

## “Contesting Illiteracy and Literacy: Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet and Pahawh”

By MaiGer Moua

In 1978, a French priest and scholar explained, “...the Hmong are as poor in history as in geography” because, “they have kept no records of their past.” His observation was part of a long tradition of placing Hmong within the parameters of western binary conceptions of literacy and illiteracy. An examination of Shong Lue Yang’s Pahawh script illuminates the ways that literacy and illiteracy were conceived by some Hmong as mutually constitutive rather than binary oppositions. To Westerners, marking Hmong as illiterate meant a natural deficiency of reading and writing skills. They failed to see that illiteracy was a political decision for some Hmong. Their decision to remain illiterate expressed experiences of statelessness, displacement, and marginalization. Laotian Hmong in the U.S. who learned Pahawh and those who used the western-devised Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) writing system shared the desire to contest their marginalization and popular perception of their illiteracy. Both offered Laotian Hmong refugees opportunities to construct a literate Hmong American identity. However, Pahawh remained more entrenched in politics of belonging while RPA became a foundational tool for assimilation into the United States.

This paper examines literacy and illiteracy of Hmong in Asia and Laotian Hmong refugees in the United States. It traces Laotian Hmong consumption of western ideas of literacy and illiteracy in their fight to substantiate themselves as Hmong Americans.