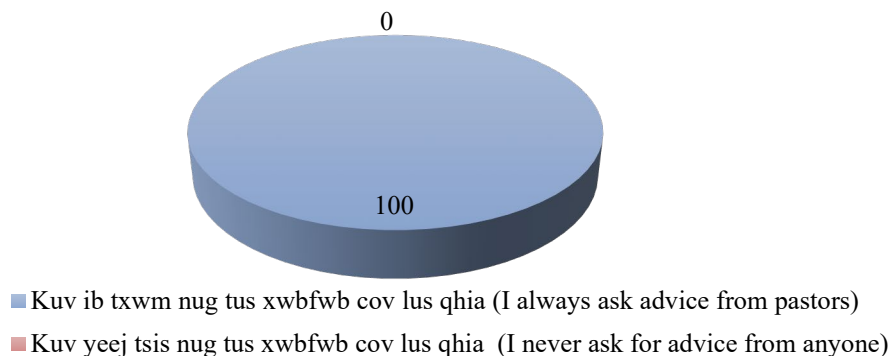


Figure 9 The need for advice from pastors according to informants
 Source: Author field trip, 2024

Similarly, all respondents expressed confidence that they would seek guidance from pastors at church should particular incidents arise in their daily lives (see Figure 9). In Lai Châu, where all pastors belong to the Hmong community, their proficiency in both Hmong and Vietnamese, along with their deep understanding of the Bible, positions them as pivotal figures in harmonizing Hmong traditions with Christian beliefs. By integrating the Hmong language, music, and customs into their services, these pastors strive to render the faith more accessible and meaningful for their congregants. Many Hmong pastors have pursued advanced education at Hanoi Bible School, a prominent institution dedicated to pastoral training and missionary work. They play an essential role in evangelism, thereby broadening the geographical reach of the Hmong Christian community. In contrast, while the role of a pastor is significant within these communities, it does not hold the same weight as that of Catholic priests in Catholic settings. Notably, Catholic priests among the Hmong are often not of Hmong descent themselves, and the dearth of Hmong Catholic priests—who could translate the Bible into Hmong and deliver sermons in the language—plays a substantial role in Catholicism’s waning popularity among the Hmong people. While a priest remains important in facilitating Hmong individuals’ practice of Catholicism, their influence is often limited, as they may lack broader access to the entire Hmong community and do not engage with the unique rituals specific to various Hmong traditions. Theoretically, the distinctions between pastor and priest exemplify by Weber’s (1978) concept of charismatic authority, which suggests that such leaders can catalyze transformative movements or societal changes by inspiring and uniting individuals around shared aspirations.

This form of power does not negate the presence of traditional authority, as Weber (1978) asserted, since tradition is essential for the Hmong people to maintain their cultural identities while coexisting with other ethnic groups in Lai Châu province. It shows that the role of both pastors and priests, and the elderly and village chiefs, are not only equal, but impose their duties in the management of Hmong communities. Religious dignitaries are held in high esteem by Hmong people in religious rituals and are deemed necessary for Christians and Catholics to believe in God and match the need of native identity preservation. Alongside adhering to the Bible, Hmong Christians and Catholics continue to heed the counsel of the village chief, who is regarded as knowledgeable about governmental regulations and capable of conveying the community’s desires to formal authorities (Figure 10).

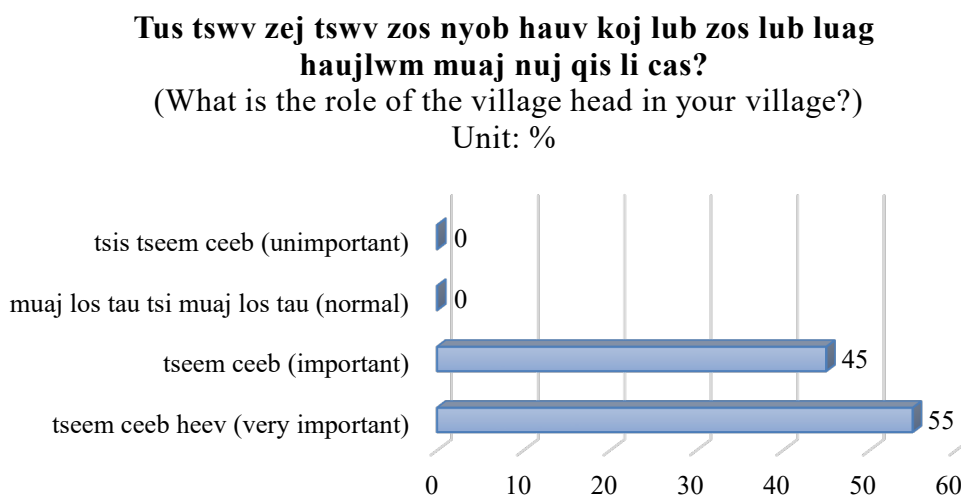


Figure 10 The role of village chief in Hmong communities in Lai Châu province, Vietnam.

Source: Author field trip, 2024

All informants agree that the role of the village chief remains significant in their daily lives. This leader, alongside the elders, commands deep respect within the community, playing a crucial role in organizing village affairs and guiding important initiatives. The Hmong village leader may identify as Christian and often seeks counsel from the pastor. Consequently, two distinct roles emerge, each evolving within its own context. In terms of authority, the village leader often wields influence more efficiently than the pastor. However, in spiritual matters, a village chief who is a person of faith turns to the Bible and seeks guidance from pastors. This dynamic is mirrored among the elderly, many of whom are themselves converts (see Figure 7). In everyday village activities, Hmong pastors rely on the wisdom of the elders for event organization and participation in key ceremonies. Conversely, in their spiritual lives, the elderly seek pastoral care and advice to engage more deeply with the teachings of the Bible.

Belief in the authority of the Kinh people often raises suspicions among the Hmong. Within these communities, there are notable Hmong officials who actively participate in the Communist Party or the Vietnamese Youth Union. However, aside from these individuals, the Hmong tend to place greater trust in the power wielded by their village chiefs or a combination of village chiefs and pastors, rather than fully aligning themselves with the formal authority of the Kinh. The village chief, as the analysis reveals, is typically a member of the Hmong community, earning grassroots-level respect by acting as a liaison to formal authorities, striving to meet the needs and aspirations of the Hmong people in their economic, religious, and cultural practices. This individual not only disseminates governmental policies to the villagers but also addresses the issues raised by his or her community. In Christian and Catholic circles, the Hmong adeptly integrate the guidance of their pastors with the instructions of their chiefs when making decisions. As a result, the prevailing forms of authority are rooted more in tradition and charisma than in a rational-legal framework. Nonetheless, the community members consistently exhibit law-abiding behavior, acknowledging the established legal system while maintaining their preference for local leadership.

“Government policies are communicated to us through the liaison role of the village chief or deputy village chief, who maintain a close relationship with the Kinh authorities. These leaders guide us to adhere to the national laws while also encouraging the preservation of Hmong cultural traditions. When we seek advice or wish to take action, we consult the village chief and his assistants. In the case of Christian groups, individuals turn to both their pastors and the village chief for guidance. On matters of significant importance to our community, we may convene a meeting. The pastors, who are also members of the village, represent the interests of the Christian community while also supporting non-converts in finding solutions rooted in our traditions. These proposals are then brought to the village leaders, who engage in dialogue with the provincial authorities.” (interview with a 55-year-old Hmong male, Phong Thổ district, Lai Châu province, November 28, 2024.)

The concerns surrounding the modern authority of the Hmong people in Lai Châu province engender the assumption that various forms of authority coexist within contemporary Hmong society, a notion articulated by Weber (1978). Notably, charismatic authority is flourishing, buoyed by the emergence of Hmong pastors and intellectuals who, embracing their faith in God, have stepped into roles as religious leaders. These figures are pivotal in assisting the Hmong community to overcome challenges such as poverty, limited educational opportunities, and various other adversities. Simultaneously, this burgeoning charismatic authority has contributed to a decline in the influence of shamans among both converted and non-converted individuals. Meanwhile, the expertise of village chiefs and elders remains a cornerstone of traditional authority, sustaining its profound impact from the past into the

present. Rational-legal authority, undoubtedly, has gained prominence in modern Hmong society in Lai Châu, a shift driven by the bureaucratic structures of the SRV established after independence from France in 1955. Yet, despite this development, rational-legal authority has not achieved the utmost efficacy; many Hmong people continue to prefer the guidance of their own native leaders over the decisions made by non-Hmong entities. That is likewise the argument of Hannah Arendt, which states that authority originates from tradition and established practices, involving a certain degree of consensus, and that the potential of political coercion could allow for the exercise of formal authority.

Conclusions

To date, comprehensive analyses of Hmong authority as a political element within Hmong studies have emerged alongside an extensive discourse among Vietnamese anthropologists, who assert that the Hmong have endured significant societal injustices and political persecution at the hands of neighboring ethnic groups. However, this narrative often obscures a crucial understanding of Hmong societies, particularly regarding the roles played by different social classes in actively organizing social structures and preserving cultural practices amid the historical fluctuations experienced in Vietnam. In contemporary times, the forces of modernity and religious conversion spurred transformative social changes within Hmong communities. This article drew upon key interpretations of authority and employed both qualitative and quantitative anthropological methodologies to investigate the evolution of authority in Hmong societies in Lai Châu province—an often-overlooked region of Vietnam characterized by a dense Hmong population and significant sociocultural transformations.

In the bygone era, traditional authority held sway over Hmong societies in Lai Châu, where latecomers to the region established their communities amid the lofty heights of the mountains, upholding matriarchal ties as the lifeblood of Hmong kinship. Prior to the arrival of the French and the encroachment of Kinh authority, the village chief, known as the *thawj tswv zog*, and his aide, *lwm tswv zog*, emerged as pivotal leaders within their villages. Equally vital to the fabric of Hmong life were the elders, or *cov laug zog*, along with the shaman, *txiv neeb*, who played essential roles in orchestrating the significant ceremonies of the year and performing rituals for key life cycle events. These groups are also embryonic forms of charismatic authority as coined by Weber (1978). Following the French intervention, each Hmong village organized its own tribal military group to safeguard their communities, operating under French sponsorship. Throughout this tumultuous period, the basic structure of Hmong society remained largely unchanged, despite the successive dominance of Tai and French authorities. Hmong groups, though subject to these external powers, largely retained their traditional forms of governance, continuing to embrace their ancestral authority well into 1954.

The modern authority of the Hmong people manifests through a complex interplay of three distinct forms of power. At the heart of this structure lies the traditional role of the village chief, whose respect commands the loyalty of the community. Meanwhile, religious leaders and elders, such as pastors in Christianity and priests in Catholicism, embody a form of charismatic authority that fosters reverence and inspires moral guidance. Unfortunately, the role of the shaman—a cornerstone of traditional Hmong society—has seen a decline, both among the converted and non-converted, as the community grapples with the suspension of certain ancestral customs and embraces a more contemporary lifestyle. The democratic mechanism within Hmong society stipulates that both the village chief and their deputy be elected by the people, eschewing the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual or family. This tradition, resilient in the modern era, underscores a cultural continuity that reflects the Hmong preference for non-coercive authority within their communities. The influence of formal Kinh authority, as represented by the operations of local committees and

councils, introduces a rational-legal dimension to governance. Yet, the practical implementation of this framework remains fluid, often balancing conventional wisdom with the demands of national legality. Despite the overarching framework of Vietnam's governance, local officials frequently struggle to achieve the unwavering support of the Hmong populace, which resists being wholly assimilated into broader Vietnamese society. The enduring spirit of political autonomy and the unique exercise of authority in Hmong ways is deeply ingrained in the community's mindset, characterized by a preference for the leadership of native chiefs and religious dignitaries. This intricate tapestry of authority not only reflects the Hmong people's rich cultural heritage but also their ongoing negotiation with modernity and external influences.

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Appendix A

KEV HLOOV PAUV NTAWM KAB LIS KEV CAI NTAWM COV NEEG HMOOB TOM QAB PROTESTANTISM NYOB RAU HAUV LAI CHÂU

Nyob zoo. Kuv yog ib tug neeg tshawb fawb los txog kab lis kev cai ntawm txhua haiv tib neeg, thiab kuv tab tom ua haujlwm rau ib lub hom phiaj txog ntawm peb cov hmoob ib qhov npaj. Daim ntawv nug no yog cov lus nug txog kev hloov pauv ntawm cov Hmoob ntseeg Yexus txoj kev cai. Txhua yam qhia Txog koj tug kheej yuav tau muab zaig mus thaum cov txiaj ntsig ntawm kev tshawb tau muab tshaj tawm. Ua tsaug rau koj tau txais kev koom nrog rau qhov kev tshawb fawb no. Kuv thov Vajtswv foom koob hmoov rau nej sawv daws.

1. Koj yog poj niam los txiv neej?

- txiv neej poj niam

2. Koj muaj hnuv nyoog npaum li cas?

- qis 18
 18-45
 45-60
 ntau dua 60

3. Koj txoj kev txij nkawm yog dab tsi?

- sib yuav
 Tsi tau sib yuav

4. Yog vim li cas koj thiaj ntseeg Tswv Yexus ?

- Koj thiab koj tsev neeg yuav tau txais txiaj ntsig
 Txuag tau nyiaj zoo
 Muaj ntau yam zoo haum koj txoj qub kev ntseeg
 Ntseeg raws tsev tib neeg
 Vim kuv tau mloog xov tooj cua

5. Cov ntseeg Yexus lawv txoj cai twg?

- Ntseeg raws Vajluskub xwb
 Ntseeg Vajluskub thiab kev ntseeg qub ntawm haiv neeg Hmoob

6. Koj puas koom nrog cov ntseeg txhua lub kev cai?

- Txhua zaug
 feem ntau
 tej lub sij hawm
 tsis tshua koom
 Tsis koom li

7. Thaum koj daws tej teeb meem loj, koj yiaiv nug leej twg?

- Nug Koj tsev neeg
 Nug tug Tswv tsev
 Nug Xwb Fwb

8. Tus tswv zej tswv zos nyob hauv koj lub zos lub luag haujlwm muaj nuj qis li cas?

- tseem ceeb heev
 tseem ceeb
 muaj los tau tsi muaj los tau
 tsis tseem ceeb

9. Vajtswv txoj lus tseem ceeb npaum li cas rau koj qhov kev txiav txim?

- tseem ceeb heev
 tseem ceeb
 ib txwm
 tsis tseem ceeb

10. Tus xwbfbw lub luag hauj lwm muaj nuj qis li cas nyob rau hauv ib ntees tshoob los yog ntees tuag?

- Tseem ceeb heev
 tsi muaj los tau.