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Dialect dispute has St. Paul Hmong group calling for Dai Thao to quit; he wants FBI probe

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Visitors view the newly unveiled Xiang Jiang Pavilion in Phalen Regional Park on Nov. 3, 2018. The structure is a gift from St. Paul's sister city Changsha in China and the first phase of a 1.2 acre China garden. In exchange, Changsha got several Snoopy statues from St. Paul. (Deanna Weniger / Pioneer Press)

It started with Snoopy, Charlie Brown and Lucy in a colorful Hmong dress. But what began as a friendly effort to celebrate the Southeast Asian community in both Minnesota and China has resulted in a St. Paul City Council member calling for an investigation, at least temporarily freezing efforts to expand a Chinese garden at Lake Phalen.

"It's really kind of sad," said William Zajicek, a Lake Phalen-area resident, former 3M industrial tape engineer and president of the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society.

The Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society spent years fundraising for a major gift exchange between St. Paul boosters and the capital city's sister city of Changsha, an ancestral home of the Hmong community in central China. The project has grown over time, fueled in part by the legacy of Minneapolis-born cartoonist Charles Schulz.

In 2018, Changsha received five sizable statues based on characters from Schulz's popular comic strip "Peanuts," including a festive Lucy, as well as Snoopy dressed as Joe Cool. In return, St. Paul received a replica of China's famous 18th-century Aiwan Pavilion, which is now installed at Lake Phalen.



PROTEST OVER LANGUAGE

Last week, two dozen Hmong Green-speaking elders involved with the "Mong Equality Committee" braved wind and rain to stand in front of St. Paul City Hall and demand that Dai Thao, St. Paul's first Hmong city council member, resign.



Speakers of the traditional Hmong Green dialect say the letter is missing for good reason, and they've become increasingly vocal in their efforts to keep it that way.

The conflict, brewing for months, has been featured on Hmong news channels on YouTube and AM radio. It's also laid bare deep-rooted tensions within the community between some speakers of Hmong Green and Hmong White, which are said to be about as different as British English and American English.

ZongKhang Yang, a film actor and producer who chairs the Mong Equality Committee, said engravings added to two stand-alone stones near the base of the pavilion are inscribed in the Hmong White dialect. In that script, which is the more common in the metro and the U.S. as a whole, a writer would refer to the Hmong people as "Hmoob."

Two other stones were inscribed last year in the Hmong Green dialect, in which Hmong people are referred to as "Moob," with no "H."

"We were just showing the cultural diversity of the Hmong community, thinking that was a valuable thing," said Zajicek, the Garden Society president. "I think most of the community doesn't understand why there would be a controversy, but some folks took offense."

'NOT ALL PEOPLE AGREE ON THE CHOICES MADE'

Approached by concerned members of the Hmong community, Dai Thao, the city council member, went on Facebook last fall and questioned why the Hmong Green dialect appeared on the stone. A hornet's nest of pushback immediately erupted on social media in all directions.

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Two dozen mostly elder protestors here demanding that the letter "H" not be added to the word "Moob" on a Lake Phalen monument, which is how you spell Hmong in the Hmong-Green dialect. They're demanding that Council Member Dai Thao resign...

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A call to the Hmong 18 Council — the organization that purports to set standards and settle disputes between the community's 18 clans — was not returned. But before retiring as the longstanding director of St. Paul Parks and Recreation at the end of February, Mike Hahm issued a statement acknowledging the Moob/Hmoob debate.

The outgoing Parks and Rec director effectively apologized for not alerting the clans in advance about the missing "H."

"It is clear to me that not all people agree on the choices made, yet it is clear to me these choices were made with good intentions and a rationale," Hahm wrote. "Despite all of the work and research performed by this group and others to chart the best course for this project ... some important voices in the community were not aware of the project work, and others were surprised by the final product. Specifically, the Hmong 18 Council feels they were not fully aware of the project work to date, and I am compelled to improve that."

Unimpressed by efforts to smooth over the controversy and resolutely in support of keeping the "H" out of the picture, ZongKhang Yang and other protesters have called upon Dai Thao to resign the elected council position he's held since November 2013.

"That's why we're here today," ZongKhang Yang said Tuesday, flanked by some two-dozen rain-soaked supporters under a tent erected along Kellogg Boulevard outside City Hall.

COUNCIL MEMBER SAYS HE RECEIVED THREATENING LETTER



St. Paul City Council member Dai Thao. (Jean Pieri / Pioneer Press file)

In response, the council member issued a written statement the same day saying his Ward 1 office and Parks and Rec began receiving community complaints last September. As a council member, he invited members of the Hmong community to get involved with the project and recommended greater community engagement and transparency.

Since then, he said, he's received vicious physical threats in writing, and he accused those responsible of trying to organize a breakaway Hmong republic in Southeast Asia.

Dai Thao said members of the Mong Equality Committee are associated with longstanding efforts to create a new Hmong homeland outside Laos, which has been a pipe dream in the eyes of many skeptics, who note the communist



The council member, who did not return calls for comment, said in his written statement that the “H” dispute was a ruse to distract attention, and he publicly called for the Minnesota Attorney General’s Office and the FBI to investigate any use of public funds. A reporter’s call to the FBI was not returned last week.

‘A CULTURAL STATEMENT, NOT A POLITICAL ONE’

“I don’t know what he’s talking about,” Zajicek, the Garden Society president, said of Dai Thao. “It’s so self-destructive. It’s diverting us from what could really be an amazing feature in St. Paul. But we’re moving forward. The garden is a cultural statement, not a political one. We appreciate the diversity, even if some of the other folks don’t. Many young Hmong kids don’t know how to speak Hmong, much less write it, and the thought was it would be a touchstone to their culture.”

Clare Cloyd, a spokesperson for St. Paul Parks and Recreation, said all funding received by the department has gone toward the design and construction of the project.

Despite being overshadowed by the “H” debate, Cloyd said the city is transitioning to the [next phase of projects at the Phalen Regional Park China Garden](#) and is eager to rope in additional community input.

“Despite all the controversy over Hmong dialect, it’s an exciting time,” said Zajicek, who hopes to extend an existing garden to Phalen Creek with additional trees, walkways, a picnic-friendly patio and plantings appropriate for a Chinese garden. “We’re planning phase two right now.”

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Frederick Melo was once sued by a reader for \$2 million but kept on writing. He came to the Pioneer Press in 2005 and brings a testy East Coast attitude to St. Paul beat reporting. He spent nearly six years covering crime in the Dakota County courts before switching focus to the St. Paul mayor’s office, city council, and all things neighborhood-related, from the city’s churches to its parks and light rail. A resident of Hamline-Midway, he is married to a Frogtown





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