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Interview with Dr. Gary Yia Lee

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Dr. Gary Yia Lee

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Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor – Paul Hillmer

Dr. Gary Yia Lee, distinguished anthropologist and scholar, traveled from his home in Sydney, Australia to California for a funeral, then made a stop to visit family in the Twin Cities. Tou Thao, his nephew, is an alumnus of Concordia University and a founder of the Hmong Oral History Project. He prevailed on his kind uncle, despite jet lag, the exhausting effects of a three-day funeral, and many, many demands on his time (including a presentation at Concordia University on 29 December), to sit down with me. I owe many thanks—and apologies—to Dr. Lee, his wife Maylee Lee, and the Thao family for taking so much of their precious family time to conduct this interview. Tou sat with us as we were talking, occasionally asking a question [plainly marked below]. Whenever Dr. Lee says 'your dad,' 'your mom,' 'your cousin,' etc., he is addressing Tou. - PH


Dr. Gary Yia Lee, Mr. Tou Thao, and Mr. Vu Thao


Dr. Gary Yia Lee and Dr. Paul Hillmer

(00:15) So, just for the record, your name, Sir—
My name is—well, I've got several names. I've got a Hmong name and an Anglicized name. My Hmong name is Yia— my given name; and my surname or clan name is Lee. And my alternate name is Gary, as you know. But that is something that I adapted from my Hmong name, which is a name that I gave myself, also to indicate that I am married and I have family [it is traditional for a Hmong to receive an adult or "ordination" name from his in-laws when he is married], and that's—I give myself this name, which is quite out of the norm, but it is because I was doing my Ph.D. research and I needed to put down some sort of 'real' Hmong name on my thesis. So I called myself Gar Yia Lee, and it later became Gary, Gary Yia Lee. The married name my father-in-law finally gave me is Txawj Yias (Jer Yia).

[Because interview is taking place in a house full of people, interviewer stops to make sure Dr. Lee is coming through all right. New track begins]

(0:02) So what are your parents' names, and where were you born?
My father is called Nor Lue Lee, and my mother is Mai Yang. And in our customs, as you know, we don't change the wife's name to the husband's so, maybe as a mark of equality, they keep their maiden name. But where I was born—I was born in a little village near the border of Laos and

Vietnam sometime after the Japanese occupation. The village was called Ban Huei Kouang (Deer River Village). That's all my parents could tell me. On paper, I was born in 1949, but I believe it should have been 1947. My parents said it was around New Year's time, so I put it down on paper as being December. So that's how we figure out our birthday. So on paper I'm born in December 1949…

(1:12) So you don't even put a day?
The day is [the] 11th, but it's a made-up day.

(1:17) You just picked a date out of thin air…
That's right—like everybody who came from Laos, except the children who are born here.

(1:28) What are some of your earliest memories of being a boy in this village?
Oh, my earliest is—the first thing I remember is I saw a big ox facing me. And as a baby I was sitting on my haunches facing this big bull with the long horns. And it was munching some grass in a stable. And I was wondering what that was. But my family had always had horses, buffaloes and bulls, so we—in a way, my earliest memory was the fact that we were living in a city rather than in a village. That is the first thing that I remember: that we were in a city. Even though the bull might be in a stable, it's behind a house that was made from bricks, and—

(2:59) So you didn't stay where you were born for very long.
No, no. The problem was that when I was one month old, Mr. Tou Thao Yang, which, if you read a lot of the accounts about the conflict between the Lo and the Lee [or Ly] clans, Tou Thao was the military leader of the Lo clan—but on account of it was related to him by marriage. And his daughter is now the Deputy Chair of the Lao General Assembly, Pranee Yang. In any case, because of the conflict between the Lo and the Lee, and because we happened to belong to the Lee clan, a month after I was born (or so my mother told me), this man and a few of his soldiers came to our village and confiscated all the possessions and burned down our house and so my parents decided to move from their village to the city to follow Touby Lyfoung, because Touby was already by that time—and by that time I mean 1950—he was already in Xieng Khouang town, and he was organizing village militia for the French, and my father decided to join him and to join the village militia. So about a month after I was born, my mother carried me on her back and we moved to the city. And we were living there and my father became a soldier in the colonial army, which at that time was still the colonial army to the French—because Laos wasn't independent from France until 1954, and we're talking about the early '50s. So anyway, my father was stationed in different parts of Xieng Khouang Province, in Northeastern Laos, so our life was just like the life of any soldier's family, moving around, and we then, in 1953, when the Viet Minh came to Laos, we—that's when I remember very distinctly, from then on, about a war, about us going and hiding in the jungle with other Hmong people, and mostly with soldiers' families.

(6:44) Did you know of any soldiers who fought at Dienbienphu [Jane Hamilton-Merritt asserts that there were about 200 Hmong fighting alongside the French when Dienbienphu fell in 1954]?
No, I didn't know any and I don't think there <u>was</u> any from Laos. I believe that Vang Pao, who was at that time a lieutenant, was going with about a hundred Hmong soldiers on their way to Dienbienphu, but before they even got outside Laos, the French lost the battle, so they just returned. That's my understanding. So for that reason, I didn't know any Hmong soldiers who participated in [the] Dienbienphu battle. <u>But</u> the soldiers, the French soldiers who were defeated at

Dienbienphu and who escaped from Dienbienphu into Laos—I did see a lot of them. And that was my first experience of seeing people from different races. Before that, I only saw Asians—in other words, I only saw Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao, Hmong, et cetera, but there were, in 1954, after the defeat at Dienbienphu, a lot of French soldiers [who] just filtered into Laos slowly. And—

[Dr. Lee needed to say goodbye to some friends. New track begins]

(0:08) As I said, in terms of actual Hmong who went from Laos to fight in Dienbienphu, I don't think there was any at all. But in terms of Hmong in Vietnam, yes—who participated in both sides, definitely. Because I did see a lot of Hmong escaping from Vietnam into Laos after Dienbienphu. And many of [Dr.] Yang Dao's family were part of this group. So definitely there were a lot of Hmong involved, either with the French or with the Vietnamese. But I would say that from my research, and as far as I could get information on, there really wasn't any Hmong from Laos going into Dienbienphu.

(1:17) You were talking about seeing Frenchmen for the first time…
Yes. By that time, as I was saying earlier, in 1953 the Viet Minh had a military incursion into Laos. And we were all going into the jungle. Do you want all of these little details?

(1:41) I do! It's the little details that fascinate me.
All right. Well, at that time I think I was about five or six. And in 1953, we were all thinking, 'Oh, the Viet Minh are coming!' Around that time there was a lot of propaganda against the Viet Minh by the French. They had posters stuck everywhere—in people's homes, in the street—depicting nasty Viet Minh in their triangular hats and—big teeth. 'They're trying to bite you!' So that's how the French tried to convince people to believe that they are the 'goodies,' and that the Viet Minh were the 'baddies.' Around that time, the Vietnamese Revolutionary movement and its soldiers were all described as Viet Minh, as you know. Anyway, after we went hiding in the jungle, and after whatever happened between the French and the Viet Minh in the battle in the town that we were living in, it was decided that they should have this big battle in Dienbienphu, instead of having an invasion in Laos by the Vietnamese. So that's how Dienbienphu came to be. In any case, the year after, I didn't know much about this political maneuvering, being just a kid, but the year after 1954, so after the Viet Minh left Laos, we all came back to the village, to the city, and continued living as before. But then not long after, we saw all these black soldiers, French soldiers coming, in <u>big</u> number into Xieng Khouang town (which now doesn't exist anymore). But that was the first time we saw big, black soldiers. And they said, 'Oh, these are Moroccans.' We always just called all of them as Moroccans. And the big, white Western soldiers were all 'French, French.' And by that time we were living in a compound that (I think) was used before by colonial officials with big lots—big blocks of land—and now it's brick houses. So we were using one of these big plots of land with the nice brick house. And the French soldiers were just all living, taking all of the houses around us, and they were growing tomatoes in their back yards to feed themselves. I remember this one big black, Moroccan—whatever he was—military guy. Every morning he just came out and [looking for the right phrase] passed water [makes a motion with his hand]—

(5:59) He just threw water out into the street [confused]?
No, no, no—<u>piss</u> [Interviewer laughs. <u>Now</u> he understands] right in front of everybody. Just facing the street, he just did it. He didn't care. And this was the first time we see this thing happen. You know, people had a lot of modesty in Laos, but not this guy. And so a lot of people were talking about, 'Oh, what are these people doing?' Also, I witnessed black and white soldiers being punished

by their officers. I was just a school kid on my way to school, and coming back from school, and I would see—I saw two soldiers being forced to dig like a grave, and they were told to get inside, and they were buried up to their neck, as some sort of punishment for, I don't know, whatever they did. I saw this happen twice: one black guy, one white guy. We never did this sort of thing, so we thought, 'Wow, this is how these people are punishing their people.' And every morning I heard the—on top of us is a big barracks, full of French soldiers, every morning they would blow on the [pauses]—they would wake the soldiers up—

(7:59) A bugle?
Yeah, by blowing on a bugle. Every morning we hear this. And also, in the sky, lots of planes, dropping things for them. You know, these old planes with the big body in front and two long things in the back [trying to remember the name, interviewer is no help]. You see some of these in books—with a body like this [holds his two hands in a large circle] and then two long things like that [making wings] with the tail [similar to Gotha Go 242 twin-boom gliders]. We saw a lot of those planes, funny-looking planes, dropping things for these soldiers. But they were not there for very long—for about only five, six months. And suddenly they were all gone. They all disappeared. That was around 1954, during which I just carried on going to school. My father, who was by then a police officer, no longer served as a soldier in the French colonial army. He transferred to the local police force, and we were also doing what other people are doing, which is farming rice—we were growing on rice land. I believe we were among the first Hmong who did irrigated rice growing around that time. Because in Xieng Khouang city at that time, there probably would be about 50 to 60 Hmong families living there. Some of them were doing dry farming around the town; some of them were laboring, and some of them were soldiers; some of them were public servants. But it's never enough just to rely on your own salary, so people had to grow their own crops, their own food. So we were doing rice land, along with four other Hmong families, just next to the town.

(10:53) Who was running the school that you attended?
Yeah, that was very interesting, too. I believe that it was run by the French or the Lao Ministry, with a lot of help from the French government. That is because the syllabus is all French, from primary school up to college level. We learned everything in French. We started off learning to write and read ABCs in French, using French books. I believe that the books that we used were the same textbooks that the French children used in France at the time. And our teachers were Vietnamese, not Lao—Vietnamese at the primary level. At the college [what US people think of as high school] level all teachers were French during the time that I went to primary and high school. When I reached upper primary school, we started to have some Lao teachers who completed teacher training in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, but every student [was] taught in French, even though we had teachers who were Lao or Hmong. So my early education was completely in French. We did have Lao taught by a Buddhist monk. But that was pretty much like a foreign language, you know? It's like two, three hours a week, and the regular lessons were all taught in French. So that was about 1954 to 1959, my primary school years, so all done like that. And then in 1960, I finished primary school and went to college, which is high school—'college' in French—*collège*.

(13:22) The old Gymnasium model—
That's right. Yeah, that's right. But it's really high school. And as I said, we had one African or black professor. And all the college teachers were called 'professor' in French. And we had this really scary, big, burly black mathematics teacher who was very keen to use corporal punishment, and he would pinch, he would slap anyone who can't do a mathematic problem, and we were always scared of him. But I was doing all right. [Interviewer laughs] But all through this part—this is just

to show you that I have always been very interested in schooling and studying. So all through my primary school I was nearly always the top student. And when I was—when I reached grade nine and ten, I was competing to be first with the current Lao Minister of Trade.

(15:19) Oh really?
Yeah. We were together in primary school and his uncle was our teacher. His uncle always wanted him to be first every time—

(15:29) That doesn't sound like a very fair system!
—second [was] no good. If we were not doing well, we would get the cane. In those days there were a lot of corporal punishments using the cane. And they would use it with no hesitation at all. Even if you just fail to simply greet the teacher when the teacher first walked into the compound or the school classroom, you had to put your hands together [palms together] and pay respect. You don't do that, you get the cane—from him. So anyway, I was trying very hard to be first all the time, because the French system gives a lot of recognition, academically speaking. People were good at sports and all that, they don't pay a lot of attention to, but people who are very good academically get a lot of attention. And so everybody tried very hard to be good, even though they may not be first all the time. So that's how the French tried to encourage competition and learning. And we were learning all by rote—nothing to do with understanding at all…Books, but also by rote. You just get in front of everybody and recite what was in the book or what the teacher just wrote on the blackboard as the lesson for that particular subject on that day.

(17:19) Memorization and recitation.
Yeah. Someone with a good memory is the best. Yeah. So when I got to this college, I was trying—it's different. They bring in a little bit of understanding to the learning process, as well as memorizing, so I spent about one term there, and I was doing good, I was still doing very well, but then the civil war broke out. That was on the first of January, 1961. And I remember that I was so sad that school had to—that college had to close. And all of our French teachers were running for their lives. And we were also running for our lives, because my father was in the right wing police force, and the invading force is the Neutralist force of Kong Le. You know his background. Anyway, we woke up one morning on the first of January, and BOOM, we hear these big artillery guns, the sound of guns exploding from a distance. And then they came closer and closer. Everybody's running around like mad. So we were trying to [pauses].

(19:08) So were you at college or at home when this was happening?
I was at home, but well before that, when I was in my last grade in primary school all through that year, there were rumors about the war coming, and we see long columns of soldiers going to the front near the Vietnamese border. And some day we were in class and they would say, 'Oh! The war is here! The enemy soldiers are here! So everybody run from school to home!' And then the next day they would say, 'Oh, it was a false alarm.' They would come back again. That happened many, many times, so we were quite used to the rumors. But on the first of January, it wasn't just a rumor, it was real when we hear guns—big guns for the first time. And then we saw all these big Russian airplanes, cargo carriers in the skies, coming from North Vietnam, dropping I don't know what, maybe military supplies or food or whatever—

(20:31) Now did you know they were Russian at the time, or—
Yeah, we knew they were Russian. Well, we didn't know that they were Russian, but definitely we knew they were enemy planes, because they came from North Vietnam, right? They came from

North Vietnam. They were big, and they were painted gray—dark gray or something very dark, either dark green or dark gray. And before that, most of the planes we were familiar with were silver. This was a very different color, different noise, different size. Anyway, on the radio they were also saying, 'The Russians are ferrying materials and supplies for Kong Le.' And so by that time Kong Le was in the Plain of Jars, advancing on Xieng Khouang town. So a lot of these planes just flew over us into the Plain of Jars, which is only about a half an hour away by car. We saw lots and lots of them coming, so we were always scared and running into the jungle again.

(22:03) Now as you were growing up, were you still in this area where the French soldiers had been, or had you moved elsewhere?
At that time we had moved like about a mile away because the compound that we were using, where I first saw the French soldiers, was only a temporary shelter for our family after the 1953 Viet Minh incursion. So after the French soldiers left in 1954, we moved to build a house on our rice land, and by that time there were four families, my three cousins and my father were living on some wet rice land that we were using. So when the civil war came and all these big Russian planes came, we were living there, on the rice land, which is about one or two miles from town.

(23:13) And what was the town?
The town is Xieng Khouang. It's now called Muong Khoun under the new [regime].

(23:22) So when you said the planes were coming right overhead and you could see where they were going you weren't kidding. You could literally seeing right where they were going.
Oh yeah, because they were passing Xieng Khouang here, going to Phonsavan or the Plain of Jars, which, as I said, is only half an hour away by car. But at the time, because I was small, the two places appeared to be very far from each other. Anyway, that was my last memory of living in Xieng Khouang. By that time Vang Pao and all his soldiers had fled south. They had given up fighting Kong Le, so everybody on the Royal Lao Army side, the right wing side of the conflict, was just in disarray, running in every direction. And my father, that night when the Kong Le troops came to town, my father was at the police headquarters, so he never came home. He just escaped south with General Vang Pao, Vang Pao's soldiers, and all the police officers. They all went together. So my mother and my four brothers and two sisters, along with other relatives, we just went hiding into the jungle again, somewhere like about 10 miles north of Xieng Khouang town. And we were there for about two weeks. The first week we were hiding in a cave, and one day this big noise above us—it was the first time we ever saw an American jet bomber. I don't know what it was doing there, but it was flying in two sweeps. It was making two sweeps over Xieng Khouang town, and then disappeared. And then we knew it was American, because we saw a picture of it before, but also because at that time the Russians hadn't brought in any fighter bombers into Laos yet. And the direction into which it disappeared—into Thailand—indicated to us that this is not a Russian plane or a Vietnamese plane. So we were very hopeful that the town would be recaptured and we could go back there, but we stayed in that hiding place for about two weeks, and my father had paid someone to come and get us out of that place.

(27:13) For those who have absolutely no idea what it's like, how did you live in the jungle with no food—I mean, I assume you were able to take some food with you, but still, this is a very difficult way to live.
Sure. It was very difficult. But as I said before, we were used to this kind of hiding in 1953. And also because, as I said before, there were rumors of the war coming, so we always prepared some

rice and some kind of dried food. We kept them in the house and always—but when the real thing came, we escaped with these supplies. But obviously they didn't last very long. When we were in the jungle during these two weeks I was talking about, we were sharing food with other Hmong who were there with us. A whole village of Hmong, from a village not far from the town where they ate with us, not far from where we were hiding, there was a Hmong village where we could go and buy rice from, and we could go and buy vegetables from, so that wasn't a problem.

(28:48) And they felt that they were safe, they were far enough away from what was going on that they could stay in their homes and survive?
Yeah, because the village was hidden behind a number of hills and a big forest.

(29:08) Do you remember the name of that village?
Yeah, Tham Kat. So we went hiding around Tham Kat. So we were there, and we were contacted by this man who was paid by my father to come and get us (and he was actually a distant cousin of my mother). We just left everybody there, we took whatever we could on our backs, and just followed him. We had to cross the main road and go to the other side—big mountain—we were really scared of meeting enemy soldiers at the crossing but we were lucky no one saw us. We had to walk for many days, and then on the third day (well, we had to walk for <u>three</u> days), and then on the third day my father came to meet us for the first time. And by that time [he] was dressed in a green military uniform—not the yellow khaki police officer uniform anymore, and he had a gun with him. I asked him, 'What does that mean?' And he said he is now a soldier in the army and not a police officer anymore. And he was a Forward Intelligence Officer, gathering information on the enemy lines. That's what he said. But anyway, he took us all the way from there to Pha Dong. You may have read about Pha Dong. Pha Dong by that time was the headquarters for Vang Pao. It took us three months to get to Pha Dong. It's not very distant. [If] you keep walking every single day, you probably would take about three or four days. But because my father's work has to near enemy lines, he was doing his work as well, and we were also hopeful that they would re-take the town and we could go back, so we were just making [biding] time, hiding.

(32:04) So your father would just go off for several days—
Go off for a few days, yes, and come back to us. And by that time we were joined by three or four other families, including my brother-in-law's [Vu Thao's] family. (Well, we did not know each other in the town previously. We were only young men at the time, but our parents and his parents knew each other.) So anyway, we met up with each other and then we were trying to make time by just hiding in the jungle, changing locations every few days. And one day he nearly threw a grenade on me. I still remember that, and I'm still not very happy when he married my sister [Interviewer laughs].

(33:05) So it wasn't <u>your</u> father, it was Tou's father who did this!
No, it was <u>his</u> [points at Tou] father [Tou laughs]. See, I was only a young boy, and to help carry our family possessions, my mother decided to buy a horse. So I had to go and feed the horse in the jungle. And there's lots of very high grass, about shoulder level. So [I was] with two other boys. And we were just grazing our horses there, and he and his older brother with a few other older people—because they were older than us. They went to Pha Dong, they came back dressed in soldier uniforms with guns and the whole thing—grenades and all. I think they were very eager to show off, too, you know [Tou and interviewer laugh]? So we were just grazing the horses along the trail and they were calling, 'Who's there? Who's there?' And so we were scared and we stooped down and tried to hide in tall grass, and he was ready to throw the grenade and I said, 'Hang on, it's

only us' [Tou and interviewer laugh]! And he said, 'You'd better show yourself, or else you'll be dead. I was a bit upset with him for a long time. Anyway, we were together there for about, maybe a little bit more than a month. Then we heard gun fights not far at all from where we were hiding. It sounded like it was a battle, so we said, 'Oh no!' We couldn't stand it. They must have been very near us now—all the soldiers from both sides. So we decided to move from there and go to another location nearer to Pha Dong, but not quite at Pha Dong. We were there for two, three weeks —we were hiding in a rice field. We were just building these little straw huts in a recently harvested rice field, where the rice [was] already collected, and it was just empty. So we were there one day. We didn't have—well, we could still buy rice from the local village, but there was nothing else to go with the rice, and often we'd just go and set traps for birds and for squirrels and rats and whatever we could find. So one day I was inspecting my traps, and I just heard this burst of gun sounds right over my head—this is real big jungle—thick, real tall trees. And we were running for our lives. And then after about ten minutes, the gunfire stopped, but a few days later we heard two T-28 bombers come to bomb a Khmu [a local ethnic group that often clashed with the Hmong and sided with the Pathet Lao] village not far from where we were hiding. We could see the planes flying, so we decided—the two families that were with us decided that maybe it's time to actually give up the idea of staying around to see the town recaptured and actually go to Pha Dong. So we packed up and went to Pha Dong. We walked about three or four days, then we reached [it]. And that was a really difficult walk—a long, long distance. We didn't walk through the jungle. We actually took a normal trail that people used to take from one village to another. So it wasn't so bad, it was just a long distance. We went to—we didn't quite go to Pha Dong, either. We went to a village from where you can actually see Pha Dong, like there's two big hills. We were on this side [of one hill], and Pha Dong is on here [the other hill], and down there is a deep valley between. Anyway, we stayed at this village, which is called Ban Pha Lai, and we stayed there for about a month, and we saw soldiers being carried back, wounded soldiers being carried back from the front. We saw soldiers marching from Pha Dong through that village to the front. And then one day there was actually fighting in the next village, which is not far at all—about two blocks away—gunfights and artillery. So we had to run again. So then we decided to go to Pha Dong. And when we reached Pha Dong, it was something very strange for me. It was full of soldiers, the big air strip, and the planes overhead nearly all hours of the day dropping military supplies and big bags of rice for refugees. And we were told that those big bags of rice had hit people on the ground and killed some of them. We still had the horse with us, so I was grazing the horse near a river next to the air strip, and as these planes came to drop the supplies and when you look from the ground up, it looks like the thing with the parachute is going to fall on you—it doesn't matter from what direction. So I and my younger brother —because we were very naïve in our youth to this kind of thing, we were running, running around and around all day. And no matter what direction we run, this thing is falling—looks like it's falling directly on us! Because the planes drop these things all day long, we were still running and running all along that river forgetting about the horses and all. Anyway, I came to some soldiers that we knew, and asked, 'Why this thing looks like it is dropping on you all of the time? How do you people manage without running? You seem to just stay where you are or walk around without a care. [And they answered], 'No, it just looks like it's falling on you, but it doesn't actually fall on you. It falls a long distance away, because it's very high up, and looks like it's coming directly down on you.' So that was something that I remember to be both funny and also very scary. And we also for the first time saw a few American soldiers who are—well, they're not soldiers, but they're dressed in soldier uniform, right?

(42:06) CIA.

Yeah, CIA. But to us, they're just soldiers. We saw Americans, we saw Thai, a lot of Thai, too.

Yeah, the Thai were always with the Americans, more [numerous] than the Americans. I think that there might be six or eight Thai to one American. And I thought, 'Wow, these are the people that are helping us. They are the ones that bring over these supplies and they are helping Vang Pao to fight a war.' But I was—well, let's say about 12—very curious, because I was not unfamiliar with Western people, because I was studying under some French teachers, but I'd never seen Americans before, and so I always went near the tent where they worked and tried to look at them. I remember I saw one very young, blond American, maybe about 30—very slim, tall. I don't know—he was reading or he was writing away, going from one Thai, Hmong officer to another. So that was my first encounter with Americans. And we were there—oh, and also, there were a lot of helicopters. At that time, they were using these noisy helicopters with the big round nose all painted green [USMC UH-34D utility helicopters, also known as the "choctow"].

[Dr. Lee is needed for a moment. New track begins.]

[Before the recorder was turned back on, Tou had asked if his uncle knew of any Hmong who chose to fight with the Neutralists or the Pathet Lao.]

(0:23) Yes, I knew a few. I mean, I didn't know at the time that they were on the side of the Pathet Lao. In terms of Hmong who were with the Neutralists, when we escaped from Xieng Khouang town, as I said, I don't think that those of us who <u>were</u> in that town, had any idea of what Kong Le represented. We only knew about *nya la* [Hmong word for Vietnamese which also means "enemy"] —you know, being communist, or being Viet Minh, but we didn't all know about this third force, the Neutralists. I think the older people probably would hear a lot of radio broadcasts from Vientiane about Kong Le and Phoumi Nosavan fighting each other down there, but I think the normal, average Hmong probably had no idea and little interest. But after we left the town and those people who decided not to escape, to stay, and the town became occupied by Kong Le and his Neutralist troops—yeah, a lot of those Hmong who stayed behind decided to 'join' the Neutralists. I think it was more a force of circumstances rather than choice or real understanding of what's going on. Some of my cousins who now live in Montana, who stayed behind, did this, because actually when Kong Le came into a town, for those who panicked and escaped, they would chase them. But those who stayed on, they would just reorganize into normal life. So a lot of the Hmong who stayed behind just lived under the Neutralist force. Some might become teachers, some might become soldiers if you wanted to be a soldier for the Neutralists, but you would need to have Neutralist ideology. I know that a nephew of mine, he became a teacher for the Neutralists. I don't know much under what situation, but I didn't know many Hmong who became soldiers. In terms of the Hmong who joined the Pathet Lao, there are many Hmong we used to know as relatives, distant relatives, who used to live near the Vietnamese border, and who we never suspected of having any interests in this factional fight. One family that was very prominent actually stayed behind, and we later learned that he was related to Fay Dang, the Hmong Pathet Lao leader. He was Fay Dang's nephew. Fay Dang Lo, you know about him, right?

(4:08) Touby LyFoung's rival.
Yeah. So when we escaped, he didn't escape, and he stayed behind. And later he joined Fay Dang. So he's the only family we know who were there maybe on—you know, who was actually put there. But he was later executed by the Neutralist soldiers —

[Dr. Lee needs to speak to his wife. New track begins.]

(0:00) So anyway, that's my early memory about the war and life…I wasn't [in Pha Dong] for very long. We were there only a week, and then Kong Le, with lots of North Vietnamese troops, organized a big push to capture Pha Dong. And so again we had to flee for our lives, and we had to again put everything on horseback and flee to a neighboring hiding place. Those [were] very steep [mountains], so [it was] very hard to get to there—we were hiding in another very deep enclave, and at the direction of Vang Pao, because by then we were with all the other Hmong refugees. And when we got there, we saw soldiers just running away from the battle, coming to join their families —Vang Pao's soldiers—not a lot of them, just the odd ones that managed to escape. We saw people crying because they had lost their father or brothers or husbands in the battle —

(2:04) Tou Thao: How often did you guys actually see Vang Pao himself?
I didn't see him at all until then. He was at Pha Dong, but because I was a little boy and because I was scared of big people, and also he was very busy. He was, by that time, someone very important and—oh! I did see him once when he was in Xieng Khouang town. I saw him with some of his soldiers. That was before the war—I did see him. He came to stay in a military—in a French colonial residence that was reserved for military officers, and I saw him come in and out, but that's all I saw. That was before the war. But a lot of people said that, as you know, he lost the town because he spent most of his time with girls, playing the ball game at New Year's time [It is customary for young men and women to engage in "ball tossing," a ritual that allows males and females to get to know each other, during the New Year], because as I said to you, Kong Le came to Xieng Khouang town on the first of January, which is around the Hmong New Year. And instead of ordering his solders around and being in command, he was playing ball games in a distant Hmong village, and he left his soldiers to some of his officers—one of his officers. I only know about one man your dad knows well [pointing to Tou Thao] with a handful of soldiers to actually block Kong Le's way, but they couldn't. So by the time he realized that defeat was imminent, and he had to give up the ball game and come and do the real job, it was already too late. So all he did was just escape with his soldiers down south. And then when they reached down south (this is just a little aside to what I was telling you earlier about the war), when my father and Vang Pao and his soldiers and the other officers of the Royal Lao Government, public service or officials, escaped from the town, they turned directly south [towards Vientiane]. And after about two days' walk away (of course they all went on foot) they stopped and decided to re-assess the situation. And that's when they were contacted by [Colonel] Bill Lair. And then you can take up that story from there [Tou laughs]. And my father was with them. So anyway, my father was told to do the job that he was doing, and because the place where they stopped was not suitable as a rear guard [defensive] position, they decided to come to Pha Dong, and to reorganize themselves there. And when Pha Dong was taken over by the Vietnamese and the Neutralist troops, they then went to Pha Khao. The soldiers went to Pha Khao and the civilians went to where I was telling you about us going there, which is called Blia Hia. We were there for about three months. That's where I saw for the first time my future father-in-law. He actually came to court my older sister, your mother—yeah, your mother was about 18, I was about 14—maybe your mother was about 16. And my father was with the soldiers all the time, so I had to act like the man of the family, built a little hut for the family and I didn't know much about how you build a house, how you build a hut. And I had to act like the head of the family, which was very hard. I didn't do it well—that was the first time I had to do that kind of thing. And while we were there, soldiers that were wounded would be taken in by helicopter, and I again saw this very blonde American medic who was trying to get a bullet or shrapnel or whatever from the leg of a Hmong soldier, and because he didn't have any anesthetic, the Hmong soldier kept screaming and he wanted to—he was trying to dig the thing out. We were all peering. And also that

was the first time I saw a woman dressed as a soldier. I never saw a woman dressed as a soldier before. So we kids all went and looked at her—stared at her!

(8:51) Probably a field nurse?
Yeah, a Lao field nurse. She was either Lao or Thai—dark-skinned. But she was a woman. We were all there, surrounding her and staring at her. I wonder how she felt [Tou and interviewer laugh]. Anyway, she wasn't there for very long. She was there for one or two days and then she disappeared—must have been taken away somewhere by helicopter. They used helicopters back and forth, back and forth. And the rice was dropped in bags from this big cargo plane called—I can't remember anymore [nobody can come up with the name of this plane]. You see one of them in the picture when they were evacuating Long Cheng in 1975. Not the C-130, very old and famous. It's got a local name like the Dakota or something [it's actually a C-47]. Anyway, they used this noisy cargo plane to drop rice for the refugees. And we were in that valley for about four or five months. But then they said, 'Oh! The Vietnamese are coming again!' And so we all had to escape again and we came to Pha Khao. We had to walk from Blia Hia to Pha Khao, then at Pha Khao they said, 'You can't live here. The Vietnamese are coming. You can't stay here anymore.' We had to go to Vientiane. So they evacuated us by plane to Vientiane. That was my first encounter with a big city—which is not very big at all now [compared to American cities]. But for us at that time, that was the biggest city we had ever seen—and very hot, sticky, humid, and very strange, lots of cars, and all Lao—no more Hmong. Very alien, very strange to us. But we stayed there for—we stayed in some people's house and were given food. And then very quickly we had to find renting accommodation. We were renting a timber place, which is just a long house partitioned into rooms, and each family rents one of the rooms. And at the back is a cooking place, but that's all there is. And we were there for about four, five months. And by that time I enrolled in the *lycée*, which is the very famous high school in Vientiane—*Lycée de Pavie*. At that time it was still called *Lycée de Pavie*. You know Pavie? Auguste de Pavie, the guy who explored and took Laos as a French colony in 1893. Anyway, so that school was named after him. And it's the only high school in Vientiane. I decided to enroll there, and when I got there—oh! My French teachers were there from Xieng Khouang! And they were actually helping me to register—they were checking that we were real, that we were from Xieng Khouang, that we were entitled to enroll there. And so I was lucky to get into there, and I was lucky to get into the boarding school part of the college. So I, along with about 30 other Hmong students, were taken in as boarders in that *lycée*.

(14:19) Now did your entire family go to Vientiane? Did your father stay behind?
Yeah, my father stayed behind, the whole family went to Vientiane, and I became separated from them, because I went to study at the *lycée* as a boarder. And sometimes we were given bread with butter on, which we were very eager to taste, to eat. We thought, 'Oh, this is prestige food—French.' But a lot of the time the food was just Lao. That's how I became separated from my family from then on and spent most of my time at the *lycée*. And gradually my family, they stayed in Vientiane for about five or six months, and the situation in Pha Khao became better. And by that time Vang Pao moved from Pha Khao to Long Cheng, because Pha Khao was too foggy, and the airplanes and the helicopters couldn't land. That's what he told me. I did an interview with him. I went to Thailand [in 1985]. I was following him to Thailand for about a month and was trying to get little bits if interview with him. And he said, 'Oh, the reason we didn't stay on in Pha Khao is because the air strip was directly in front of a big cliff, and the little helio-planes sometimes couldn't make it over, and as well it was very foggy, very dangerous,' so they moved to Long Cheng. But anyway, all this I only learned about much later. I was just studying there [in Vientiane], just concentrating on my studies, concentrating again on being first and coming first in my class. And my

French teachers were very happy with me, so they put me, after [my] first year of studying there, they were very impressed, so they put me in a class full of French kids—which is an advanced class. We were studying Latin, and I'd never studied Latin in my life! And the Latin teacher was very kind. She said, 'You can do it. I will give you extra coaching.' So she let me go to her house after hours and she was teaching me all these verbs and how you conjugate. But it was all Greek to me; it never got into my head. I could never—I was very good in French, and I really loved French, but Latin—it just never, never got to me. So after a few months I told her, 'Look, I really just cannot do this Latin. You'd better change me to a different class, because this class has to take Latin.' So she said, 'All right. If you really, really cannot do it, then you just don't do Latin' [Tou and interviewer chuckle]. But my French teachers were very, very helpful, very nice, very kind to me. I'll be forever grateful to them. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be where I am now. Many, many people have helped me along the way, apart from my family, and among these are my French teachers. (I don't mean the teachers who teach me French, but the teachers from France who teach me all kinds of subjects at this *lycée*.) So when I went to—I don't know how you work the high school years here, but in Australia we…start with Year 7, 8, 9, 10, which is Middle School and then Year 11 and 12. Up here how do you…?

[Interviewer explains system in US]
(19:32) Anyway, whatever, the French system starts with 6ème, right? Sixth class. Then fifth, fourth, third, and it goes down in numbers as you advance. So the first year of high school is called sixth. Anyway, it was during the fifth class that I have to do this Latin thing. And then when I got to the fourth class, I was trying so hard to maintain my academic success or achievement or whatever—to stay at the top level, that I became sick, because I studied all the time. I had a book with me at all hours, and by that time I became caught up in French literature. I was reading all kinds of novels from France with all these famous French classic authors, starting from Balzac to Stendahl, Alexandre Dumas. Then I came to learn about Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and I was really, really taken up by all these fascinating big novels and I was just reading them all the time, ever after lights out in the dormitory. I bought a torch [flashlight] and covered myself under the blanket and read my novels. I really came to like my reading and French—well, all literature, Western literature in French, translated into French. And my French teacher (I mean the teacher that was teaching French—the subject) was really impressed because I could quote all these classical authors. She said, 'Now I want you to continue and go to France—study French literature. I was very keen to. But anyway, when I got to fourth class, I became very sick and I spent half the year in hospital with water in the lungs. So I missed half the year. But at the hospital I met this Lao woman. She came one day to the hospital, and she said, 'Why does no one ever come to the hospital to visit you? I said, 'Oh, my family live a long, long way away.' And she said, 'Oh, poor boy! You come live with me.' And then she said, 'You [will] become my son.' So anyway, I became her adopted son, and she took me in. She had lots of other kids, but she had a big heart. I spent about three years living with that family, and they were very kind to me. And later on, when your dad married my sister, and my brothers and my mother, they all came to stay with this family, too, in Vientiane [all laugh]. Yeah, everybody came, and they were very nice to everybody in the family. Your dad sponsored them over to America [after the communist take-over of Laos in 1975]. The parents are dead now, but the daughters and sons live in Kansas, two of them. Anyway, that's what happened. And when I recovered from my pleurisy, I went to talk to the headmaster and some of my teachers, and they said, 'Oh, you're so good, there's no problem with us just passing you to the third year (which in French is called *diplome*). They said, 'We'll pass you, and we will get you up to that year, even though you missed half the year in the fourth class. And I said, 'But I haven't studied a lot of subjects.' And they said, 'We will give you extra coaching.' So while I was very good in the French language

subject and literature and science and other things, I was not very good in mathematics. Anyway, the Mathematics teacher gave me a lot of coaching, at his house, and let me stay there and gave me food as well. They were very nice. He was married to a Vietnamese woman. He was French. Anyway, he always gave me a lot of coaching, and I got through that final year of middle high school. And that's when I went to Australia.

(25:43) How did that happen? It seems to me very curious that someone living in Vientiane, being taught by French teachers to love all thing French, who's lived with a Hmong family all over the place would suddenly [snaps his fingers] go to Australia.
Yeah, that was a real accident. As I said to you, all my French teachers—I was very keen about France. 'Anything French is the best.' It was best for me, you know? And through all these readings [I was thinking] 'Oh, I'd <u>really</u> like to go to France. And also my teachers were very chauvinistic—in other words, they had the same attitude. And they all said, 'You have to go to France. You will make it.' So I said, 'All right, that's what I will do.' So when I was in this third class, very busy with all the coaching and extra study and all of that, I had a very distant cousin who was studying in Australia under the Columbo Plan scholarship. The Columbo Plan [for Co-operative Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia] is now history, but in those days it was a kind of foreign aid scheme set up by a few countries around the Pacific Rim, like New Zealand, Australia, India (they were a little bit away)…and they had a meeting in Columbo, in Sri Lanka, and that is how they settled on this scheme called the Columbo Plan to help the poorer countries in Southeast Asia with their economic development, but also the ultimate aim is to combat communism. So by that time Australia was giving Columbo Plan scholarships to students from Laos. And they all went to—because we all studied in French rather than in English—these students were brought to Australia to study in high school, in the three final years of high school to become well grounded in English — before graduating to the university and all that: college, vocational, whatever, depending on the level of achievement. But anyway, around that time, in 1964—no, in '65, yes—I had this cousin studying in Australia and he sent me a postcard, also wrote to me about what a nice country Australia was. And I saw these beautiful postcards with beaches and long stretches of dry rocks, and he was telling me all about life down there, and he said I should go down there. I should forget about going to France. And I said, 'Oh, I'm not too sure, because my aim has always been to go to France.' So when I finished the *diplome*, I passed the *diplome* after the third year, the Australian embassy gave a scholarship test, and I said, 'Well, why not try?' And I went to sit for the test and I passed—I passed as the best. Oh! And then I wasn't too sure, too keen anymore, so I went home. By that time your dad [pointing to Tou] was married to my sister, and my mom and her children were living in Pha Khao with your dad and your mom. So I went there, I went to stay there and keep quiet there, and I was out to think things over. I wasn't so sure at all about whether I wanted to go to Australia. But one day I heard this announcement on the radio that I should go to Vientiane and get my papers ready. They were all waiting for me! And I said, 'Oh, well, it looks like I can't escape' [Tou chuckles]. So I went to the Australian embassy, filled out all the forms and did everything, and then I went—and at that time not many Lao students were very keen to go to Australia at all. It's sort of just something way down there nobody knew much about, but because there were a lot of Americans in Laos at the time, in civilian clothes, and a lot of USAID people, everybody wanted to go to America, but most of all, everybody wanted to go to France. So that's probably why I was doing very well on the test. Not many people were sitting for the test—only about 30 people. And they only wanted six people. So anyway, that's how it happened, and I went to Australia where from very early on, I was looking for French people to talk to, 'cause I couldn't speak good English. I mean, during my studies at the high school in Vientiane, we were studying English, but like a foreign language, three or four hours a week, and taught by

French teachers with not a very good accent, right? So when we got to Australia we had to start all over again from scratch. So it was—I spent three years in high school down there, and had to go through all the exams again, but in English this time.

(32:47) Were you able to keep in contact with your family reasonably well while you were in Australia?
Yeah, quite reasonably well. Yeah, we were able to—not so much writing to my mother and the rest of the family who lived in Pha Khao, but with one of my brothers who was studying in Vientiane. Yeah, we were able to write quite regularly, and he then shared the news with the family. And also the Australian government was very generous. They let us come back home at the end of each year for two months, for the long vacation. So in '65—I went there on the 19th of September, 1965, and then in 1966, '67, '68, I was able to come back for holiday. And in 1968, on the plane to Long Cheng, I met Pop Buell [Edgar "Pop" Buell, from Hamilton, Indiana, was a retired US farmer who worked in Laos through International Volunteer Services and later under USAID. He eventually worked out of Sam Thong, where he advocated education for all Hmong children and helped build and staff a hospital.], and he was full of whiskey, but he was telling me so many nice things, I was really very grateful. He said, 'Not many Hmong'—(he called us Meo at that time)—'Not many Meo students go to study abroad. You are one of the very few, so you have to study really hard and try to make it back to help your people.' So I thought, 'Oh gee…'

(34:55) More pressure!
Yeah. What pressure and what honor! So anyway, that really sort of encouraged me a bit, because when I was down there in Australia I was really homesick the first two years—really homesick. Because everything was so different—cultural difference, language, food, but mostly no family, no familiar faces and environment. It was an experience. It helped me grow up and face life.

(35:37) Were the Australian people, or at least the students and faculty that you interacted with reasonably friendly and supportive, or—
Yeah. Well, I think that on the whole, most Australian students were—in the '60s, [there were] not many Asian [people] living there. I mean, there were Chinese migrants, immigrants who started going there in the late 19th century, but not too many of them. You had the odd Chinese restaurants here and there, so the Asian face is not an unfamiliar face, though people still stare at you quite a bit. But what I would say is that I couldn't fit in very well, because—and not only me, but some of my friends as well—because the whole system was completely different from what I was used to—completely the reversal. If you are best at sports you are the hero of your class, whatever sport, you know? But if you are very good at academic studies, who cares? [Tou and interviewer laugh] And I used to be very good at academic studies, and the first time I was ignored and I felt like I just wasn't encouraged to pursue my studies, but more encouraged to do sports, to fight with my classmates in the sporting field doing rugby, football, tennis, and all that. Well, we are very small in bodies, so we are the worst at the sporting field! And I think that in Australia that made me very unhappy, because I couldn't care less about these sports. I came here to study, not to do sports! We were put in a boarding school—private Anglican church school. I mean, the government put us in this expensive church school so that they don't have to do a lot of work looking after us. And also at this school, for the first time we are to go to pray and worship and all that—which I'm not averse to, 'cause I read the Bible and went to Catholic church before in Vientiane a number of times. But to do it every night, every Sunday, when I really want to read my novel [Tou and interviewer laugh], sort of made me very, very unhappy being there. But in terms of actual racism, that sort of thing, there was not so much overt or intentional [racism]. Maybe something accidental. People would

never call you anything, call you names, you know? And also, I think because it is like a—mostly the kids are from middle- to upper-class, rich families, maybe they were well-brought up or something, I don't know, but I didn't really experience any overt racism. But what I [was] really unhappy about, was those things I told you about [Tou chuckles].

(39:53) Sports!
Yeah. So in the end I decided to do sailing. But they were real hard —they have rowing, they have sailing. Rowing—I can't row! I need big muscles, too. So they said, 'All right, since you are no good at anything, you go sailing' [All laugh]. So we went. I thought also about canoeing, but [you] still need a lot of muscle. I nearly drowned a few times [All laugh]. 'Cause in the bay, it's not just a little river—we were rowing in the bay, and when the big ship came, [makes motion of boat rocking, maybe tipping over]. Yeah, you need a lot of work! Anyway, I decided to take up sailing and I really enjoyed it! I was really good at sailing, a little boat or bigger boat. So in my three years there I spent mostly sailing, and then they decided they wanted to have a soccer team, and for some reason they decided all the Asian kids should be on the soccer team [All laugh]. So yeah, I was put on the soccer team—it wasn't so bad. It was not so competitive, like we didn't have competition with other schools, like in rugby or cricket and other more—

(41:22) [Yours was] more intramural
Yeah. So that's how I spent my first three years down there.

(41:30) So you finished school in Australia. Did you go back to Laos, did you stay in Australia—what happened next for you?
Well, when I finished high school, the intention was for us to prepare for university by studying high school first so that not only our English would be good enough for university study, but that we be well-grounded in the subjects that we needed to do later in university. So after I finished high school, I came back for vacation, and that's when Long Cheng was—some Vietnamese soldiers came to Long Cheng, and I spent a few nights running around, with bullets flying over our heads. There is one—around that time, a few—just a handful of Vietnamese soldiers infiltrated Long Cheng, and tried to destroy the air strip or the airplanes there, whatever. But I think they were caught and they were killed.

(42:57) I was talking to Lee Pao [Xiong] about that. He remembers seeing the bodies of Vietnamese soldiers there when he was just a boy.
I didn't actually see them, but I—because of that, all the soldiers and—well, everybody has got guns at that time, and they were very edgy, so every little sign or every little torch they see in the night, sort of [makes a low, sighing noise] everybody fired at that. So because of that, we just spent a few nights hiding in the creek, hiding behind bushes, spending our time in muddy rivers and so on, which was all a false alarm. And also, that last year [1968], when I went back home, I was working for the CIA for the first time.

(44:02) And what did they have you do?
Translation. So I was doing nothing big, but it was a very interesting experience for me.
So you were translating from what to what?
From Lao to English, largely because of his [Tou's] father, I was staying with my brother-in-law's, and he was stationed in Pha Khao, and the prisoner of war detention center was located there. So one day we met these CIA officers on the air strip. We were just checking on some airplanes, as they came landing. And so we started talking [with one of these two American officers] and I was

telling him about me studying in Australia and he said, 'Oh, your English is so good! You have to come and work for me. I need a good translator.' So what happened was, when they got a prisoner of war from the battlefield, mostly Vietnamese, they brought him in to the detention center, which is the first point of interview—interrogation. They would then make the prisoner—all tied up—crouch on the ground and they sit on the desk looking down and interrogating the person in Lao or Vietnamese. And then this would get translated into Lao, because there's no Vietnamese translator or interpreter there. [It would] get translated into Lao and then from Lao into English for the CIA officer. There were two of them there, as I said. And I know one—the one that was very friendly with me was called John Delavarane, and he used to give me his address, and I remember that it was in one of the eastern states near New Jersey. [Interviewer asks him to say the name again] He gave me his real name, but the other guy wasn't very friendly, maybe because I wasn't working for him. His code name was Zorro. This Zorro wasn't very talkative, either. But John, he talked a lot, just talking—we went around a lot, because later we became good friends, and I took him to the village and we talked in Hmong, and he tried to learn all kinds of things. Of course, a lot of other CIA officers were working with the Hmong, but they mostly kept to themselves— because of the language barrier mostly. But I spent about three months in Pha Khao, and I spent three months translating. I would translate the report from—sometime the interrogation was done by some local military officers who wrote the report down in Lao, and I translated it into written English for John. I don't know what he did with it, or if he sent it on. But then a few days later the prisoner would be sent away somewhere, disappear, then other new ones would come in. So it worked like that. And I don't know where they took them, [if] they took them to the jungle, they took them just a few blocks away and did something to them, or took them to another prison far away. I don't know. They never tell you. But it was a very interesting experience for me, but I didn't see any torture or anything. So for about two years after we [he and John] came in contact, we kept writing to each other but John just stopped writing one day. I later heard that he was assigned to this rescue mission in Iran when they went to the desert and the big helicopters crashed. And I was told that he was one of those who was injured. So it was an interesting encounter.

(49:37) So once you finished working for the CIA, what did you do next?
When I finished high school, I just enrolled in the University [of New South Wales]. I went back to Australia after I worked with the CIA officer and in 1969 I started my university studies, and I chose social work because every time I came home, there were all these poor, starving refugees with nowhere to go, and no food. I thought I might be able to do something for them, but then I was wrong, because after I did two years of social work, it's all about counseling. It's all about case work, working on advising people on how to sort out their personal problems. And I thought, 'Oh my God! How can I do this in Laos? There are thousands of starving people! I can't just give advice —and nobody would employ me. And the government will just be wasting its money on me.' So there's no such thing like Western social work in Laos. So I started reading about social welfare and social work in third world countries, and I thought, 'Oh it's so different in approach! It's all community development that has come under social work.' So I thought, 'Oh, but these studies at the university that I was studying have no community development as a subject for me.' So okay, I tried to struggle on and finish my degree and got honors for it, but I wasn't happy about what I studied, so I asked for an extension to do a Master's [Degree] in community development. But it was very difficult. And it was, again, his [Tou's] father—yeah, I owe a <u>lot</u> to your father. And we were really helping each other. His father then—well, I mean I applied formally through the official channels of the Columbo Plan scheme—the Australian government and the Lao Education Ministry, but my brother-in-law also helped by directly having meetings with high officials in Laos and Touby Lyfoung was also very instrumental in helping me. Together with your father they often

went together, because Touby knew the Minister for Education. Touby was Minister for Social Welfare at that time. But social welfare at that time meant flood relief and disaster relief, that sort of thing. So I owe a lot to my uncle, Touby Lyfoung as well. They went to see the Minister for Education, and your father told me the minister wouldn't look at them. And after a minute the minister said, 'Why does he want to stay on? Everybody has to come home and serve their country when they finish the bachelor degree. No one is allowed to do postgraduate study.' So they didn't know what to say, and Touby said, 'Oh, but this student is <u>really</u> good. He wants to study rural development because most of Laos is rural and has a lot of villages that need development. And we have no one studying rural development.' So [the minister] said, 'Oh, OK, you go and I'll let you know.' So many weeks later they told me that I could stay on and do my Master's. So I focused my Master's on community development among the displaced people in Laos, 'cause around the time it was 1972 and there wasn't this Paris agreement, ceasefire yet. And actually USAID [he pronounces it "YOOS-aid"] was very, very helpful, providing me with—when I told them, 'Okay, this is what I want to focus on for my thesis (and I did it by thesis, not by study).

(56:04) [Interviewer asks where he went to university in Australia]
University of New South Wales, in Sydney. So I was focusing on that particular topic, and because they wouldn't allow me to come back to do field work in Laos, I had to do everything by correspondence and through literature. But USAID was very, very helpful. The director was very, very encouraging, supportive, and he asked me to have a set of questions for him, and I sent him all the questions I could think of, and he provided all the information, (not him, but his people) along with the relevant publications, and I had all the information I needed, and anything that was not in the annual reports or publications, they answered me directly by letter with statistics, everything—beautiful! They were very, very helpful.

(56:57) So when did you finish your thesis?
I finished that in 1974. And then—yeah, I started in '73 and then finished in '74. In '72 I got my bachelor's degree. So I was just getting ready to come home, you know? Because when I finished in '74, I submitted [my] thesis, and then they said, 'OK, you pass, but your graduation is not on until April 1975—

(58:45) Oh my goodness…
—so I said, 'OK, I'll wait around.' And I was working in some factory, trying to make some money. And then even before I had the graduation and got my degree, [the communists took Laos] and my family's in Thailand. And I said, "Oh, wow! What am I going to do now?' So that's how it happened.

(59:21) So you're in Australia, you're family's in Thailand, and you have to ask yourself, 'Where am I going to go, what am I going to do, and how is my family?'
That's right. And nearly all my family had escaped from Laos. Most of my student friends had returned to Laos, or some were there [in Australia] but were undecided. Some said that they would return, no matter what. The Pathet Lao took over in April 1975, right? That's when they physically took over the country and many Hmong fled to Thailand—although they didn't declare their victory until the second of December. So before I knew anything, Grandma and all your uncles were in Thailand with your dad [addressing Tou]. And I said, 'Oh my God, what can I, what should I do now? So there was no point for me to go back to Laos. I've got no one there. If they're all in Thailand it would be a danger for me if I went to Laos. We didn't know what the Pathet Lao would do. Everybody was so scared. And—well, all the Western countries were very sympathetic, too, at

that moment. So then I applied to the Australian government to stay on as an asylum-seeker. It took them quite a while to make a decision. It took them about, maybe five, six months. So in the meantime I was just working away in the factory, supporting myself.

(1:01:27) Was your family able to get word to you about where they were and that they were all right?

Yeah, because before that, we had regular contact. As I said, by then, two of my brothers were studying in Dong Dok—in the teacher's college in Vientiane. It's called Dong Dok—you say that name and everybody [will] know Dong Dok Teacher's College. So we were in regular contact. And then as they were going to Thailand, my younger brother, [to Tou], Uncle Cher Wa, he wrote to me and said, 'We are now in Thailand. You'd better not come back to Laos.' Because I was like a person with no country—no papers—I couldn't come to Thailand to visit the family, so—but then, Professor William Geddes, who wrote that well-known book on the Hmong in Thailand called *Migrants of the Mountains*—he was—in those days he was one of the very few people who were interested in the Hmong and who had written anything on the Hmong. He was teaching at Sydney University, teaching anthropology there. I heard about him writing a book about the Hmong in Thailand. One day I contacted him (that was before I finished my Master's thesis) and said, 'I'm very interested in your book. Could I have a look?' And he said, 'It's still in manuscript.' I said, 'Yes, even in manuscript. I would like to know more about my people, because I have been here for so long, and I want to know how other people see them.' And he said, 'OK.' He was very happy to meet me, actually, because he never thought a Hmong person would be in Australia, because all the Hmong he ever saw were growing opium in the hills in Thailand. He was very surprised. So he said, 'Why don't you come over to my house and I'll show you the manuscript?' I went there, and the first thing I saw on his manuscript was—it said *Migrants of the Mountains: A Study of the* ***Miao*** *Socioeconomy*. And I said to him, 'Look, we hate to be called Miao, and firstly you should try at least to call us Hmong.' And he said, 'Oh, it's too late now.' It's too late now because it's already in camera format—camera-ready. So he said, 'It's too late now, but I'll make a note, an extra note.' And he—now you can take a look at his book, and he made an extra note: 'These people, the people in this book that are described as Miao; they prefer to be called Hmong' [Tou laughs]. Anyway, I read the manuscript, and there was a lot in there that I disagreed with, because he said that the Hmong institution of polygamy arose directly from the opium economy. And I said, 'Why [do] you say that? Even Hmong who don't grow opium have many wives. I don't know where it comes from, but many Hmong have [multiple] wives and they don't grow opium.' But now I go back to read his book and I agree with him. I agree with him. I just read it a few months ago, and I agree with him, because he's talking not about opium, but he's talking about economic success. So what he's saying is that, in places—because in those days the Hmong only made money from growing opium, and no other commodity, because they just didn't know how, didn't have the means to do otherwise. But what he's trying to say is that rich people can afford more than one wife, so the more rich they are, the more they tend to marry more than one wife. And this is true. But because his book is mostly about opium growing, I got the wrong understanding. But there were little things in there that I disagreed with him. So he said, 'Why don't you just do it yourself? [Interviewer guffaws] Why don't I just find you a scholarship, and you do a Ph.D.? And you go to Thailand—' well, I can't go to Laos anymore. 'You go to Thailand. I have many friends there. And you can write a book yourself. It would be so good, because you have the understanding and you have the language.' And he didn't speak a word of Hmong; he used Thai interpreters. So I said, 'Yes, why not? If you can find me a scholarship when I finish my Master's. And I would try to do it, but I don't even know if they [the Australian government] will let me stay on.' Luckily, you know, what I said earlier about the family escaping to Thailand, is a big help towards this plan. And I went

to—so when the family got to Thailand, I told Professor Geddes, 'Look, I can't go home anymore. Now is the best time for you to find me a scholarship. And I will go to Thailand. But then I don't have a passport. I don't have a—.' So he was trying very hard to help me get my application for asylum-seeker approved, and then very quickly they approved me—my citizenship. And so I spent about six months at Sydney University trying to study anthropology. And I really tried—he gave me lots of books to read, and many things to catch up on, and I attended a lot of the post-graduate courses, so after six months—but within that time, he [Geddes] visited the family in the refugee camp, because he was coming to Thailand to do some field work in Northern Thailand. And I said, 'Oh, can you visit my family for me? 'Cause I can't go.' I didn't have much money. I only gave him like a hundred dollars [Tou and he laugh] to take to the family in the refugee camp. And then my mother said, 'Oh! My son has been in Australia all these years and all he could send was $100, and we're starving!'—in Namphong there [Interviewer sighs to indicate the guilt Dr. Lee must have felt]. Anyway, it was very easy in those days to apply for refugees to resettle in Australia—much the same like in America. There was no form at all. I just wrote to the Australian embassy just saying, 'I have a family. My family is in Namphong refugee camp. Here are their names and dates of birth (most of which I made up. I can't remember them) and I would like to apply for them to be accepted into Australia. But at first they didn't want to accept any refugees from Laos or Cambodia, because they said that they didn't commit any troops there. They only accepted Vietnamese refugees. So we had to make a lot of representation to the Australian Parliament—you know, the Australian government, and in the end, for some reason—I think that a lot of people were lobbying and they could see, OK, they had to do it [accept Lao refugees]. And I'm sure there was pressure from the US government as well. 'Cause they tend to do what the US government asks them to do.

(1:12:18) [Interviewer thanks Dr. Lee for his time and asks if they can briefly discuss a couple of current issues]. One of the big issues in the United States is this divide, particularly in the elder generation, between those who follow General Vang Pao and those who follow Dr. Yang Dao. And then of course, there are younger professionals who are, in many cases, simply trying to make a life for themselves and their families here. How do you see that sorting out in the next ten to twenty years? And what's your take on those divides here—I imagine it's not quite as big a deal in Australia.

Right, not in Australia—well, a little bit. But I will tell you my frank opinion, provided you don't quote me, OK?

[Interviewer says Dr. Lee can edit these comments however he wishes]

Oh no, no, you're free to use it, just don't attribute it to me. But I leave it up to your judgment. Yeah, this is a long, long, long-standing problem, especially for us younger and more educated Hmong. I see that it will sort itself out very soon. It is already sorting itself out at a covert level, under the table—I mean without a lot of publicity and direct confrontation. I think that, if you ask the majority of young, educated Hmong, they all share much the same attitudes and opinions about this problem. If you ask the older generation, it is the opposite—very pro-Vang Pao, very steeped in the belief that Vang Pao will get them back to Laos under a right-wing democratic regime, whereas the younger [Hmong] don't see any prospect for this, or possibility and may not even wish to, really, because they are here, they are assimilated into the American life, way of thinking, and quite like it. The homeland, in the sense of Laos, is a very remote memory or, for many, they have not even been there. And so it just keeps getting more and more remote for them. And they have less and less interest or direct involvement. It's just not relevant to them. And I think that a lot of the young people realize it, because I have been with the General, trying to urge people to join him. In 1985, I spent about half a year with him, but my intention was really to get interviews [All laugh]. But you can't get something for free, you know. So along the way—in those days there were very few

Hmong Ph.Ds—just me and Yang Dao. And he was very keen to have somebody, a Ph.D. associated with his work and himself so he can recruit more supporters. So I said, 'All right.' He was asking me for help. Why not? I will get something for myself along the way as well. So I got a lot of very good interviews from him, as well as—and this is the most valuable thing for me, I got a first[-hand] insider experience of what he was trying to do. What is the real purpose against what is the declared purpose.

(1:17:37) How would you describe that real purpose, as you see it?
The real purpose—again, with a lot of caution—the real purpose is to make money. But this is not the declared purpose. The declared purpose is, 'Give us money so we can fight, pay for the liberation of Laos.'

(1:18:13) This fabled return to Laos that will never happen…
Yeah, that's right. Has any, in history, in the whole history of mankind, has a country been taken back by the side that lost—I mean, the whole country? I haven't seen a single country that has been re-taken, re-possessed by the old regime. I mean, it's not only that, it's just not the right time. I've been with him to Washington, D.C. lobbying for US government's support and the treatment we got there is a very clear indication that it is not the time, it is not the place to even dream about this kind of thing anymore. I mean, he knows that very well. But when they come back to the Hmong, it's a different story. I mean, all these trips that they are making here and his supporters are making to Thailand, China, Washington, D.C. are just a front. But anyway, I just think—and now, a lot of people know about this scheming game. And particularly the younger, educated people. But I think that because a lot of people feel that they owe a lot to him, they owe their coming to—and he keeps hammering this down on people—that everybody, <u>every</u> single Hmong owe it to him for coming to America and to other Western countries.

(1:20:34) So there doesn't seem to be any indication that he may, now that he's older, back off on the hard press with the money raising and worry more about building his legacy and his reputation once he's gone?
I don't think so, and I don't think that he has any interest in trying to prolong his legacy, to build his legacy. But to begin with, I think he knows very well there is no one who can replace him. No one. And mind you, I am very impressed with him as a person and as a leader. Many aspects might be very authoritarian, and something we might not like, but there are many other things that nobody can do as well. I'm very impressed by his charisma, when he was, say, a bit younger, and by his memory. He has got a <u>super</u> memory, a little bit like Napoleon. And I'm really, really impressed with this—because I've been with him and I saw it happen. He can just remember people's names after being introduced—hundreds of them, when I can't even remember two. The other thing is he is very charismatic for the Hmong.

(1:22:21) I met him just once, and I was very impressed.
Yeah, very impressed. He's very sure of himself, very charismatic, and that's what people need. But I think that sometime he's just <u>too</u> sure of himself in certain situations, and when he should have, perhaps, been more humble or maybe take more advice from other people.

(1:22:53) One other issue that I'm sure you've studied to some degree is the situation of the Hmong who remain in Laos. And there are many different claims about how many there are, and whether they are being attacked, and all of the different things that are being said about the Hmong in Laos.

Yeah, I just gave a paper that I completed last month to Tou to read the other night. I don't know if there's good enough information in there—and I would be happy to give it to you, but—were you finished with your question?

Yes.

This is also very controversial, and I only share with you what I believe from all the research that I have done on the subject although I don't think I have done enough direct research, both outside Laos and inside Laos. I have never been to these people themselves, but I have been to people who had dealings with them, or who were former members of these groups, and I have interviewed them. As well I have interviewed many of these liberation groups in Thailand and working with Gen.Vang Pao for a while and knowing the claims and counter-claims about these groups in the jungles. When we were in Thailand, when I was in—we were actually calling them on the radio, and I was very impressed—yes, very impressed, but I was also very sad, depressed. In all my life, I never cried in front of everybody [like] when I was talking to these people in the jungle. And they said, 'Come and help us. Today five of us have been killed,' or 'Three of us have just died from starvation. We just buried them a few minutes ago,' and things like that. So I was so touched and saddened by all of this, and I really believed that, at the time, we should do all we can to try to help these people, no matter what, whether it is by means of helping them to get out into Thailand (because in '85 people still managed to get into Thailand and be accepted into the refugee camps) or trying to do what these liberation groups were claiming to be doing. Anyway, based on all of that, I have now come to the conclusion that—well, a lot of these jungle groups were really stooges of the liberation groups—now, I mean. Early on, there were resistance groups in their own right, because they couldn't get out of the country, they were being chased around by Vietnamese and Lao troops, and maybe some of them even put up a fight, had a battle here or a few clashes there, but nothing major. But a lot of them firmly believed that they were part of a liberation movement. They did this quite separately with no coordination. But I think that's in the past—after the Vietnamese decimated a lot of them, and particularly in the last five years when they saw no progress, and when they saw few real supporters from overseas and after the camps in Thailand were gone ('cause most of the support went through the camps; whether they were from Hmong in America or from some other country, they all went through the refugee camps. But the Thais closed them [in 1992], so the door was closed. and contact was lost, and they had not much contact anymore with the outside world. And those liberation groups—no more contact with the inside groups—the groups inside Laos (***). And mainly because the Thai now turned to Laos and [are] trying to become a friendly neighbor, so they had to do away with all these liberation groups and their activities in Thailand. And the [Wat] Tham Krabok camp that closed last year were part of that process. So, with the Tham Krabok people—not that the Tham Krabok Hmong people were doing anything much, but I think that with this link to this outside world completely cut off, the only link they now have, that exists now between Vang Pao and some of the groups in the jungle is a radio station—the Hmong-Lao radio. Do you ever listen to—oh, it's all in Hmong and Lao, so it's difficult, but you should try to listen to it.

(1:29:38) I'll sit with Tou and he can tell me what's going on [chuckles].

Yeah, you can listen to it here; it's actually broadcast from here, so you can either listen or you can listen on the internet. It's available on the internet. If you listen, it sounds like Laos is full of gunfire and battles going on. But I've been there many times; it's all very quiet.

(1:30:15) So this could, at least conceivably, be just another part of the Vang Pao money-raising machine to create a sense of anxiety or even hysteria about what's happening to the Hmong people—

That's how I see it, and that's how a lot of other people see it. But if you say this in the open—
You can't.
Yeah, we can't. And this is the mystery for me about the American government. Because in Australia, anybody trying to do this would be—would spend their life inside [prison]. But what's the problem in America? I ask many people in America, and they say, 'Oh, it's a free country.' OK, it's a free country, but look at the impact, not only here, but also back in the so-called homeland. How many people have died because somebody said this is what they are going to do? If you go into the Lao Human Rights Council web site, all those claims about torture and human rights violations by the Lao government, and how many Hmong have died at the hands of the Vietnamese and the Lao government by the Big Man and the Lao Human Rights Council—you know Dr. Pao Ge Vang, who died recently—last August? All those claims make your hair stand on its end, because a lot of it's just hot air. And because of this, my interest in all these claims and counter-claims, I have tried to go to Laos, very quietly, without letting anybody know who I am, apart from my relatives, and try to look and try to listen, try to confirm and understand, and I came away with a very, very different impression or conclusion. As I said, when I went there, I talked to a lot of the former jungle people who now live peacefully as citizens, farmers, and I also talked to the guy in the government who is responsible for re-settling these jungle people into civilian lives, into a normal life. I was very impressed by him. He is a Hmong, and he is a very, very impressive and charismatic Hmong.

(1:33:39) So there's a Hmong individual in this position.
Yeah, a Hmong, but in this position in the Lao government.
So that alone says a great deal.
Oh, no, there're many Hmong, many very impressive Hmong in the Lao government, but if I say this, I am dead—or they will say I am a communist. They had already said—just merely knowing that I have been visiting Laos, I am already branded as a communist. The other day Vang Pao's Number One man —do you know him? He's in California. This guy often represents VP at functions. He's his brother-in-law. They came to my father-in-law's funeral just last week— so I just went to say, 'Hello,' and greet them, and he was telling me, 'Some Hmong really, really love the Red Lao,' as an indirect way to describe me to myself in my face. So I said to him, 'No, some Hmong are not a great lover of the Pathet Lao. Some Hmong [are] just great lovers of truth.' But anyway, I know that—just to answer your question, the issue will continue to linger on for many years, so long as we have these external claims and propaganda fed to other people in Laos and in the jungle. Because everybody in Laos can receive the broadcasts. And those who get into trouble with the government are those who suffer, who are too poor, who, at the slightest provocation run into the jungle. And this is not just Hmong, but Khmu and even Lao—not a lot of Lao, mostly, number one the Hmong, number two, the Khmu, and a few Lao, particularly government officials who get into trouble with the government. They have nowhere to run, so they run to the Hmong in the jungle and get shelter there. And these people who join the Hmong also feed negative information to them, and that will perpetuate their resistance in the jungle. So I see the problem as being caused not only by the outside, but also by the Lao government itself, the Lao regime as well. As long as you are authoritarian, you try to kill people, you put people in prison without trial and all that, people will keep running into the jungle and form little resistance groups, whether Hmong or not—it just happens that the Hmong are the ones doing it at the moment, but—and on top of that, then you get these external influences. So I do see it to be a very difficult problem, and will last for quite a while yet, even though compared to the number of people who have already come out of the jungle to live under the new regime, there are not very—probably—my estimate would be that former resistance members who are now living peacefully under the regime would be maybe twenty,

thirty thousand, as against two or three thousand who are still in the jungle; whereas before we were talking about 20,000 or more that were in the jungle.

(1:38:49) Most of them are either dead or they've escaped
That's right. Most of them are either dead or have escaped. Or some are here. Some have given up and decided to live under the new government. I'm not saying that the new government has treated them nicely. For the followers, it's probably not a problem, but for the leaders who come and join the government, a lot of them have met with very suspicious circumstances—death, disappearance, or outright imprisonment, which is, is a sense, quite legal. When you're talking about law, about rebellion, rebels, then it's quite OK for a government to do whatever it likes with rebels, to pacify the country, to get rid of the rebellion by whatever means.

(1:40:24) People want peace and order.
Yeah, exactly. I mean, even if that happened in America, [the] same kind of thing would happen to people who take up arms against a government. So a lot of us don't see it that way, but a lot of us—if you read [the literature of] these human rights groups, [pauses] or the Fact Finding Comm,ission on Laos, anything, it seems that the government that has rebels has no rights [to respond] — and should not do anything to these rebels.

(1:41:11) Well, all of these arguments seem to come down to the same question, which is 'Who's in charge?'
Exactly, exactly, and I think that it's a matter of time. It's just too complex and too difficult at the moment, so a lot of people are saying, 'OK, just wait. One day it will disappear.'

[Interviewer thanks Dr. Lee profusely for his time and insight, recording stops.]