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Announcements:

Call for Article Submissions for the JLS:

The study of Laos and the Lao has grown significantly over the past decade. With the opening up of some historical and manuscript archives, the improvement of communication and transportation, and the launching of joint Lao-foreign research projects, Laos has attracted a number of new scholars in diverse fields of expertise. The *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) is an exciting new scholarly project which is expected to become the first and most prestigious venue for researchers who work on Laos.

We are now accepting submissions of articles, book review suggestions, review articles (extended reviews of major publications, trends in the field, or of political, social, or economic events). These submissions can cover studies on Laos, the Lao diaspora (Northeast Thailand, Europe, the Americas, Australia, and so on), or studies in regards to ethnic groups found in Laos (Hmong, Akha, Khmu, among others).

Language: Lao and English are the main languages, other languages are welcomed. Please check with the editors first before submitting articles in other languages not listed here.

Introducing a First Collection of Papers from the Fourth International Conference on Lao Studies (4ICLS)

By Guest Editors: Ian G. Baird¹ and Christine Elliott²

The Fourth International Conference on Lao Studies (4ICLS) was held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) in Madison, Wisconsin, USA, from April 19 – 21, 2013. Organized by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) and the Center for Lao Studies (CLS), based in San Francisco, California, the conference—the only regularly organized international Lao studies conference in the world—followed three previous, successful multidisciplinary and international Lao studies conferences. The first was organized at Northern Illinois University (NIU) in DeKalb, Illinois, USA in 2005,³ the second convened at Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, Arizona, USA in 2007,⁴ and the third was held at Khon Kaen University (KKU) in Khon Kaen, Thailand in 2010.

The 4ICLS brought together over 250 scholars, students and community members from around the world with various interests related to Lao studies. There were a total of 38 panels organized and 120 individual presentations were made. A wide range of topics were covered in the presentations, from the ancient past to contemporary, and from the lowlands of Laos to the remote upland areas, and from Laos to the United States. Ian G. Baird (UW-Madison) and Vinya Sysamouth (CLS) co-chaired the conference, which received generous financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation. We were also given a grant from the Anonymous Fund at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in support of the Lao film festival, which was organized as part of the conference by Steve Arounsack (University of California-Stanislaus).

As with past international Lao studies conferences, the 4ICLS defined “Lao studies” quite broadly so as to include not only scholarly research related to ethnic Lao people in Laos, but also peoples from all ethnic groups found in Laos, including but not limited to the Hmong, Iu-Mien, Khmu, Lue, Phouan, Tai Dam, Brao, Akha, Jrou, Brou and many others. In addition, the conference covered ethnic Lao people living in other countries in Asia such as Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam, and China. Finally, the conference welcomed research presentations related to people from all the ethnic groups found in Laos but living in other parts of the world, including former refugees and their descendants and other immigrants to North America, Europe and Oceania.

This special issue of the Journal of Lao Studies (JLS) is the first of two devoted to highlighting some of the best of a wide range of papers presented at the 4ICLS. All the articles included in this collection passed through a rigorous double-blind peer-review process (two or three reviewers), and we are grateful for the helpful feedback provided by the many prominent researchers who agreed to serve as referees for individual

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³ A collection of papers from the conference was prepared by Compton et al. (2007).

⁴ A set of papers from the conference was edited by Adams and Hudak (2010).

papers. Their critical comments were crucial for ensuring the quality of the papers. We also thank Rebecca May for her expert support in copy-editing the papers. This first special issue includes eight full-length research articles, each of which variously addresses different aspects of “Lao studies” broadly defined.

The first two articles contain historical background and analysis that help ground this initial set of papers. The first of those is titled “Imagining the ‘Lao Mission’: On the Usage of ‘Lao’ in Northern Siam and Beyond,” and was written by Taylor Easum, who completed his Ph.D. in history at the UW-Madison and has recently taken a tenure-track faculty position at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Although some might wonder why a paper about the Lao is centered in northern Thailand, it vividly demonstrates an important point in Lao studies, one related to the nebulous and changing nature of “Lao” identity, by focusing on how the meaning of “Lao” has shifted over time. In particular, the paper considers what is now known as northern Thailand, but during a period when it was politically northern Siam or more historically Lanna. At present, the majority population is most frequently referred to as northern Thai, Lanna Thai, “Khon Muang,” or simply Thai, but, as Easum demonstrates, there was a time—not so long ago—when these same peoples were frequently referred to as “Lao,” something that might be surprising to many today, even those who originate from the region. Easum points out that the term Lao gradually stopped being used to refer to people in northern Siam in the first half of the 20th century. This piece complements the work of Easum’s doctoral supervisor, Thongchai Winichakul, by showing how one aspect of the Thai “geo-body” was transformed from being considered “Lao” (see Thongchai 1994). It also fits well with Soren Ivarsson’s (2008) work, even if Ivarsson’s focus was on present-day Laos rather than Thailand.

The second of the historical pieces, titled “Indochina War Refugee Movements in Laos, 1954–1975: A Chronological Overview Citing New Primary Sources” was authored by Frederic (Fritz) Benson, who now lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, USA, but spent over six years residing in Laos, from 1968 to 1974, working on development projects, particularly those linked to internal refugees who were associated with the “Secret War” (or Second Indochina War) in Laos at the time. Given Benson’s background, it is not surprising that he writes about development in Laos before 1975, the year when the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) took control of Laos and officially established, on December 2, 1975, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). This paper is particularly significant considering the dearth of recent academic studies regarding this period of Lao contemporary history.

Benson’s focus is development and refugee relief activities occurring in Laos during the Royal Lao Government (RLG) period, especially those with the support of the government of the United States of America. His article also introduces an exceptional collection of documents and images, one particularly focused on USAID supported development in Laos, and assembled by him and another American who worked in Laos during the same general period, Ernie Kuhn. It is fantastic that they made the effort to save so many materials and send them to the USA, and this resource has certainly opened new research opportunities related to the history of USA development aid in Laos. This collection is part of Southeast Asian Images and Texts (SEAIT), which is held

in the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections⁵ and is freely available to the public online.

The third, fourth, fifth and sixth articles focus on issues of cultural identity, heritage, and preservation. The first two papers deal specifically with the creation and use of textiles in the Lao context. The first of those, “Why Do They Weave?: The Role of Marriage Rights in the Textile Production of Lao-Tai Women in Houa Phan Province,” was written by Nagisa Ito, a Ph.D. candidate at the Graduate University for Advanced Studies located within the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan. Ito’s paper is based on extensive fieldwork in northeastern Laos’ Houa Phan Province and examines the cultural context for weaving as an integral part of village life. Ito wonders why women continue to weave both for personal use and for sale and determines that the creation and use of woven textiles are distinctive aspects of the cultural identity of the Lao-Tai villagers that she studied. In particular, woven textiles play a central role in marriage customs including the preparation of a bride’s trousseau and the exchange of textiles as gifts, helping to establish the bride’s place within her new husband’s family.

The next article, “Fashioning Lao Identity: Textiles, Representation and the Grand Fashion Show” also focuses on aspects of weaving in contemporary Laos. This paper, co-authored by two senior scholars in the fields of sociology and anthropology, Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black, introduces the reader to nine Lao textile companies and their fashion creations as displayed at the 10th annual Grand Fashion Show held in Vientiane, Laos as part of the Lao Handicraft Festival. According to documents cited by the authors, the main objective of the Festival was to, “enhance solidarity of craftspeople” and “to preserve ... handicraft occupation[s] [in order to] promot[e], protect ..., preserv[e], and present ... Lao handicraft designs and products.” Festival organizers also stressed the role of “cultural heritage unique to Laos” as a resource for developing new products and expanding markets for Lao fashions. Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black’s contribution begins by providing important historical background on weaving in Laos, particularly commercial weaving since the founding of the Lao PDR in 1975. The authors draw on their many decades of research in Laos, discussing how identity is conveyed through the types of garments produced and modeled. Their analysis shows how Lao textile designer-entrepreneurs convey not only their “personal identities, Lao culture and nationhood,” as they put it, but also “the fusion and border crossing of fashion elements of other cultures with Lao clothing.” This illustrates changes in textile traditions over time and in the face of globalization through weaving and design innovation as well as preservation and integration of traditional Lao weaving techniques, styles, and patterns.

The third article of this second group of papers, titled “Lao Filmmakers Break Free from their Cultural Chains” was written by Scott Christopherson, an Assistant Professor in Communication at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas. As a film studies scholar, Christopherson analyzes the small but rapidly changing film industry in Laos, focusing on the shifts that have occurred during the post-1975 period. He shows how Lao films are increasingly addressing issues unique to Lao cultural traditions and heritage both within Laos and amongst the Diaspora. This paper is, to our knowledge, the first academic article to critically assess changes in the Lao language film industry in

⁵ The link to the collection is: <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/SEAIT/USAIDLao>

Laos since the Lao PDR was established in 1975. While filmmakers in Laos continue to be constrained by the political system in the country, Christopherson shows that Lao filmmakers have gained increased freedom and flexibility in making films in recent years, especially compared to the more restrictive second half of the 1970s and early 1980s carving out “a culturally unique Lao National Cinema.” While serious limitations remain, there are certainly many more possibilities now than previously.

The sixth article, and the last of the second group, titled “The Cultural and Natural Heritage of Caves in the Lao PDR: Prospects and Challenges Related to Their Use, Management and Conservation,” was prepared by Nicholas Roberts, a graduate student in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences at James Cook University, in Cairns, Australia. His paper echoes similar themes to those of the others in this grouping of Lao cultural heritage, identity, and preservation. Roberts views caves in Laos as “living places” sharing a variety of uses and values over time. These include, for example, past and present use of caves as sites of Buddhist and animist practices and shrines, and as sites having particular meaning and use for various ethnic groups within the Lao context. However, as Roberts points out, rapid economic and social development are changing the ways caves are viewed and used, creating greater challenges for the preservation of caves’ unique natural and cultural heritage. With a particular focus on cultural and natural heritage issues associated with caves throughout Laos, this paper constitutes a valuable contribution to the field because it provides us with the most up-to-date and thorough review of research associated with caves all over Laos. Roberts’ paper also acts as a good bridge to the last two papers, with its concurrent focus on environment and development issues.

The third and last grouping of two papers engages specifically with environment, development, governance and livelihood issues. The first of those was authored by Charlotte Moser, an American who has conducted research in Laos in collaboration with IUCN—the World Conservation Union. Her paper is titled “Listening to Women Fishers on the Sekong River: Fostering Resilience in Village Fishery Co-Management.” Moser focuses on small-scale fisheries in the Sekong River Basin in southern Laos’ Attapeu Province, but with a particular emphasis on environmental and sustainability issues, fisheries co-management, resilience, and gender and women’s issues. She convincingly argues that women’s issues as they relate to small-scale wild-capture fisheries in Laos are important to better understand, but that they have been poorly studied to date. Hopefully her article will inspire others to conduct similar research in other parts of the country.

The final paper of the issue, and the second of the final set of papers, was written by Nicholas Zeller, presently a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Titled “Doing a Dam Better? Understanding the World Bank’s Eco-Governmentality in Lao Hydropower Development,” this article draws from his first Master’s thesis at the University of Tennessee (he completed a second Master’s degree in Southeast Asian Studies at UW-Madison in 2014, working with Ian Baird). Zeller strongly critiques the Nam Theun 2 (NT2) Hydropower Project in Central Laos’ Khammouane Province, so far Laos’ largest and most controversial dam. He is inspired by the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault, particularly his important work on what he called “Governmentality” (Foucault 2004). Zellers’ paper also draws on the work of sociologist Michael Goldman (2005), who has focused on eco-

governmentality linked to NT2, with special attention to the role of the World Bank in producing particular types of environmental knowledge, knowledge that serves to elevate the World Bank to the position of being the holder of expert knowledge related to this topic. The links between acceptable forms of knowledge and practice and justifications for particular large development projects are made evident. We can see how similar situations are arising in relation to the controversial dams planned for and under construction in Laos, including the Xayaburi dam in northern Laos, which is already half completed, and the Don Sahong dam in southern Laos along the border with Cambodia, which is presently in the later planning stages.

We have enjoyed putting this collection together, and hope that readers find the new varied and revealing research presented in this special issue of the JLS of value. Indeed, many of the contributions to this collection represent important new contributions to understanding people and places of relevance to Lao studies. Please look for the next set of articles coming out of the 4ICLS, which will appear in the subsequent special issue of JLS. Finally, we encourage readers to consider participating in the 5th International Conference on Lao Studies (5ICLS), which will be held at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand in July 2016.

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Imagining the 'Laos Mission': On the Usage of 'Lao' in Northern Siam and Beyond

Dr. Taylor M. Easum¹

Abstract

The wide application and flexibility of the term 'Lao' in inland mainland Southeast Asia is well-known. The ethnonym has been applied to groups in countries neighboring modern Laos, and especially in Thailand's northeast. The term was widely applied in Thailand's north as well, however, until an abrupt change in the early twentieth century, after which the term fell out of favor among local and expatriate elites in the region. This essay examines the complex life of the term 'Lao' in northern Thailand/Siam. The American Presbyterian Mission (APM) in Siam's north was founded as the 'Laos Mission,' using the term in contradistinction to the 'Siam Mission' based in Bangkok. As the mission expanded its presence to Phrae and Nan, cities with a close connection to Lao states such as Luang Phrabang, key missionaries also promoted the term 'Lao' to fuel aspirations for a regionwide mass conversion. However, Bangkok began to see the term 'Lao' as an obstacle to Thai nationalism, and so the APM gradually shifted away from promoting a distinct 'Lao' identity, and toward the policies of Bangkok, aimed at making 'Lao' into 'Siamese.' Though the APM in northern Thailand/Siam eventually aided and abetted the extension of Siamese power in mainland Southeast Asia, there was a historical moment in which the American missionaries envisioned and promoted a very different notion of 'Lao' in Southeast Asia.

Introduction

Many scholars have noted the ephemeral, constructed nature of nations. Whether as an imagined community or a colonially contested space, Laos certainly fits this bill. So what constitutes the space and population of Laos? In the conclusion to *Siam Mapped*, Thongchai Winichakul argues that, rather than searching for the supposed ancient origins of the nation, scholars should instead focus on the "obvious components" of a nation to see its "ephemeral conjuncture." He concludes with a seemingly radical thought: "It is as simple as saying that the birth of 'Siam' locates in the composition of the characters S, I, A, and M" (Winichakul 1994: 174). This essay seeks to examine the concept of 'Laos' in a similar way. Rather than follow the political lines of colonialism and nationalism that produced the modern Lao state, or trace the ethno-cultural distribution of a broadly defined Lao population and culture, either across the border into northeastern Thailand, or 'Isan,' or abroad as a refugee diaspora, this essay examines the construction of a Lao space and people through the combination of the letters L, A, O and (sometimes) S. In turn of the century America or Britain, 'Laos' could

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just as easily have been applied to Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai or Phrae as to Luang Phrabang, Vientiane or Champassak. The provinces that later became Siam's northern periphery were known to much of the outside world as 'Laos,' and their people were referred to as 'Lao' by both government officials and western observers well into the twentieth century. Thus, the provinces and populations of northern Siam were initially drawn into and later excised from the ephemeral creation that is Laos. What does this history mean for our understanding of the idea of a Lao space and Lao people? Conversely, what does the 'Laos-ness' of Siam's northern periphery tell us about the formation of both the modern Siamese state and northern Thai identity?²

This article begins by briefly considering the idea of 'Lao' in Thai history and historiography, and the view from the Siamese state, which sought to deconstruct and erase the idea of 'Laos' within its borders as it was coming to terms with the new creation of French Laos. The core of the essay examines the views of American missionaries operating in northern Siam at the turn of the twentieth century who, along with other western observers, continued to identify the land and people of Siam's north as 'Laos' well into the twentieth century. The conflicted meanings of 'Laos' erupted into a bitter dispute between Baptists and Presbyterians over evangelical jurisdiction—a fight that helped to produce an idea of a Lao space limited by the shifting ethno-racial discourse of the Thai state and of French Laos. In short, I argue that these missionaries promoted a vision of 'Laos' quite distinct from the French, British, Siamese and most—but not all—of those in the region referred to as Lao. If nothing else, the former 'Laos-ness' of northern Thailand highlights the conflicted, twisted road that led to the concept of 'Laos' as we know it today. By highlighting these alternate paths, which are so often pushed aside in historical narratives that privilege a homogenous, unified nation-state, this essay hopes to show the possibility of alternate conceptions of the northern, inland realms of mainland Southeast Asia.

The region formerly known as 'Lao'

The term 'Lao' has a very long history in mainland Southeast Asia. There are many historical debates over the local origin of the term, most of which are outside the scope of this essay. However, as Søren Ivarsson has noted, the term 'Laos' has been used since at least the middle of the sixteenth century to describe areas north and northeast of the core of Siam in the Chao Phraya basin (Ivarsson 2008: 24). A mid-sixteenth century usage of the term by a Portuguese geographer, for example, encompasses the areas of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lan Xang; essentially, the two core areas of Lanna and the heart of Lan Xang were all 'Lao.'³ This perspective reflects the view from Ayutthaya, where Portuguese and other western visitors came to trade and collect information, and whose chronicles referred to the region of Lanna as "the country of the

² For the purposes of this essay, 'Siam' refers to the modern, territorially defined nation-state that existed until 1939, when the name of the country was changed to 'Thailand.'

³ Lanna and Lan Xang were two important inland kingdoms that shared cultural, political and economic ties with one another, and that often fought with Ayutthaya. Lanna covered much of present-day northern Thailand, and included, at times, areas of adjacent Myanmar and Laos. Lan Xang extended its power through much of present-day Laos and maintained close relations with Lanna.

Lao" (McDaniel 2008: 93). Thus, in western knowledge as well, 'Lao' began its career as a term of identification by signifying primarily social and spatial distance from Siam.

If in the sixteenth century 'Lao' referred to the lowland peoples of inland Buddhist kingdoms beyond the easily accessible Chao Phraya basin, by the late nineteenth century, the term came to clearly signify racial and ethnic difference; this period also saw the "ethnographic construction" in Siam of what Thongchai Winichakul (2000) calls the "others within." The two categories of internal 'others,' according to Thongchai, are *chao pa*, or the wild and 'savage' people of the forest, and the *chao bannok*, the "multi-ethnic villagers under the supremacy of Bangkok" (Winichakul 2000: 41). In Siamese eyes, the Lao belonged not to the *chao pa*, but rather to the *chao bannok*. Lao were upcountry, lowland-dwelling speakers of closely related Tai languages, but lacked the access to civilization and global modernity that favored Siam. No longer simply outside the reach of Siamese control, by the late nineteenth century they became outside the reach of modernity.

In this process, a distinction between a *spatial* and an *ethno-cultural* construction of 'Lao' must be made. In Bangkok's eyes the external kingdoms of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Lan Xang became 'within' by becoming spatially part of the Siamese kingdom and territory—the space ceased to be Lao and became, instead, Siamese. Ethno-culturally, however, the people remained different and apart from the Siamese people and culture—hence, they remained 'others.' In this formulation, 'Lao' populated not only the territories that make up the modern nation-state of Laos, but also the northern vassal states that were formerly part of the Lanna kingdom. In the dominant master-narrative of Thai history, Siam 'lost' the provinces of modern Laos to France at the turn of the century, while the Lao-ness of the people of what became Siam's northern provinces was erased from memory. Before 1893, however, the Lao came not only from places like Lan Xang, but from Lanna as well—in other words, there were both *lao lan xang* and *lao lanna*. As Grant Evans notes, "the people of what is today northern Thailand were formerly known as Lao, and were only formally integrated politically into the Thai state a year before the French asserted their control over Laos in 1893" (Evans 1999: 21). What does it mean to consider the population of Thailand's north as 'formerly Lao'?

It was not only the people who were formerly known as Lao—the region as a whole was referred to as Lao. In the 1890s, Bangkok began to assume direct control over the north, at least on paper, grouping outlying areas of the kingdom into regional administrative zones, or *monthon* (following the Sanskrit *mandala*). Several of these were identified as Lao, including *monthon lao phuan* and *monthon lao kao*, in what is today Thailand's lower northeast, while the provinces of the northern region were called *monthon lao chiang*. Once the French took control over the territories east of the Mekong in 1893, the fate of the term 'Lao' in Siam's north began to rapidly change. Between 1894 and 1900, Siamese officials embarked on a more thorough reorganization of the country's administration by implementing the *thesaphiban* system (Bunnag 1977). In the process, many of the country's *monthon* were given directional names indicating their position relative to Bangkok; *monthon lao chiang* became *monthon phayap*, or the 'northwest mandala' (Keyes 1995: 154–56). In other words, the formerly Lao provinces of Lanna were no longer identified by the ethnicity, culture or language of its population, but instead by their location in a Bangkok-centered national

space. These administrative changes sought to remove Laos-ness from the space of the nation, even while the majority of its people would continue to be referred to as Lao.

This presented a serious problem: an identifiably Lao population within Siam's borders could serve as pretext for continued difficulties with the French. In part to address this problem, Bangkok embarked on a project of racial homogenization described by David Streckfuss as the historical, ethnic and demographic erasure of the Lao from Siam (Ivarsson 2008: 70). Siamese elites began to replace the term 'Siam' with 'Thai' in diplomatic correspondence and treaty negotiations in the early twentieth century, well before the official name change in 1939. Textbooks began to explain 'Lao' identity to students in the new education system as simply another form of 'Thai,' an ethnic subset of a larger group. In the northeast, official policy toward language and education sought to transform the Lao into *khon isan* (Keyes 1995); in the north, similar policies erased the Lao in favor of *thai neua*, or *khon muang*. Moreover, these policies aimed at more than just transforming Lao people into Thai citizens; the goal was also to make people realize that they had, in fact, always been Thai. As Justin McDaniel has put it, "Lao and Thai became natural, eternal, and, therefore, real divisions, even though there is little evidence that they existed in precisely this way historically" (McDaniel 2008: 93).

This policy, while simple to declare, met with friction and frustration on the ground in Siam's northern provinces. Take, for example, a report filed by the Chief of Staff of the Royal Thai Army in 1916:

I saw one strange thing. It seems as though the people in Monthon Phayap are afraid of the people who come from Bangkok. Some even run away. This is all because those who come from Bangkok still look at the locals here as primitive and uncivilized [*khon pa / khon thuen*], as a bad race [*chat lew*], not like other Thais. They see themselves as higher, more special than them, and thus they act in a way that at the very least bothers and irritates the locals, and at times, much worse. (*Raingan kantruat ratchakan ...* 2458)

His description evokes the language of *chao bannok* and *chao pa*, as discussed above. This abuse is linked, he argues, to the use of the term 'Lao' in the north, a practice that clearly needs to be abolished. He goes on to explain that the purpose of the official policy to stop using the word 'Lao' in the north is:

to persuade people in M. Phayap to feel as though they are part of a single Thai nation, and no longer part of a colony [*prathētsarāt*] just like foreign colonies [*colonī*]. This is the best policy. High-level officials understand this well, and act accordingly. However, I feel that lower-level officials have yet to try and understand it clearly, and continue to think of themselves as superior to the locals. (*Raingan kantruat ratchakan ...* 2458)

What bothered this official was not only that low-ranking officials continued to use 'Lao' to describe the locals, but that they did so out of a sense of superiority. Initially a term

signifying social and spatial distance from the capital, when deployed by young soldiers sent from Bangkok to control the north, the term 'Lao' had become a derogatory term of internal colonial subjugation. Prince Damrong Rachanuphap even referred to the older system of administration, in which the population of the border provinces distant from Bangkok were called 'Lao,' as essentially an 'empire' (Keyes 1995: 155).⁴ Thus, to use 'Lao' to describe someone from Nan, Phrae, or Chiang Mai was not only dangerous because it opened up potential conflicts with the French colony of Laos to the east, but also because such language could implicate Bangkok in the colonial and imperial project itself.

The disentangling of Lao and Siamese was thus fraught with difficulty. The same report later mentions that Siamese officials in Monthon Phayap have taken to calling the locals *thai nuea*, or 'Northern Thai,' and those from Bangkok and the surrounding provinces *thai tai*, or 'Southern Thai.' This is problematic, he argues, as it duplicates the existing divisions that label those in the north as backward and different, and the Siamese as superior. At this point in the report, the author suggests a wonderful alternative to the problems of identification: rather than referring to everyone as Thai, people should be referred to by the city or province of their birth. So, instead of 'northern Thai,' he suggests we would have 'Chiang Mai people,' 'Nan people,' 'Lampang people' and 'Bangkok people' (*Raingan kantruat ratchakan ...* 2458).

By the 1910s, then, the term 'Lao' had become a dangerous word in Siam, not only because it referred to the newly created Laos state next door, but because it reinforced a sense of oppression at the hands of Bangkok officials. In short order, the formerly Lao peoples of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Phrae, Nan, and Lampang became simply Siamese, and later, Thai. They became, in fact, always-already Thai.

The 'Laos Mission'

While official Siamese policy led to the demographic and spatial erasure of 'Laos' within Siam, certain groups, especially Western observers, held on to the idea of the north-as-Lao longer than most. Foremost among these groups was the American Presbyterian Mission. The missionary presence in Siam's north began in 1867 with the arrival of the Rev. Daniel McGilvary and his wife in Chiang Mai to establish a Presbyterian mission (McGilvary 1912). By 1900, the Presbyterian mission had grown in both stature and extent, sprouting up stations throughout Siam's northern provinces. Since American missionaries had already established a mission in Bangkok earlier in the nineteenth century, the new mission came to be known as the "Laos Mission." Perhaps unsurprisingly, these enthusiastic American missionaries in Chiang Mai saw themselves operating in a Lao space and, in McGilvary's words, 'among the Lao' people (McGilvary 1912). In an early letter written to a friend in America, in fact, McGilvary wrote at the top, "Chiengmai, Laos capital" (McGilvary 1868). The Presbyterian mission became 'Laos' rather than 'Chiang Mai' or 'northern' in this way for several reasons. First, since the intellectual path of the missionaries, like their physical route, passed through Bangkok into the upcountry realm of the Lao, American contact with and

⁴ Keyes points out that Damrong uses the English term 'empire' directly rather than the Thai equivalent, *prathet rachathirat*.

knowledge of the interior was filtered through the prism of Bangkok elites. This was not always the case for other outsiders visiting or living in Chiang Mai. Foreigners arriving by different routes often used different vocabulary to describe the ethno-racial character of the region. Americans or British coming from Moulmein in Burma often saw the region and its dominant ethnic groups in Shan rather than Lao terms. For example, writing in 1890 about a trip through the region in 1876, Holt S. Hallet refers to the “Siamese Shan state of Zimmé”; he also makes a distinction between the “Ping Shans” and the “Lao provinces of Siam,” the rough equivalent of Isan today (2000: 32, 321). Second, even after Siam began to reimagine the region as northern as opposed to Lao, the focus of mission work remained the people, who continued to be identified as Lao, as illustrated by the frustrated government report discussed above. Therefore, even as space and place ceased to be Lao, the emphasis remained on the conversion of the Lao people; the logic and hope of conversion thus operated along ethno-cultural rather than spatial lines.

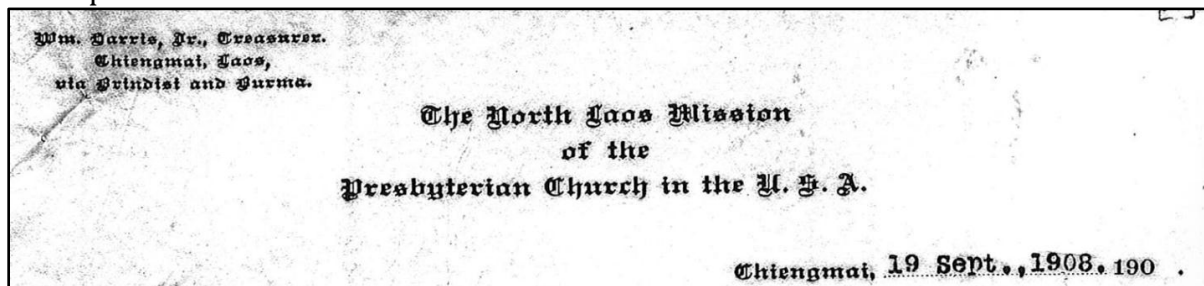


Figure 1: Letterhead from the treasurer of the Laos Mission, William Harris. Note the complex spatiality of the address in the upper left corner: “Chiangmai, Laos, via Brindisi and Burma” (Harris 1908).

Initially, then, the mission was clearly ‘Laos.’ This slowly began to change, mostly in response to Siamese government policy. While most missionaries continued to think of their mission as working in ‘Laos’ and among the ‘Lao people,’ a few turned away from this term early on. One of the most important was Dr. William Clifton Dodd, who wrote the influential book *The Tai Race* (1923), in which he acknowledged this policy and its impact on the history of the American Presbyterian Mission: “The name ‘Laos’ as applied to the people of North Siam was a mistake, both in pronunciation and application;” furthermore, the term Lao “was never used by the people” (Dodd 1923: 250). Dodd concludes that the ‘Laos Mission’ changed its name to the North Siam Mission as a result of Siamese government policy, clearly reflecting the preferred racial scheme of the Siamese state.

By 1920, the administrative realities of modern Siam, underscored by the impending extension of the railroad from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, led to the merger of the Laos and Siam Missions to form the ‘American Presbyterian Mission in Siam.’ For a brief period several missionaries referred to the mission as the ‘North Laos Mission,’ a sort of hybrid between ‘North Siam’ and ‘Laos’ (Figure 1). The name of the mission neatly reflected the conceptual break between ‘Laos’ as an imagined space on one hand, and an ethno-cultural construct on the other.

The “Struggle for Laos Expansion”

The fullest expression of this imagined Laos space came, ironically enough, with a foray into Burma. The Presbyterians were not the only game in town in the inland reaches of mainland Southeast Asia, and in nearby Burma, Baptist missionaries had begun to have some success in converting various groups, especially the Karen, by the late nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, Baptist and Presbyterian ambition came into conflict in a way that brought forward a very different conception of Laos in the region. By this time, the Baptist missionaries working among the Karen in Burma wanted to expand their operations into Kengtung (Chiang Tung), a move that many Presbyterians saw as impinging on their territory. This relatively minor episode in the history of the Laos Mission highlights the conflict between Laos as a space and Lao as a people. This dispute, known as the ‘Kengtung Question,’ simmered in the late 1890s before erupting into conflict and confusion in 1907 and once again before its final resolution in 1913. Before its resolution, however, this conflict demonstrated the extent of the missionary field, both in a Lao space and among a Lao people.

The ‘Kengtung Question’ was essentially this: who had the right to conduct missionary work in Kengtung, the Presbyterians or the Baptists? Though located in British Burma, Kengtung was a city with extensive cultural and historical connections to the Lanna city-states of northern Siam. Presbyterian interest in expanding the mission to Kengtung began in the 1890s, when Robert Irwin and McGilvary went on an exploratory mission to the city. A few years later, Irwin wrote to McGilvary explaining that “the Presbyterian Church had a special responsibility in Kengtung because the people there were ‘Laos’ similar to the people in northern Siam” (Swanson 1982: 60). The authority to establish a mission rested ultimately with the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the Board), which was based in New York City. The Board had to consider multiple obstacles: not only was Kengtung a remote location for a new mission, but financial constraints also made expansion difficult at the time, and by 1901 the Baptists had established a presence in the city (Swanson 1982: 61). In spite of these obstacles, the Board agreed to establish a mission in Kengtung in 1903; one year later two families, including Dr. Dodd and his family, arrived in Kengtung to set up the mission (Swanson 1982: 61). Though things started off amicably, conflict erupted when the mission physician, Dr. Cornell, left to work for the Baptists and began to argue along with them that the Presbyterians should leave Kengtung altogether.⁵

⁵ Swanson reports that the “points of conflict between Dodd and Cornell were petty, being related to Cornell’s unstable and explosive temperament” (1982: 62).

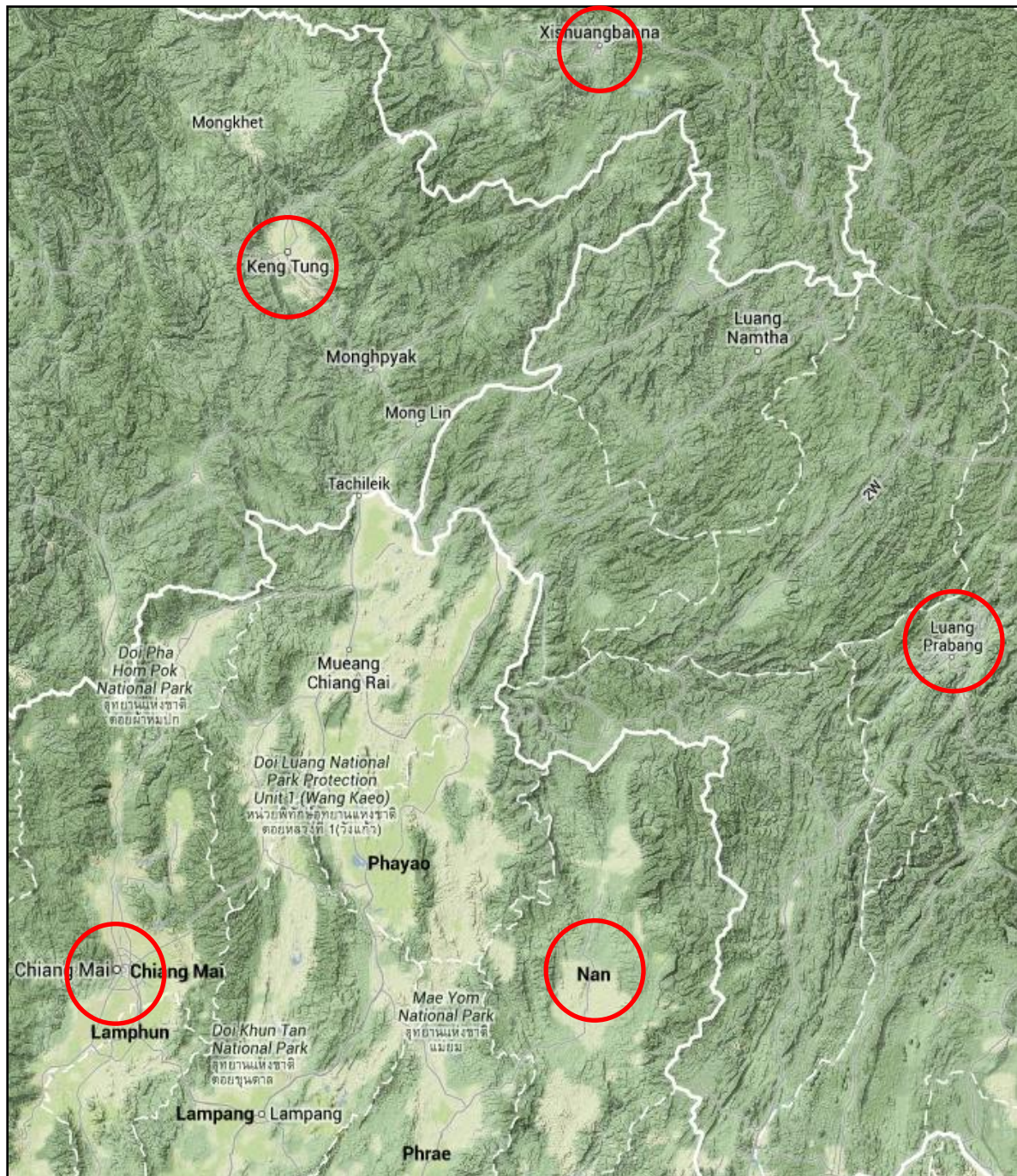


Figure 2: Upper mainland Southeast Asia, showing the cities mentioned in this essay: Chiang Mai, Nan, Luang Prabang, Kengtung and Jinghong.

At this point, the arguments on both sides became more forceful and clear in terms of 'Lao' ethnicity, religion and language. The Presbyterian missionaries in the field wrote to the Board arguing that responsibility for Kengtung fell to the Laos Mission because "the people in Kengtung were much more closely related to the 'Laos' of northern Siam than to the so-called Shans, the people the Baptists worked with in their Shan Mission south of Kengtung" (Swanson 1982: 62). Furthermore, they argued that

the Buddhism practiced by the people in Kengtung was closer to that practiced in Chiang Mai than to what was practiced in the rest of Burma. Finally, they argued that only the Laos Mission was capable of reaching the population of Kengtung because of their facility with the language and the mission press, which was the only press capable of printing in *kam muang*, the regional script used throughout the former Lanna kingdom. Debate continued throughout 1905, and although the Board allowed the Presbyterian station in Kengtung city to continue operating, which it did with moderate success in 1906, the controversy and conflict between the Presbyterians and Baptists continued. Missionaries on the ground, as well as the Board, viewed joint occupation as impossible, which pitted two views of Kengtung against each other—Kengtung as politically Burmese, or Kengtung as culturally, linguistically and ethnically 'Laos.'

A joint commission comprising members of both missions met in 1907 to attempt once again to resolve the 'Kengtung Question,' but they ultimately failed (Swanson 1982: 63).⁶ The commission had to deal with the political realities of the border between British Burma and Siam, and that the Baptists had entered the field by working through the British colonial government. In short, the Baptists were already there, better funded and eager to take responsibility for the whole of Kengtung. Moreover, since joint occupation was out of the question, there was no option for the Board to continue the mission there and it decided to close the station.

This should have marked the end of the Kengtung Question. In 1910, however, Dr. Dodd, the former head of the Kengtung mission, undertook a journey that would bring Kengtung—and an expansive Laos space—back to the missionary imagination. Dr. Dodd's travels through Yunnan and southern China via Kengtung would become the basis of his oft-cited book *The Tai Race*; moreover, both his travels and his book had the effect of transforming Kengtung from a Lao space to a gateway to an extensive Tai-speaking population (Swanson 1982: 66). Now the stakes seemed higher—a mission station in Kengtung was about more than the existing population there; it was about reaching millions of Lao souls in an untouched mission field. By 1911, the Kengtung Question was very much on the minds of Presbyterian missionaries in the north.

Though many missionaries voiced their opinion in these matters, one of the most vocal was Dr. Samuel C. Peoples, the head of the Laos Mission station in Nan. Dr. Peoples began his missionary career in Chiang Mai and Lampang. In Chiang Mai he is perhaps best known for having secured, sometime around 1890, the first typeface in the aforementioned local 'Lao language' of *kam muang*, which then enabled the Mission Press in Chiang Mai to print bible tracts and religious pamphlets for distribution throughout the region (Swanson 1982: 5).⁷ In 1894, Dr. Peoples was transferred to the easternmost station of the Laos Mission in Nan, near the present-day border with Laos. He was a strong advocate of the Presbyterian presence in Kengtung and served on the 1907 commission that tried, but ultimately failed, to save the station.

⁶ The Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and the Baptist Union agreed to form the joint commission in 1905, but there was much conflict within the Laos Mission over whom to appoint. Pro-Kengtung forces initially blocked any appointments to the commission over fears of working together with the Baptists, but eventually the Board forced the missionaries to make appointments to the commission.

⁷ This language was not Lao, of course, but rather the local script found throughout northern Thailand called *kham muang*.

Dr. Peoples wrote often to his friends in the United States to raise awareness and solicit funds for the mission station in Nan. He often started by simply explaining what ‘Laos’ and ‘Nan’ were. In a personal letter to a friend in California, for example, he began by noting that “‘Laos’ is not the name of a country at all but of a tribe of people. ‘Nan’ is the name of a small inland City [*sic*] of a few score thousands people, probably not generally known” (Peoples 1914f). Regardless, he remained keen to promote his work among the Lao, even as they were becoming Siamese. Figure 3, for example, shows a photograph taken around 1914 that he used to promote the mission to the faithful back in America; however, this image also provides, in a sense, a snapshot of the transition from ‘Lao’ to ‘Siamese’ mentioned above. While he sent the photograph out ostensibly to raise funds for the *Laos* Mission, the caption—added to the picture later—described his class as *Siamese* evangelists. The subjects of this photograph were caught between two shifting identities, and depending on one’s perspective, could be seen as Lao or Siamese.



Figure 3: “Dr. Peoples and Siamese Evangelists” This photo, taken sometime around 1914, shows Dr. Samuel C. Peoples and his evangelical staff, referred to in the caption as “Siamese Evangelists.” By this time, Nan was considered part of Siam, even though Dr. Peoples saw his mission as focused on the Lao people. The caption was added later when the photograph was printed for distribution to churches in the United States in order to solicit funds for the “Laos Mission” (Peoples 1914a).

This shift was taking place as the Presbyterians were once again considering Kengtung, this time as a gateway to a broad field of Lao souls. Unsurprisingly, Dr. Peoples avidly opposed the Baptist presence in Kengtung, which he saw as the rightful space of the Presbyterian Laos Mission.⁸ His arguments after 1911 mirrored the earlier ones discussed above—the Presbyterians alone worked among the Lao, and so

⁸ His descriptions of the Baptists were often quite colorful: “Those Baptists!! [*sic*] There is no possibility of satisfying them. They open their mouths so wide that there is not room left to open their eyes to see what they are howling for” (Peoples 1914c).

considerations of ethnicity, language and culture should trump the inconvenient facts that a) Kengtung was politically part of Burma and b) already occupied by the Baptists. After Dodd's sensational journey through southern China, however, Dr. Peoples saw this as, in his words, "a struggle for Laos Expansion" (Peoples 1913).

The protests of missionaries like Dr. Peoples failed to sway the Board in New York, which simply wanted to avoid further conflict with the Baptists in what was from its perspective a tiny corner of the overall evangelistic field in Asia. Even when it became clear that Kengtung would be given over to the Baptists, Dr. Peoples maintained that the Laos Mission was "responsible for the Evangelistic Interests of all the literate or Bhooddistic Peoples [*sic*]" in the rest of Kengtung province, based primarily on their written script and religious practice (Peoples 1914d). The Kengtung boosters proposed a compromise—cede Kengtung to the Baptists, but open a new station in Chiang Rung (*Jinghong*), a city populated largely by ethnic Lue or Tai-Lue peoples with close cultural and political ties to the Lanna city-states where the Presbyterian Laos Mission operated. Through this compromise, the struggle for 'Laos expansion' would take precedence over the Laos of Kengtung.

Viewed another way, the Laos Mission was experiencing its own version of 'lost territories,' a phenomenon that continues to plague modern Thai politics (Kasetsiri et. al. 2013). Having been forced to concede Kengtung to the Baptists, the mission endeavored to make a claim for a more extensive evangelical space, based on a racialized notion of 'Laos peoples.' This sentiment did not, of course, begin or end with Dr. Dodd or Dr. Peoples, nor was this a new dream for the Presbyterians; the founder of the Presbyterian Mission in Chiang Mai, Daniel McGilvary, noted that missionaries had for some time envisioned extending the Laos Mission to "Tai-speaking peoples [...] under English and French and Chinese rule," or to what he called "regions beyond" (McGilvary 1912: 418, 422). Thus, even as the Kengtung question was answered, a new one was asked: just how far could the Laos Mission expand among Lao People?



Figure 4: "Dr. Peoples and his Siamese Evangelists." Note the map in the background. (Peoples 1914b)

The photo in Figure 4 shows this concept clearly. Produced in an effort to promote the mission and to help solicit funds (Peoples 1914e), the image shows Dr. Peoples surrounded by his 'Siamese Evangelists,' similar to the image in Figure 3. The most remarkable feature of the photograph, however, is the map behind Dr. Peoples, which shows a huge area marked 'LAO PEOPLE,' stretching from eastern Burma, through northern Thailand into Laos, northwest Vietnam and deep into Southern China. In short, this was the dream of the missionaries after losing Kengtung—to expand the Laos Mission into this newly discovered 'Lao' space.

This Lao space was imagined, however, at a time when the ontological basis of a Laos Mission was being called into question. In short, the extension into 'regions beyond' was being imagined just as the Lao were being discursively erased from Siam, and as a new discourse built around the Thai people and the Tai race was rising to prominence. Once again, returning to Dodd:

Mission policy in the past has been influenced by the prevailing tendency to deal with peoples according to civil boundaries. The partition of mission fields according to comity agreements among the various Boards has usually followed national or provincial lines. But in the case of our Tai task, we anticipate the broadening effects of the War by following up a people, regardless of civil boundaries (Dodd 1923: 340).

Dodd argues that in the wake of World War I, with the decreasing importance of borders, the mission needs to follow people, not state lines (Ivarsson 2008: 75). Where Peoples envisioned an expansive field based on 'Lao Peoples,' Dodd's formulation was centered on the Tai race. This new formulation became popular in Bangkok, where Thai officials began to see in Dodd's work an argument for burgeoning irredentist claims (Ivarsson 2008: 75).

The close of World War I brought a brief wrinkle to the struggle for Lao expansion as well—expansion into Luang Phrabang. Unsurprisingly, it was Dr. Peoples, whose station was closest to Luang Phrabang, who raised this point, which was for a time discussed among mission leadership in Chiang Mai (Peoples 1919a). The logic was based on overly optimistic reports in missionary media immediately after the war that the time was ripe for French cooperation with British and American missions (e.g., Callender 1919). By this time, however, the door had already begun to close on the possibility of eastward expansion, as the racial ground continued to change. The Laos Mission had become the North Siam Mission, and by 1921, north and south had merged to become simply the Siam Mission. At the same time, the tide of nationalist and racialized thought was sweeping across the Thai political landscape, pushing local identities off the mental map and replacing them with a unified 'Thai' identity. The mission field was increasingly defined by both the geo-body and racial space of the Thai, as distinct from that of French Laos.

Nevertheless, there were moments of possibility, historical moments lost in the teleological story of the creation of Siam and Laos that show alternate ways of thinking about local and regional identities and regional and national spaces. One such possibility was suggested by the government report cited above: rather than call people Lao (which was used by lower-level Thai officials in a derogatory sense), or Thai (which was simply too much of a stretch for most residents outside central Siam), why not refer to people by their local *muang* or province? Deconstructing the Laos-ness of Siam's north brings to the fore alternatives that could have been constructed in its place—alternatives to a homogenous Thai identity, perhaps something more attuned to local identities.

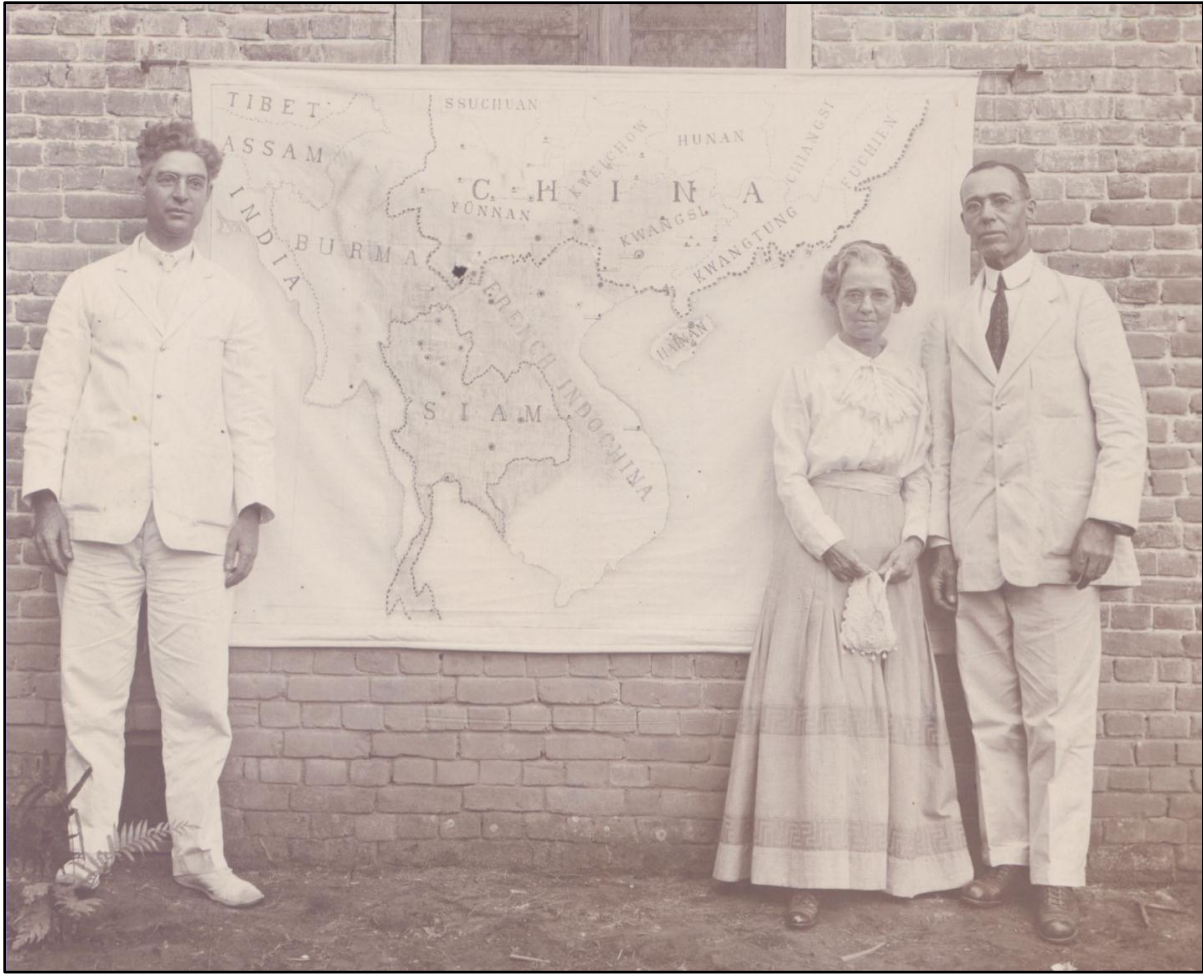


Figure 5: Dr. Claude W. Mason, Mrs. Belle Ruth Dodd, and Dr. William C. Dodd, in front of a map showing the location of the Chieng Rung station. According to Dr. Peoples, the shaded area indicates “the area of Lao population in Siam, Burma, China and Indochina” (see Peoples 1918 and 1919b).

This is not to suggest that this was in any way likely, or even widespread. However, these ideas do appear in the archival record and suggest a diversity of opinion, even at the moment when the identities were being formed, that could in some small way inform present efforts to re-formulate local identity politics in Thailand’s north or in modern Laos. But regional and national identity has a purpose, a use and a reason for being. What this story shows is that those purposes are not always self-evident and can be taken up in surprising ways by unexpected people. That Bangkok officials sought to construct a unified Thai nation out of an ethnically diverse empire in order to confront the challenge of western colonialism is clear; that American missionaries would seek to deploy a contrasting Lao identity as part of an interdenominational turf war is somewhat less obvious.

Though prominent Lao nationalists such as Katay Don Sasorith shied away from any notion of Lao identity that led to irredentism—which, after all, was becoming a popular sentiment in Bangkok, as well as a political problem for Laos—other Lao nationalists did promote a version of such an idea (Ivarsson 2008: 208–218). In this case, certain American missionaries were happy to imagine a Lao space, based on a

racialized sense of Lao identity that began with the Presbyterian experience in the former city-states of Lanna, but that extended beyond Siam's modern borders into modern Laos, Burma, Vietnam and China. Can we read this as an Evangelical reflection of an imagined Lao irredentism? Later Lao nationalists would imagine such an expansive Lao space, one that would encompass areas, to repeat Grant Evans' phrase, "formerly known as Lao" (Evans 1999: 21). Prince Phetsarath's vision of an expansive Laos was particularly bold. For him, a post-war Laos would include territories on the right bank of the Mekong up to the Dangrek Mountains in the south, the watershed between the Chaophraya and Mekong Rivers in the west, Chiang Mai in the northwest, and Burma in the north (Ivarsson 2008: 210–11). Textbooks in the 1980s continued to include, along with Isan, the provinces of Chiang Rai, Phayao, Lampang, Phrae and Nan as the "lost Lao territories" (Grabowsky 1995: 125). Though it is unlikely this irredentism was directly related to missionary discourse, the 'Laos Mission' certainly did much to reinforce the idea of the northern provinces of modern Siam—and beyond—as Lao. In short, there were multiple struggles for Lao expansion.

Conclusions

What are the implications of these imagined Lao spaces for regional identity in Siam's formerly Lao north? While the nation-state of Laos exists in its current shape (and not in the form imagined by Prince Phetsarath) largely as a result of French colonial expansion, rule and policy, it nevertheless provided an alternative basis of cultural identity, especially for the Lao in Isan, if less so for the population of Chiang Mai or the Lanna states to the east. There are, of course, strong historical and cultural bonds across the border and beyond, throughout the Lao diaspora, that shape the idea of 'Lao-ness.' But what about the lines drawn between northern Laos and northern Thailand? Ideas about 'Lao-ness' have more frequently been considered in relation to the northeast or Isan (Baird 2013; 2014; Draper 2013), but there were certainly important historical connections of trade and pilgrimage between states like Nan and Phrae on the one hand and Luang Phrabang on the other. While we both remember and reify the Lao identity of Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, and other spaces within the borders of modern Laos, as well as the 'Lao-ness' of Isan, what do we lose in our historical analysis by 'forgetting' the former 'Lao-ness' of the north? Before the twentieth century, the Siamese considered the populations of both Lanna and Isan to be Lao. Likewise, most from these regions would have considered themselves as "[belonging] to the same stock distinct from the Siamese" (Grabowsky 1995: 125). The incorporation of Chiang Mai into the Siamese state helped to erase the Laos-ness of the north from historical memory. Elites in Chiang Mai and Siam forged political alliances, both on the battlefield and through intermarriage, while Rama III's response to Chao Anou's revolt devastated Vientiane. For the *khon muang* of Chiang Mai, Siam was an ally that helped them gain independence from Burma; for the Lao in Isan, Siam was an imperial power that took their independence from them (Grabowsky 1995: 125). Laos remained as a potent source of cultural and linguistic identity for many in Isan, while the centers of *khon muang* identity were integrated into modern Siam.

If we seek to complicate the story of alliance and cooperation between Bangkok and the north, a different possibility emerges. Activists and scholars seeking increased

local autonomy and political control in the north have often couched their arguments in the vernacular of local *khon muang* identity. Many actively link the problems of the present, such as pollution, unplanned urban sprawl and a perceived loss of culture, to the colonization of the north by Bangkok (Charoenmuang 1995; 1999). This story should not neglect the former Laos-ness of the north, and what that means in terms of power relations between Bangkok and the periphery, and for the potential historical connections across the upper mainland region of Southeast Asia. In short, if we allow for friction and conflict alongside alliance and cooperation in the north, we should open the door not only to local identity and history, but also to the various meanings of the region's status as formerly Lao.

What this 'Laos-ness' actually entails is another question entirely. Many have suggested possible ways of seeing the continuity and coherence of this inland realm. Hans Penth, for example, spoke of a common culture, encompassing much of the former Lanna and Lan Xang kingdoms, which he called "the region of the *dhamma* letters," meaning the areas where a particular script had come to dominate monastic writing (Penth 2004: 117). More recently, Leslie Woodhouse has referred to this region as an 'inland constellation' of city-states aligning and re-aligning in a distinct intermontane environment, with both frequency and political expedience (Woodhouse 2009: 17, 26–27). A comprehensive definition of 'Laos-ness' is, however, outside the scope of this essay; the point here is that it is worth asking about the continuities across the historical lines that divide Lanna and Lan Xang, or across the modern border that separates Nan from Luang Phrabang.

The missionary discourse discussed in this essay represents one strand out of many that have come together to form a picture of ethnic and racial identity in mainland Southeast Asia. Though the vocal opinions of missionaries like Samuel Peoples have largely been relegated to the footnotes of history, other figures, such as Daniel McGilvary and William C. Dodd, have been more influential, both in their actions and in their published works. Siamese and French officials had to contend with a variety of opinionated actors within their borders, including some who stubbornly held on to distinct notions of identity, so some influence, however slight, is likely. Even so, American missionaries held on to a distinct notion of Lao identity that enabled them to advocate improbable-sounding causes, such as the expansion of the *Laos* Mission out of *Siam* into *Burma*.

As for Laos, the history of the nation can be imagined in a number of ways. It can be the history of the modern nation-state, specifically the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), or it can be a history of the Lao people more broadly conceived, including origin myths and early kings and kingdoms. In another sense, the history of Laos can be quite literal—the history of L, A, O and sometimes S. Though northern Thailand has been largely excised from Lao history, and Laos-ness from the north, this essay has shown that wherever that term goes, including to Chiang Mai and Nan, and even further afield to Kengtung and Jinghong, so goes Lao history.

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Indochina War Refugee Movements in Laos, 1954–1975: A Chronological Overview Citing New Primary Sources

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Abstract

This paper outlines the history of the relief and resettlement assistance program established by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to assist civilians displaced during the Second Indochina War in Laos. Many of the primary source materials cited in this paper can be found in a digitized collection of reports and documents that was recently made available in the University of Wisconsin's Southeast Asian Images & Texts (SEAIT) digital collection.

A fundamentally humanitarian undertaking, the USAID refugee program ultimately became a significant part of a larger, integrated political-military engagement, in which the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) played a significant role. The objective of this paper is to summarize the complexities of the USAID refugee program as it developed from January 1955, when the American embassy was opened in Vientiane, until the Second Indochina War came to an end and USAID was evicted from Laos in June 1975, the year in which the Lao Democratic People's Republic (Lao PDR) was established.

Viewed in historical and geographical contexts, population shifts within the hinterlands of Laos, which peaked during the war, continue into the present post-conflict period. This has been due in part to more recent interactions and struggles prompted by "political memories" of the Second Indochina War alignments, which have led, to an extent, to post-1975, anti-Lao PDR insurgencies and land (re)allocations that address security concerns and accommodate both foreign land-based investments and cross-border migrations.

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Introduction

Landlocked Laos has historically been a buffer zone surrounded by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma, with much of the perimeter being mountainous terrain inhabited by a “heterogeneous population [which] reflects [the country’s] position on an ethnic watershed” (Halpern and Kunstadter 1990: 1). Geographically similar in size to the US state of Utah, the country’s four main linguistic families are Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Iu Mien, Mon-Khmer and Tibetan-Burma, within which there are 47 official ethnolinguistic groups (Goudineau 2003: 14). During the course of history there were frequent struggles between confrontational Siam, Annam and China to control the Lao hinterlands bordered by Tai domains, which fell under a system of “multiple tributes” and which maintained their semi-autonomous existence long before the arrival of the colonial French in the latter part of the 19th century (Brocheux and Hemery 2011: 64).

During the 19th century, various ethnic groups (especially Hmong-Iu Mien and Tibetan-Burma language speakers) migrated from southern China to escape domination that threatened their cultural independence and freedom. There was also an increase in borderland confrontations—for example, the rebellious Chinese Haw and Black Flags who thrived on pillage and extortion—that led to significant population shifts (mostly involuntary) from neighboring domains into the sparsely inhabited highlands of northern Laos (Grabowsky and Wichasin 2008: 5; Lee 1982: 199).

Many of these displaced people who relocated throughout Laos brought with them “a heritage of defeat,” following failed revolts to preserve their autonomy from expanding neighboring entities (Scott 2009: 23). Furthermore, as Annamese control over its sphere of influence in northeastern Laos weakened, thousands of Tai Phouan people (possibly three-quarters of the Tai population) were deported from the plateau of northeastern Laos (Plain of Jars) into northeastern Thailand by aggressive Siam seeking to fill the geographical vacuum (Smuckarn and Breazeale 1988: 3).

Most of the highland minorities in Laos relied on shifting agriculture and relocated every few decades, never residing for long in static communities. With an estimated population in 1960 of approximately 1.9 million (about half of whom were from minority ethnic groups), Laos remained a sparsely populated country with a density of about 7.3 people per square kilometer. As of 1959, the average village population for an estimated 10,000 villages in Laos was in the range of 190 people (Halpern 1961: 4, 8, 10).

Laos owes its present boundary alignments to the French (notably Auguste Pavie), who effectively unified the royal principality of Luang Prabang and the ancient states of Vientiane, Xieng Khouang (annexed by Annam in 1832) and Champassak (Bassac), as well as segments of the northern borderland Tai principalities of Chiang Khaeng, the confederations of Sipsong Panna and Sipsong Chau Tai, and Siam-occupied territories along the Mekong River (Brocheux and Hemery 2011: 64). However, the distribution of the country’s ethnic groups did not correspond to defined international boundaries, and the dispersed minorities were never successfully integrated, effectively remaining stateless. Both during and after the French colonial period, non-Lao “rebellions exploded when [external forces] threatened the internal equilibrium of the

highland societies, and their traditional systems of relationships...” (Brocheux and Hemery 2011: 284).

The politically dominant ethnic group in Laos, the Lao, primarily populated valleys formed by the Mekong River and its tributaries. The ‘uncontrolled’ highlands served as buffer zones for the lowlanders, who were established in the valleys. For the lowland people, the mountains were recognized as effective barriers to large-scale movements of population except when the area was under warfare pressure, as it was during the Second Indochina War (also referred to as the Vietnam War) (Solomon 1969: 16-17).

The First Indochina War, which, like its successor, encompassed the colonial states of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, ended with the 1954 defeat of Indochina’s French colonialists by the Viet Minh.² While the French were often viewed as protectors of the Lao from the incursions by neighboring countries, the political vacuum they left behind led to internal and regional political rivalries, and ultimately to a Cold War-era confrontation known as the “Secret War.” The ensuing conflict pitted communist North Vietnamese forces (who sought to gain control over South Vietnam and assert their influence over Laos) against the military might of the United States and its Thai allies (who sought to stop Communist aggression and assert their influence regionally) in the context of a domestic civil war waged locally in Laos between the western-backed Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the communist Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX).³

Caught in between were the tribal minorities scattered along the borderlands, who chose to take up arms (with opposing factions receiving support from either the United States and Thailand or the North Vietnamese and China) to protect their space, and when overrun, fight to recover it. Because Laos was thinly populated, each conflicting side was able to maintain mostly ethnic guerrilla bases behind enemy lines. Geographical control was nebulous insofar as battlefields comprised vast areas of no-man’s-land, where any platoon that marched through could claim control (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 1-2).

From 1954 onward, gradually escalating conflicts led to the displacement of nearly 25 percent of the population of Laos, the largest cohort of which were highland minorities caught in the middle of battlegrounds that served as buffer zones between Thailand on the one hand, and China and Vietnam, on the other. As the buffer zones deteriorated, the burden of the war shifted toward lowland Laos, situated in the valleys of the Mekong watershed.

To date, little has been written about the plight of civilians displaced by the Second Indochina War. The objective of this essay is to provide readers with a brief chronological overview of key events that led to the uprooting of at least one quarter of the country’s population (estimated to be 3.2 million by the early 1970s), the

² The League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh, was set up by the Indochinese Communist Party to serve as a broad front organization for the communist-directed independence and reform movement in Vietnam (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 164)

³ The organization formed in January 1956 to act as the broad political front of the Pathet Lao (PL), the latter being a political designation applied to the anti-French guerrilla movement allied to the Viet Minh, and to the Lao Communist movement in general (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 75, 103).

circumstances of their displacement, and the relief and resettlement programs launched to assist them by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)⁴ in conjunction with the Royal Lao Government's Ministry of Social Welfare. A common goal was to provide "at best a temporary solution to the problems of [in particular] the displaced minority and tribal populations" (Halpern 1990: 20). In some areas of Laos, especially the mountainous homelands of ethnic minorities, the USAID refugee relief program that evolved during the course of the war was, in fact, a very significant part of a larger integrated political-military war effort.

Much of the primary source material cited in this essay can be found in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Southeast Asian Images and Texts (SEAiT) digital collection entitled "Indochina War Refugees in Laos, 1954-1975," which has digitized and made accessible more than 2,500 relevant primary-source documents and reports.⁵ It is hoped that this paper will serve as a platform for further research into other aspects of the impact of the Second Indochina War on the population of Laos—especially ethnic minorities—well into the present post-conflict period. A historical pattern of population shifts continues, both within Laos and cross-borders (albeit to a lesser degree than during wartime), land allocation matters continue to be prominent issues, and the country continues to be geographically situated between competing economic and political powers that have long sought to expand their respective spheres of influence (presently by peaceful means) over the hinterlands of Laos.

The Demise of French Indochina

Prior to the May 1954 fall of Dien Bien Phu,⁶ which marked the end of the First Indochina War, the Viet Minh launched a two-pronged invasion of northern Laos in April 1953, an action "important to its claim to power." The Vietnamese "presence in Laos [was] of crucial importance in maintaining and consolidating the Pathet Lao's control over large areas of Laos" (Langer and Zasloff 1968: 4). One prong was directed toward Houaphanh (also known as Sam Neua) and Xieng Khouang Provinces, and the other prong penetrated Laos from Dien Bien Phu and moved down the Nam Ou valley, where both prongs converged within striking distance of the royal capital, Luang Prabang. Later, in December 1953, a second threat materialized in central Laos where the Viet Minh briefly occupied Thakhek.

Following French counterattacks, the Viet Minh withdrew to the hills of southern Laos, where they made a special effort to gain the support of borderland mountain tribes (Dommen 1964: 40–42; Toye 1968: 89). The victims left behind by the Viet Minh were civilians who fled the onslaught for safe havens near provincial capitals. Assistance was provided to them primarily by local charitable organizations, including the Lao Women's Association (Agence Lao Presse 1954: 6, 17, 21, 31), as well as by the

⁴ Known as USOM (United States Operations Mission) until 1961, the acronym USAID will be used in this essay.

⁵ <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/SEAiT/USAIDLao>

⁶ A Tai-populated mountain valley in North Vietnam near the Lao border, historically a caravan trade center that was mistakenly regarded by the French as a strategic transit hub for Viet Minh forces.

United States. On May 9, 1953, US Secretary of State Dulles, a staunch anti-communist, “indicated that funds were being made available to ease refugee problems” (FRUS 1981: Document 0275, 366).

In the meantime, on October 22, 1953, France granted full independence to Laos in the Franco-Laos Treaty (Dommen 1985: 42), which included a mutual defense pact that obligated the French to improve the defense of Laos’s border against Viet Minh incursions (Morgan 2010: 185).

Immediately following the loss of Dien Bien Phu, the settlement of the First Indochina War was negotiated at the Geneva Conference and an agreement was signed in July 1954. The Viet Minh divisions in Laos, recruited from among minority tribespeople who inhabited the mountain areas under Viet Minh control (Dommen 1985: 45), were to withdraw. The Geneva agreement also provided for the regrouping of the Viet Minh-backed Pathet Lao (PL) in the provinces of Phongsaly and Houaphanh, one condition being that national elections be held within two years, leading to the reintegration of these two PL areas into the Kingdom of Laos.

Uncertainty prompted groups of people who did not wish to live in PL-controlled areas to move southward. While many Lao people fled to Vientiane, other minorities (including the Tai Dam, or Black Tai, from North Vietnamese borderlands) relocated to the mountainous regions of Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang Provinces, with meager assistance from villagers, local organizations and the RLG. A limited amount of US government-sponsored relief was provided through private humanitarian organizations (Yost 1954: 2; Yost 1955: 4–6).

American Mission Opens in Laos

United States aid to Laos began in 1951 and was furnished as part of an economic and technical assistance program (administered from Saigon) for the three Associated States of Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) on a unified basis (United States Operation Mission 1957: 8; US House 1958: 2). In November 1954, the first US ambassador to Laos, Charles W. Yost, was appointed, and in January 1955 the United States initiated separate and expanded assistance to each of the three countries (US House 1958: 2). Accordingly, the United States began supplying direct assistance to Laos through supporting agencies that included USAID, which provided economic and technical assistance; the Program Evaluation Office (PEO), which oversaw military budget support and assistance (Conboy 1995: 17; Stevenson 1972: 150)⁷; the United States Information Service (USIS); and the CIA. In addition to collecting intelligence, countering subversion, and providing arms to anti-communist guerrillas, the CIA played a key role in the internal political affairs of Laos (e.g., selecting and supporting anti-communist leaders) (Rust 2012: 4). During the years that followed, the United States fully supported (with third country assistance) the entire Laotian economy, including the Lao military, with the objective of assisting Laos to become a neutralized, stable and

⁷ Beginning in April 1961, civilian-garbed PEO staff effectively became MAAG personnel by donning military uniforms.

independent state and to prevent it from coming under Communist control (USAID 1962a: 115–116).

The first large-scale US government-sponsored relief initiative was conducted during the second half of 1955 and consisted of some 200 missions by Civil Air Transport's C-46 airplanes, airdropping 1,000 tons of rice and salt to about 26 reception areas in the famine-stricken Phongsaly and Houaphanh Provinces (Moore 1995: 110; Rust 2012: 36; Anonymous 1955: 4–6). These relief flights marked the beginning of direct assistance by the United States to ethnic minorities in the mountainous borderlands, whose political and military potential was gaining recognition (Rust 2012: 37).

US Civic Action Programs

In August 1956, the US ambassador to Laos, J. Graham Parsons, recommended the implementation of a clandestine program that would strengthen the ability of the RLG to resist subversion and penetration by the PL (Rust 2012: 49). Shortly thereafter, in September, the CIA station chief in Vientiane proposed to the US ambassador that a Refugee and Relief Rehabilitation program should be set up in Houaphanh and Phongsaly. “We feel [that a] bold, dramatic move of this type has not only humanitarian aspects in relieving the suffering of the people, but also should be of immense propaganda value to the government in supporting its position and detracting from the PL attacks on the Royal Regime” (Rust 2012: 49–50).

While there is no indication that the proposal was implemented, a US Mission-sponsored civic action/rural development operation, pioneered in late 1956 by Lao General Ouan Rathikoune, was organized by the RLG in 1957, initially as a civilian operation under the name National Committee of Civic Action, in Phongsaly and Houaphanh Provinces. However, due to operational difficulties, as well as to the Communist occupation of key portions of the two provinces, this initial program was terminated in 1959 (Conboy 1995: 27; Wing et al. 1964: B60; Phillips 2008: 95–98). Because of their political implications, subsequent civic action program initiatives received only indirect support from USAID in the form of commodities. The USAID position tended to be that the civic-action program as instituted was a military problem (Wing et al. 1964: B22, E16–E17).

One of the first humanitarian organizations to enter Laos under contract with USAID was International Voluntary Services (IVS)—a precursor to the Peace Corps—“a non-profit organization formed in 1953 to promote ‘people-to-people’ cooperation in improving health, productivity and living standards and fostering better understanding among peoples” (International Voluntary Services 2003: 1). The initial IVS program in Laos commenced in March 1956 as the ‘Xieng Khouang Development Project’ based in Phonsavan on the Plain of Jars. An important objective was to provide rural development assistance to an area that was “overrun by the Viet Minh [in 1953] who destroyed livestock and buildings” (Rolston, n.d.: 1). One of the key elements of IVS’s Xieng Khouang community-development program was “to aid in the resettlement of a war-torn area by assisting and encouraging refugees and tribal people to seek a settled life” (Bowman 1959: 1).

Air Logistics Support

After long, drawn-out negotiations following the 1954 Geneva agreement, the competing political factions in Laos formed a coalition government in late 1957, and Laos was finally at peace for the first time since World War II. Leading up to the April 1958 elections, US agencies in Laos began a high-impact village aid program, codenamed Operation Booster Shot (FRUS 1992: Docs. 169, 171, 14 March 1958), which airlifted 1,135 tons of food, supplies and equipment and airdropped 300 tons to over fifty locations. Although it was a one-off aid project, the operation highlighted just how vital the role of air transport would be to future military and civil operations in Laos (Anthony and Sexton 1993: 26–27; US House 1959: 46).

From 1955 until 1974, air transportation services (provided initially by Civil Air Transport (CAT) and later by its direct descendent, the CIA-owned Air America, by Bird and Sons, and by Continental Air Services, Inc. [CASI]) were to become key players in the emerging refugee relief program. Without the services provided by the airlines—airdrops of food and essential commodities—a successful refugee relief program would not have been possible (Leary 1999; Leeker 2013).

Failed Coalition Sparks Fighting and Refugee Movements

Following the 1958 election, which the PL won, the coalition government fell apart, because the rightists and the United States refused to recognize the results, and the PL returned to guerrilla warfare in their historic strongholds of Houaphanh and Phongsaly Provinces. The ensuing period of armed struggle—marked also by Viet Minh incursions in eastern Savannakhet Province, and later into Houaphanh—and political maneuvering was to last until 1964 (Brown 1982: 18–21).

During the period 1954–1958, as many as 27,000 civilians—mostly highland peoples from northern Laos as well as Tai Dam from the Lai Chau and Dien Bien Phu borderlands of North Vietnam—were displaced and received assistance from humanitarian organizations such as CARE (Meeker 1956), Catholic Relief Services, Operation Brotherhood (Balitang Laos 1964–1966; Bernad and Fuentecilla 2004; Flores 2010), Laos Mission of the Christian and Missionary Alliance 1953–1969 (Laos Mission), and the Missionary Oblates of Mary the Immaculate (OMI) (Sion 1969; USAID 1971b: 1191).

Furthermore, in early 1959 there was an influx of some 14,000 Yao (Iu Mien), Hmong, and Lue refugees from Yunnan Province into the Nam Tha and Muang Sing areas of northwestern Laos. They sought to escape conditions in Communist China. Like many others, these “cross-border,” or “border-crossing” people (Lee and Tapp 2010: 125) relied mainly on their own initiative and the hospitality of fellow tribesmen (Fall 1969: 96).

Between 1954 and 1959, North Vietnamese aid to the PL continued in a low-key manner. However, beginning in 1959, the Communists pursued a more aggressive policy (Langer and Zasloff 1968: 4–5). When fighting accelerated in mid-1959, US government inter-agency staff members were assigned to assist the RLG as they coped with the problems and human needs of some 40,000 refugees—mostly Hmong and Lao Theung (Khmu) in northeastern Laos—who had fled their homes (USAID 1969: 13;

USAID 1971a: 1191). This unfavorable situation prompted a series of cooperative programs between the two governments involving organization, development of procedures, and material assistance to displaced people, many of whom were the families (referred to in this paper as dependents) of the paramilitary forces (US Senate 1970: 67). A Mission report indicates that USAID funding for refugees began in late October 1959 (Chandler 1969: 790).

Early Formation of Paramilitary Units

A sizeable number of the tribal refugees, particularly in northern Laos, but also in the south, were originally the dependents of partisan paramilitary militias that were recruited in tribal areas on a countrywide basis by French intelligence in 1950. Building upon their close relationship with the Hmong, led by Touby Lyfoung (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 157), the French formed commando units—intended to create insecurity behind Viet Minh lines—known as the Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aeroportes (GCMA) in Xieng Khouang, Houaphanh and Phongsaly Provinces, in the north, while smaller GCMA programs were organized in the south (Muelle and Deroo 1992: 57–72; Fall 1968: 58).

In 1955, after the first Indochina War came to an end, these guerrilla units were absorbed into special Royal Lao Army (RLA) paramilitary units known as Auto-Defense de Choc (ADC) (Conboy 1995: 6–7, 16, 23). The principal advocate of this type of guerrilla force since early 1955 had been Crown Prince Savang Vatthana. ADC units (operating as an alternative to major offensive action by the RLA) were engaged in remote villages located deep in contested mountain areas and their activities revolved around villages or groups of villages, with the objective of preventing the PL and Viet Minh from overrunning not only the mountainous areas of Laos, but more importantly, the ethnic Lao-dominated rich riparian plains of the Mekong (FRUS 1990, January 10, 1956: Doc. 336).

In May 1955, US Ambassador Yost met with Hmong leader Touby Lyfoung and the Governor of Xieng Khouang Province, Chao Saykham, who indicated that their partisans in Houaphanh would be willing to participate in guerrilla action but that careful preparation and clear instructions from the RLG would be required (FRUS 1990, May 31, 1955: Doc. 297). Although the CIA began to discreetly support upland people as early as 1955 (FRUS 1990, February 13, 1956: Doc. 344; Conboy 1995: 16), beginning in mid-1959, the PEO and select US Army Special Forces known as “White Star” mobile training teams, which operated under the supervision of PEO (Wing et al. 1964: C21; Conboy 1995: 64–65), actively began to expand the ADC militia network and provide civic action support (Wing et al. 1964: B21; Chandler 1969: 789; Paddock 1961).

To free menfolk from the need to work in the fields while devoting their time to militia-related activities, it was necessary to provide their families with food and other basic household necessities. As the intensity of fighting increased, and as the ADC units and their dependents—all of whom were destined to become refugees—were displaced, the demand for essential relief support via airdrops increased.

Kong Le Coup, the Turning Point for USAID Program

In August 1960, Neutralist Captain Kong Le staged a coup d'état and gained control of Vientiane, only to be removed by US-backed Gen. Phoumi Nosavan in December 1960, with Thai support, following the Battle of Vientiane, during which some 8,000 people were left in need of assistance. Essential public services had been damaged or disrupted due to the fighting. To cope with these problems, a group of essential USAID personnel remained in Vientiane after the battle (the Mission was divided between Vientiane and Bangkok until July 1962) and began refugee relief operations (USAID 1963a: 2; Wing et al. 1964: E21–E22; Chandler 1969: 790).

Kong Le entered into an alliance with the PL (which subsequently deteriorated after the July 1962 Geneva Accords), and retreated to the Plain of Jars via Vang Vieng and Muang Kasy (leaving behind a trail of displaced civilians) with logistical support from the Soviet Union. The count of civilians displaced by this increasingly destructive conflict, which expanded to Houaphanh Province, the Ban Ban area of Xieng Khouang, and to Xieng Khouangville (the provincial capital), grew to 90,000 (USAID 1971b: 1191). It became obvious in early January 1961 that refugee and relief operations would be necessary for the foreseeable future and that there was a need to strengthen the RLG and American presence in nearly all accessible areas in Laos (USAID 1962a: 123).

US Provides Support to Hmong Leader Vang Pao

Stuart Methven, a CIA case officer, became the “civic action contact with the Hmong” (Hillmer 2010: 82). His primary contact was a former GCMA company commander, Vang Pao (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992: 161), who transitioned to the RLA in 1955 and was based on the Plain of Jars in 1959. Methven met Captain Vang Pao in early 1959 in Ban Ban and explored ways to work with the Hmong to set up an effective paramilitary program. However, Vang Pao's first priority was his people, who had become victims of adverse weather conditions that had wiped out their crops of rice and opium, both of which were critical elements of their integrated highland economy. Opium was the principal, if not the only, source of cash for the average rural Hmong family (Yang Dao 1993: 77) and was commonly used by the Hmong to barter for livestock, blankets and cooking oil.

Desperately in need of assistance, Methven arranged for airdrops of blankets and four tons of triple-sacked rice to Vang Pao's people in his hometown, Nong Het. However, according to Methven, “before saying goodbye Vang Pao took me aside, reminding me ‘not to forget the guns.’ Vang Pao eventually got his guns, enough to arm the largest ‘clandestine army in history’” (Methven 2008: 63–75).

On January 2, 1961, after being evacuated to Bangkok from the Plain of Jars following the Kong Le coup, US Military attachés in Bangkok sent in a joint message

reporting an interview with two American [USAID] personnel, a Meo [Hmong]⁸, and a Chinese who had been evacuated December 30. The interview “concentrated on a suggestion made by one of the evacuees that the Meos [Hmong] and Black Thai [Tai Dam] in that area would combat the Pathet Lao if they were trained and supplied. The message concluded by recommending that the proposal be given serious consideration” (US Department of Defense 1963: 126–128; Jacobs 2012: 199).

At nearly the same time, a Christian missionary who spent a great deal of time with the Hmong over close to a twenty-year period, and who spoke their language, recalled that a group of Hmong he used to visit in Houaphanh Province—before he escaped from the PL in September 1960—walked all the way to Vientiane to ask Americans for ammunition and rifles so they could start recovering the villages they had fled after being overrun by communist forces.⁹

While this idea of partnering with the Hmong and Black Thai was not new, beginning in January 1961 the PEO was authorized to channel US Department of Defense (DoD) funding through the CIA (James William “Bill” Lair was the CIA’s chief military advisor at the time) to arm the first 2,000 Hmong and organize them on an ADC basis (Conboy 1995: 61), perhaps understanding that highland minorities likely thought of their situation “solely in terms of their own ridgelines” (Shaplen 1965: 362). The Hmong, who “generally have a very strong attachment to their native lands” (Lee and Tapp 2010: 125) and had “long fought for recognition of their rights” (Yang Dao 1993: 29), rallied behind Vang Pao, who was able to support them with substantial aid from the Americans. The Hmong who backed Vang Pao had long been alienated from the Communists owing to historical internal clan disputes (Yang Dao 1993: 39–40). Touby Lyfoung’s uncle, Faydang Lobliayao, was the leader of Pathet Lao’s Hmong guerrillas (Yang Dao 1993: 24).

In March 1961, the CIA dispatched a special contingent to seek greater support from the Hmong leadership to bolster the recruitment and training of Xieng Khouang ADC units—with assistance from Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) military teams (Conboy 1995: 59–61)—to ensure the RLG’s ability to claim control of the highlands of northern Laos (Wing et al. 1964: B21; Castle 1993: 38; The White House 1961: No. 29). However, as time passed and the war intensified, the effectiveness of ADC was seen to have reached its limits, and the militias were increasingly regarded by Vang Pao and the CIA as “farmers with rifles, a part-time militia,” characterized as being adept at defending themselves but not inclined to leave their villages and families and go on the offensive (Warner 1996: 114). Accordingly, Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) were also recruited as ‘enhanced ADCs’ for offensive-type missions and were subject to deployment anywhere. Their dependents, from whom they were separated, were allowed to resettle in secure locations for safety (Conboy 1995: 89).

⁸ During the time frame under review, the Hmong people were commonly referred to as “Meo” people, or the “Lao Soung,” the Iu Mien people as “Yao” or “Lao Soung,” and the Khmu people as the “Kha” or “Lao Theung.”

⁹ Based on an interview with Father Lucien Bouchard (OMI) in December 2013.

Hmong Refugees and Paramilitary Dependents

Two months later, in May 1961, a fact-finding USAID team met with Vang Pao, who was by then a lieutenant colonel (Conboy 1995: 60), at the Pa Dong outpost, the first military base for the Hmong resistance (Hillmer 2010: 85; Warner 1996: 52–58), to assess the overall needs of refugees at various Xieng Khouang relocation centers (Chadbourn 1961: 3, 6). Despite a cease-fire agreement reached by the warring factions in May 1961, shortly thereafter a combined PL and Neutralist force captured Pa Dong and several thousand refugees, mostly Hmong, who had already been displaced by earlier Communist maneuvers, and evacuated them mainly to Pha Khao, the new command post. However, several hundred refugees moved on to Vientiane. The Hmong ultimately moved to Long Tieng (Wing et al. 1964: D35; USAID 1962: 158), which was subsequently established as the CIA's paramilitary headquarters in about August 1962 (Leeker 2013; Conboy 1995: 90–91; Wing et al. 1964: D35; Ahern 2006: 88–89). In October 1962, neighboring Sam Thong, which had served as a base for White Star teams, became the headquarters for USAID's northeastern Laos operations (Conboy 1995: 90).

Also in May, a member of the US National Security Council stated that “it was...necessary to airlift food to the Meo [Hmong] because of the absence of many men during the recently completed planting season which adversely affected the Meo food supply” (FRUS 1997, May 9, 1961: Doc. 153). By that time 6,900 Hmong had been armed (FRUS 1997, May 9, 1961: Doc. 153). In about July 1961, Brig. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, the Pentagon expert on guerrilla warfare, stated:

As Meo [Hmong] villages are overrun by communist forces and as men leave food-raising duties to serve as guerrillas, a problem is growing over the care and feeding of non-combat Meos. CIA has given some rice and clothing to relieve this problem. Consideration needs to be given to organized relief, a mission of an ICA [International Cooperation Administration, USAID's predecessor] nature, to the handling of Meo refugees and their rehabilitation. (Gravel 1971: 646)

With mounting concerns about future relocation sites for refugees, in 1961, US Ambassador Winthrop Brown foresaw an eventual Hmong migration as “perhaps the only escape from extermination.” It was the ambassador's opinion that the United States should try to persuade the Hmong to settle in the mountains of the Annamite Chain (which runs along the border with both North and South Vietnam). It would be in that strategic zone where they would find relative safety and they would also serve as an “effective screen” against North Vietnamese probes, infiltration, and subversion into both Laos and South Vietnam (Ahern 2006: 83–84).

In August 1961, the US Country Team in Laos¹⁰ submitted its recommendations for future Hmong operations under several possible conditions, which included:

¹⁰ Coordinated by the US ambassador, Country Team members included the chiefs of USAID, USIS, CIA, PEO/MAAG, and the Military Attaché.

- The US would guarantee the Meo [Hmong] that, if [a] new [coalition] government [with adequate safeguards against a Communist takeover] persecuted them, the US would, at the minimum, support their evacuation and resettlement....In the meantime, the [USAID] relief program for the Meo would be continued.
- [If a coalition government unsatisfactory to the US is formed] the US should continue whatever assistance was necessary for the evacuation of those Meo who wished to leave Laos...[or] to either support the Meo in their present locations or to resettle them in southern Laos. (Joint Chiefs 1962: 126–127)

Indeed, in the event of a cease-fire breakdown, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed (in July 1961), as a contingency plan, action to secure the Mekong population centers from Vientiane to Pakse, to hold Xayaboury Province up to and including Luang Prabang, and to expel Communists from southern Laos. The net result would, in effect, be the partition of Laos, leaving most of northern Laos under the control of antigovernment forces (Rust 2014: 40).

On several occasions over the years, the option of relocating the Hmong to the secure Xayaboury Province along the mountainous border with Thailand was also discussed as the war took its toll on the Hmong people (Ahern 2006: 84; FRUS 2000, March 14, 1968: Doc. 343; Conboy 1995: 254; Warner 1996: 33, 249–250, 308–309; Buell 1969: 206–212).

Joint Mobile Task Force Assists Refugees

One outcome of the 1960–61 refugee crises was USAID's decision to reorganize and form a joint mobile task force that provided the necessary flexibility to launch a relief and rehabilitation program to help the RLG support the nearly 50,000 multi-ethnic refugees who had been uprooted by then in northeastern Laos (Tobler 1961: 1; Wing et al. 1964: E33–E34; USAID 1962: 124). In August 1961, some 6,000–10,000 refugees (many from Houaphanh) (USAID 1963b) also relocated to the Vientiane area along the Mekong; a year later (August 1962) their number had increased to 30,000–35,000 people (Agence Lao Presse 1962: 5). Beginning in 1962, there were additional population displacements elsewhere in northern, central, and southern Laos (US State Department 1962: 79; Conboy 1995: 70–73; Agence Lao Presse 1962: 5–6; USAID 1962b: 5). When an area could not be successfully defended, villagers retreated and regrouped.

In response to these movements, great quantities of relief supplies (blankets, medicines, and kitchen utensils) were purchased and airlifted from Bangkok to Vientiane and other major provincial cities. These commodities included relief supplies provided by humanitarian organizations, including CARE and the Christian Missionary Alliance (USAID 1962a: 127), and Catholic Relief Service (US Senate 1970: 4). As demand grew, the airlift was expanded to include US Food for Peace (PL-480) commodities, rice, salt, and iron bars and flights were made to transport them to villages in the interior (USAID 1963a: 2–3).

Members of the joint task force began to effectively work together on a cooperative interagency basis (Wing et al. 1964: E33). One of the major contributors to

the task force was IVS, which, as noted above, had been in rural Laos since 1956. Usually arriving by small planes and helicopters on crude airstrips carved out of rugged mountaintops by the villagers, team partners then frequently walked long distances to remote villages and settlement sites to evaluate refugee needs and to organize a system of distribution and control of relief supplies mostly delivered by air (USAID 1962a: 134). Without the cooperation of other agencies engaged in similar activities in Laos, the USAID refugee program could never have matured or developed as it did (USAID 1962b: 5).

One of the early figures in the refugee program was Edgar 'Pop' Buell, an Indiana farmer who, at age 47, went to Laos in June 1960 and served with IVS in Xieng Khouang until he joined USAID in mid-1962 (Schanche 1970; Jacobs 2012: 194–208). Prior to October 1962, the USAID refugee relief staff consisted only of Pop Buell and one Lao assistant who worked in areas of greatest refugee concentration; namely, 25 locations in Xieng Khouang, the nearby fringes of Luang Prabang Province, and Houaphanh, with the largest location accommodating 7,000 people. Beginning in October, Pop and his assistant were supplemented by two IVS assistants (USAID 1962b: 5–8; Buell 1962).

The refugee program received another boost with the arrival in June 1963 of Charles (Jigs) Weldon, MD (known by many as Doc Weldon), a country doctor from Louisiana who proactively took over USAID's public health program. Almost immediately, Dr. Weldon was sought after by Pop Buell to make primary health care available to refugees, a humanitarian undertaking that both Weldon and his wife, Patricia McCreedy, also a medical doctor, passionately pursued as key personnel in the refugee program (Weldon 1999: 51; Ramsey et al. 1976: 2100–2111).

By October 1962, it was estimated that USAID had under its care a maximum of 60,000 refugees, 75 percent of whom were Hmong (USAID 1962b: 5). Other agencies, including the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), the agency that replaced the civilian-manned PEO in April 1961 (Wing et al. 1964: B18), had airdropped rice and salt to an additional 80,000 to 90,000 refugees (USAID 1963a: 2; USAID 1962b: 5). With a combined total of some 150,000 refugees and dependents, the relief load required about 40 tons of rice per day, most of which was airdropped to as many as 200 widely scattered village locations (USAID 1962b: 8).

Political efforts to create a neutralized Laos continued, and in accordance with the July 1962 Geneva Accords (which followed the May 1961 cease-fire), MAAG military advisers, US White Star teams, and other foreign troops (including the North Vietnamese) were ordered to withdraw from Laos by October 1962. Accordingly, the refugees and dependents supported by MAAG were added to the rolls of refugees already being supported by USAID.

USAID and RLG Formalize Refugee Program

During his visit to Washington in July 1962, the Prime Minister of Laos, Souvanna Phouma, officially requested aid for refugees (FRUS 1994, July 28, 1962: Doc. 415; Rust 2014: 165), and a formal agreement was subsequently signed by USAID/Laos and the Ministry of Social Welfare in October (USAID 1962a: 161; Stevenson 1972: 183–197). The refugee relief program was recognized not only as a humanitarian effort, but also for its contribution to political and social stability within Laos (Brady 1969: 832).

Under this agreement, and in view of the pending withdrawal of logistical support provided until then by MAAG (USAID 1962a: 116), the USAID workload increased considerably. It was reported that by the end of 1962, air supply to refugees involved fourteen aircraft making over 1,000 flights per month, carrying about 1,500 tons of cargo (USAID 1962a: 162).

The Refugee Relief and Resettlement program that emerged was a humanitarian effort designed to deal with a constantly fluctuating refugee problem. The fluctuations in the number of refugees receiving assistance depended on such factors as enemy pressure, rice harvests, and natural disasters. The Laos refugee program was fundamentally divided into four categories of support: “Relief Assistance,” full relief, and partial relief for refugees who were once receiving full relief but had managed to become partially self-sufficient; “Relocation Assistance” for refugees who moved, or were moved to safer areas; “Assistance to Paramilitary and Their Dependents,” and “Resettlement Assistance” for displaced people who agreed to be permanently resettled in areas provided by the RLG (Brady 1969: 832–834).

Overall, as Knott (1973: 1599) reported, the United States provided the following assistance to refugees in Laos:

- On an emergency basis in refugee movements created by or in anticipation of military action, providing help in evacuating people if required, and emergency medical care and food supply.
- In relocating refugees, providing transportation to relocation sites, food, water supply, shelter materials and medical care.
- In providing basic facilities (schools, dispensaries, roads, wells) to bring refugee groups to an economic and social level equal to that of the non-refugees in the area.

As USAID and the Ministry of Social Welfare of the RLG embarked on a mission to provide assistance to refugees as long as there was a need, they could not have realized that over the next six years, attempts to seek peace would be shattered and there would be seasonal increases in the refugee population in northern Laos and an inexorable displacement of population gradually retreating through the mountains toward RLG-controlled areas along the country’s vital artery, the Mekong valley (US Senate 1971: 45).

Refugee Displacements Swell

In October 1962, the US Mission was faced with a refugee relief program that included between 140,000 and 150,000 people. However, Souvanna Phouma’s fragile coalition created earlier in the year between the PL and the Neutralists began to fall apart in the autumn of 1962 after the July Geneva Conference (Rust 2012: 266), and fighting erupted on the Plain of Jars as Neutralist Kong Le (who had parted ways with the PL) retreated in May 1964 (with US support) to more defensible locations in the Muang Soui area on the Plain’s western fringe (Dommen 1985: 87). The intensified fighting led to the displacement of even more refugees (USAID 1963a: 2; Stevenson 1972: 54).

Amid concerns that the Geneva Accords might break down, American intelligence indicated that “it is essential that we establish as rapidly as possible a sound international political basis for continued supply of food to the Meo.... The goal should eventually be that the subject of air supply to the Meo becomes a fitting subject for discussion under the Geneva Accords.” (FRUS 1994, January 15, 1963: Doc. 440).

From that point onward, the situation moved steadily toward open hostilities (Blaufarb 1972: 23). On June 25, 1963, President Kennedy authorized the CIA to strengthen the capabilities of the Hmong and other similar programs in central and southern Laos (known as the Panhandle) and take up new responsibility for the security of the Mekong valley (Ahern 2006: 161–162). It appeared that the planned expansion of military operations on the part of the RLG to regain areas lost after the signing of the Geneva Accords and enlarge its sphere of influence would create new refugees (USAID 1963a: 4).

Full-scale fighting broke out in Laos in March 1964 when North Vietnamese and PL forces attacked across the Plain of Jars, and by mid-May took control of this area of strategic military value because of its command of vital road communications in northern Laos. Complicated by an attempted right-wing coup d’etat on April 19, this action brought an end to the recently formed shaky coalition government (Benson 2014).

Bombing Commences

Beginning with the rainy season of 1964, the shooting war in Laos followed a relatively stable pattern and a definite annual rhythm until 1967, when a period in which the Communists advanced during the dry season and retreated during the rainy season began. It was also at this time, in late-1964, that low-key US Air Force bombing missions began and gradually escalated during the following years, targeting North Vietnamese supply routes to South Vietnam through the Lao Panhandle along the Ho Chi Minh trail and its transport routes to the Plain of Jars area in Laos (Anthony and Sexton 1993: 111).

Acknowledging that refugees in Laos, as in any other theater of war, were caused primarily by the high level of violence, the deputy assistant secretary of defense, Dennis Doolin, testified before the Senate in 1970 that

our air operations [in Laos] are controlled by the US Ambassador in Laos [in consultation with the RLG]. Furthermore, our air operations are conducted [mostly in sparsely populated areas] in accord with a policy of avoiding civilian casualties and hardships. In addition to targeting controls by the Ambassador, our air activities are governed by strict Rules of Engagement and Operations Authorities designed to minimize civilian casualties. (US Senate 1970: 48)

Inevitably, there were many instances when civilians fled due to the fear of bombing, and there were people who were inadvertently killed due to bombing errors. However, bombing was not the sole cause of population displacement; other factors, virtually all of which are directly attributable to the war, are briefly reviewed later in this paper.

Paramilitary Operations Expand

Between 1964 and 1967, the CIA expanded its presence in Laos beyond Long Tieng in Xieng Khouang Province to include training and support bases in Houa Khong, Xayaboury, and Luang Prabang Provinces in northern Laos, and various locations in the Panhandle by recruiting mostly highland ethnic minorities (Conboy 1995: 135–136, 164–165; Blaufarb 1972: 53–54). By October 31, 1968, the paramilitary forces in Laos comprised 39,000 tribal guerrillas of multiple ethnicities (FRUS 2000, October 31, 1968: Doc. 389¹¹; Kuhn 1995: 31–32; Yang Dao 1993: 40–41¹²).

Hmong villages (like those of other ethnic minorities) had a good measure of autonomy, and “the village chief [was] more than just a representative of the village; he [was] an honored leader on the local scene.... He [had] authority in emergencies. During the Communist occupation, he was responsible for the evacuation of his village and its defense” (Barney 1957: 20). Accordingly, the enlistment of ADC guerrilla fighters to protect their respective villages involved a decision by an entire village to follow the course of its tribal leader, and a “commitment thereupon by the US to support the village if it was forced by enemy action to evacuate its home area.” The support would take the form of emergency action if there was a need to evacuate the villages to a suitable location well out of the combat zone, where they would remain refugees until they were able to produce rice crops. The knowledge that their families would be cared for in such emergencies was a factor in persuading the tribesmen to join the irregulars (Blaufarb 1972: 59–60).

Moral Obligation

Over time, many of these targeted, isolated villages were overrun by invading forces and their inhabitants had no option but to flee and regroup in more secure outposts. Ultimately, with their backs finally against the wall with no place to run, instances arose where air evacuation was necessary.

From a humanitarian point of view, it was mandatory that the displaced families of paramilitary guerrillas be given the opportunity to make new homes for themselves. According to Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown, the United States had a “moral obligation to [sustain] these loyal supporters” who, under the direction of US advisors, had contributed to the fight against Communist military aggression (USAID 1963a: 2–3; FRUS 1997, February 25, 1962: Note 1219). It was stated that “without the USAID/RLG efforts under this [refugee relief] project there would be little incentive for the tribal people to continue their sacrifice. We provide immediate relief assistance to tribal and

¹¹ The guerrilla forces included Northwest Tribal Guerrillas (Yao and others), 7,000; North central Tribal Guerrillas (Luang Prabang and Phongsaly Provinces), 2,000; Hmong Tribal Guerrillas, 22,000; Central Laos Tribal Guerrillas (Lao), 4,000; and South Laos Tribal Guerrillas (Lao and Mon-Khmer), 4,000 (FRUS 2000, October 31, 1968: Doc. 389).

¹² As of 1969, Hmong comprised only about 60 percent of troops under the command of Gen. Vang Pao.

Lao ethnic groups caught in the maelstrom of ideological differences. This humanitarian effort is coupled with support for the families of paramilitary. It is essential that paramilitary forces be assured that relief assistance will continue to be on hand if it is expected that they will continue their resistance to aggression” (Chandler 1969: 794).

Overall, between 1961 and 1973, it was estimated that as many as 60 percent of the refugees supported in northern Laos were paramilitary dependents, whose USAID support was filtered through the US DoD (USAID 1971a: 74; Brady 1969: 833; Ramsey et al. 1976: 2267). Most paramilitary dependents in the Panhandle were not supported by USAID unless they had been displaced.

USAID’s Refugee Operations Officers

Augmented by local USAID staff members and Ministry of Social Welfare personnel, five American USAID advisors coordinated the support program for 150,000 refugees in 1964 (Mann 1964: 178–179). By 1967, the number increased to ten USAID refugee operations officers coordinating support for 250,000 refugees (Mendenhall 1966: 216). Most were assigned to locations in northern Laos, including Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai. Sam Thong in Xieng Khouang Province was the USAID base in northeastern Laos from which the greatest number of refugees was supported. A new high of 317,000 refugees (including about 43,000 receiving rehabilitation support) was reached in June 1971 (O’Connor 1972: 1376), and by 1972 the number of operations officers had escalated to 23 full-time Americans devoted to refugee affairs countrywide, as well as about 34 other USAID personnel who devoted either all or part of their time to refugee work (US Senate 1972: 1378).¹³

USAID’s refugee operations officers—many of whom were former IVS or Peace Corps volunteers who spoke Lao, were sensitive to the cultural environments in which they worked, accepted operational risks, and were dedicated to their mission—worked on a partnership basis with their Ministry of Social Welfare counterparts and local authorities to maintain up-to-date status reports on refugee populations, locations, and needs, as well as to provide daily schedules and devise systems and procedures for coordinating and facilitating the delivery of emergency relief supplies and services. There was also close collaboration with the USAID Public Health Division, which provided medical support as an important component of the refugee relief effort (Blaufarb 1972: 61).

Contingent on the unpredictable intensity of military operations from 1964 to the 1968 dry season, the total number of refugees receiving full or partial support generally averaged 150,000 people countrywide (as of 1964, 94 percent of the refugees, 62 percent of whom were Hmong, were located throughout northern Laos), with the numbers dipping after the harvest season when those refugees who were able to grow rice became self-sufficient. It was not unusual, however, for refugees to be upended

¹³ While there were some “undercover” CIA operatives in Laos classified as Office of Refugee Affairs employees, they were, in reality, direct-hire CIA employees and were not employed by, nor were they directly involved with, USAID’s refugee relief program.

before harvest time, often repeatedly over the years and therefore never permanently resettled (Mann 1964: 063–3).

Causes of Population Displacement

The movement of refugees was usually subject to a decision-making process that was based on the movement's magnitude, immediate cause, and timing. When danger from enemy action was imminent, a decision was usually made on the spot by the lowest echelon of leadership. If the number of refugees was in the 1,000 plus range, the provincial governor and/or the region's military commander made the decision. In situations of particularly large movements, and where impending danger could be predicted sufficiently in advance, the decision would be made by the highest levels of government (US Senate 1970: 70).

In addition to exposure to, or the fear of, local combat activity and/or bombing, there were a wide range of considerations that prompted civilians to move either before or after living in PL-controlled territory. These included heavy rice taxes, compulsory long-distance portage duty, tight movement controls, conscription for labor or fighting, and separation of families imposed by the PL and North Vietnamese. Others fled because of their ties with the RLG. Some wished to join family members in secure areas. In some instances, civilians were ordered to move by the RLG in order to remove them from the path of battle. More than 500 first-hand countrywide accounts of what prompted refugees to move can be reviewed in the digital collection, referenced below, of refugee interviews that are organized on a region-by-region basis.¹⁴

From a strategic standpoint, "encouraging civilians in enemy-held territory to abandon their villages and take refuge in government strongholds became a US policy goal in mid-1965; the rationale was the prospect of denying to the Communists the forced labor on which they relied to support dry-season offensive operations....This effort was to rely on positive incentives..." and not coercive methods (Ahern 2006: 238). In reality many people, especially minority groups, walked out or escaped on their own accord to save their lives and/or reposition themselves to fight in an attempt to recover their lost villages and farmlands.

RLG Temporarily Gains Ground

In 1966 and 1967, after losing key areas, the RLA regained some ground in Houaphanh Province that included locations within a few miles of the town of Sam Neua and fringe areas of both northern and eastern Luang Prabang and northern Xieng Khouang Provinces. One significant accomplishment was the capturing of the Nam Bak (also spelled Nam Bac) valley by the RLA in August 1966 for the first time since 1960, thereby improving the defenses of the royal capital by establishing an operational base to be used as a springboard for regional guerrilla operations (Conboy 1995: 163–164, 179; USAID 1966a: 264–265; USAIDb 1966: 269). In southern Laos, a concerted social,

¹⁴ <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/SEAIT/USAIDLaos>. Browse sub-collections of refugee interviews.

economic, and security program (known as the Sedone Valley, or “Wapi” Project, a joint USAID/CIA undertaking) (Blaufarb 1972: 58–59) was launched in mid-1965, and by the fall of 1967 most of the Sedone valley had been secured by the RLG (American Embassy 1968: 742). Many of the gains, however, were destined to be temporary ones.

Downturn Leads to Refugee Evacuations

A turning point in the war may have occurred during the dry seasons of 1968 and 1969, when the North Vietnamese significantly stepped up their military activities and refugees sought to flee the increasingly volatile areas—often before they could harvest their rice crops—to more secure locations away from the war zone. On October 20, 1969, US Ambassador William H. Sullivan testified that

in 1968 the Communist offensives were primarily directed toward clearing out Sam Neua [Houaphanh] Province of governmental forces...and the thing they did that was different in 1968 from previous years is that they pushed out the local population as well. (US Senate 1969: 490–491)

By spring of 1969, the North Vietnamese had captured almost all of the RLG outposts in Houaphanh Province (including strategic Phu Pha Thi on March 11, 1968) (Conboy 1995: 188–196), and in the northern and eastern fringes of the Plain of Jars. Northern Luang Prabang Province was similarly affected. Thousands of people were displaced, and the number countrywide doubled to more than 260,000, with nearly 90 percent located in northern Laos (Brady 1969: 831). The USAID effort during this period could be described as trying to keep one step ahead of the flood of refugees (US Senate 1973: 56).

Until the late 1960s, the refugee program had largely been a matter of providing temporary help to people who were continuously displaced from one mountain to the next. No major resettlement effort was involved. It was the airlift evacuation of refugees from several important and increasingly insecure outposts in northeastern Laos between 1968 and 1970 that introduced a new phase of refugee resettlement activity.

The demise of the RLG’s presence in Houaphanh Province serves as an example. In March 1968, some 8,000 to 10,000 refugees were airlifted from the Phou Louei¹⁵ area to the Long Tieng area (via Na Khang and Muang Hiem) following the loss of nearby Phou Pha Thi (the site of a US Air Force tactical air navigation system) (Kuhn 1968: 55–56, 94; Kuhn 1995: 90–92; USAID 1968: 6). In January 1969, large capacity US Air Force (USAF) Pony Express helicopters transported about 8,000 refugees from Houay Hin Sa to Houay Tong Kho (Conboy 1995: 207; Thomas 1969: 1). One year later, in January 1970, approximately 9,000 refugees were airlifted by US Air Force (USAF) helicopters from Houay Tong Kho to Ban Xon. With no place else to go, many of these Houaphanh people, who had been fighting since the 1950s to remain free of the PL and North Vietnamese, were evacuated to Xieng Khouang Province by air (Conboy 1995: 251; Buell 1970: 296). Shortly thereafter, Gen. Vang Pao withdrew the last remaining

¹⁵ Phou Louei, Phou Loi, or Point Alpha, was also referred to as DZ-056, Alpha Pad.

ADC unit from Houay Tong Kho, the RLG's last operational outpost in Houaphanh (Conboy 1995: 259).

About the same time, approximately 15,000 civilians (mostly Tai Phouan) were airlifted from the outlying areas of the Plain of Jars to the Vientiane Plain in February 1970 (MacQueen 1970: 118–127; Central Intelligence Agency 1970: 1–2; USAID ca. 1972: 121–128). Plans to resettle these refugees on the Plain of Jars went awry when it became evident that the North Vietnamese were poised to retake the Plain, thus putting the lives of the refugees in danger by placing them in the face of a cross-fire between warring factions.

Cornered Soldiers Retreat with Families

Not only were all of these air evacuations new and complex logistical operations, they were tactically significant insofar as there was little remaining incentive for indigenous paramilitary forces to defend highland territories where their villages had been destroyed mostly by powerful, invading North Vietnamese forces and from which their families had fled overland and/or were evacuated by air.

In March 1969, Na Khang, the center of support for the Houaphanh area since 1965, was overrun (Ahern 2006: 235; Conboy 1995: 209). Small enclaves north of Nong Het (near the Vietnamese border) held out until mid-1970 when they were overrun. A few hundred civilians were evacuated, but by that time the refugee program in Houaphanh Province was effectively dead (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2120).

By mid-1970, two key RLG strongholds along the southern edge of Xieng Khouang Province—Long Tieng and Ban Xon (the latter replaced Sam Thong as the refugee support base for northeast Laos after it was overrun in March 1970)—effectively became the front line militarily as well as becoming home to thousands of refugees (including many from Houaphanh), with only two RLG enclaves (Bouam Long and Phu Cum) remaining north of the Plain of Jars (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2122). The Communist's offensive military activity had effectively driven refugees into a corner with twice as many refugees (as of April 1971) receiving emergency relief than were supported at any given time since 1963 over an expanse of territory ten times as great (Ramsey 1971: 1037). In this congested area, population density reached 98 people per square kilometer (up from about 7.3 pre-war 1958 countrywide average), a landscape that would not support shifting cultivation (Ramsey 1973: 115; Halpern 1961: 4). [see Maps Appendix: "Refugee Flow in Northeastern Laos" Figure 2.]

The outcome of these events essentially marked the transition point of the war in northern Laos from paramilitary guerrilla warfare (wherein the mission of ADC units was to defend their villages, harass the enemy, and collect basic intelligence) (Wing et al. 1964: D35) into more conventional SGU offensive warfare to help defend the Plain of Jars.¹⁶ The evacuations furthered the disintegration of the traditional paramilitary and

¹⁶ The Plain of Jars was strategically important because via east-west Route 7 it provided direct access to Sala Phou Khoun, located at the intersection of Route 7 and north-south Route 13 which led to Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

civilian relationships, a divergence from the past when civilians, including their soldiers' families, lived together in the vicinity of remote outposts and had been an integral part of the overall plan (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2122).

Other areas of northern Laos were also faring poorly. Nam Bak, an important RLG stronghold in Luang Prabang Province, fell in January 1968 (Castle 1999: 81–85), and by April 1970, areas to the east of the Nam Tha River, including the Nam Houn and Nam Beng valleys, had been lost over time—as were the last RLG positions on the upper Mekong (Mokkachok, also known as Ban Nong Tong; and Pak Tha). These actions marked the end of RLG-controlled areas throughout most of Luang Prabang Province and precipitated additional population movements (Conboy 1995: 316). The royal capital was almost encircled—and continued to be so until the 1973 cease-fire—with a record high of 48,000 people on the area's support rolls in a congested area (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2122).

China was a beneficiary of the RLG's losses in northwestern Laos insofar as the Chinese could proceed unimpeded with their road-building projects (which commenced as early as 1962) "laden with strategic and tactical considerations" directed southward toward the Mekong River and Thailand (Godley and St. Goar 1991: 285).

Population Displacements Shift Southward

Prior to 1969, there were relatively few significant population displacements in central and southern Laos, with the exception of some in Attapeu Province (Baird 2010). Beginning in mid-1969, the relative peace enjoyed by the inhabitants of this region came to an end as both the RLG and the South Vietnamese attempted with greater effort to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail—the North Vietnamese supply corridor through Laos, to Cambodia and South Vietnam, which began in May 1959 (Conboy 1995: 115). In response, the North Vietnamese moved farther west of the Vietnamese border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, toward the Mekong River, in an effort to create a buffer zone that would protect their vital supply routes, an encroachment that disrupted life in the largely undisturbed, populated areas of central and southern Laos.

For the next several years, the flow of refugees throughout the Panhandle was contingent upon the seesawing military operations. As the Communists pushed relentlessly westward, important towns fell, including Muang Phine, Muang Phalane, Dong Hene and Kengkok in Savannakhet Province; Nam Thorne, in Khammouane Province; the provincial capitals Saravane, Attapeu and Khong Sedone; and the provincial towns of Thateng, Houay Kong and Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau. By early 1973, the relief rolls in southern Laos reached their highest level at 52,000, including 10,000 Saravane people who had been recently driven from their villages. Conflict in these areas mainly took place between 1970 and 1972, but skirmishes due to cease-fire violations continued intermittently at many of the locations, which changed hands more than once, up to and even after the cease-fire in February 1973 (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2122–2124, 2184; Sams et al. 1969: 108–122; Conboy 1995: 286–287, 349–352, 395–397).

From June 1970 to April 1972, USAID and the Ministry of Social Welfare supported an annual average of 281,000 refugees countrywide. On September 1, 1970, the director of USAID/Laos, Charles Mann, stated that "because of the non-deferrable,

life or death nature of requirements, relief assistance to refugees will normally receive the highest priority within all USAID projects and supporting services in claims on material and human resources” (Mann 1970: 1004). In June 1971, the numbers hit a new high of 317,000 [see Maps Appendix: “Refugee Locations (April 1971)”, Figure 3]. However, the total steadily decreased to 238,000 (a 25 percent decrease) by February 1972, due largely to the success some refugees had in planting and harvesting enough rice to become at least temporarily self-sufficient (US Senate 1972: 33).

Refugee Resettlement Program

While the first resettlement need emerged at the end of 1961—the initial movement took place in 1962, when Hmong refugees from various locations were resettled in the Muang Phieng area of Xayaboury Province (USAID 1962b: 7; USAID 1962a: 138)—the Refugee Resettlement Program formally began in January 1964 when the RLG requested and received implementation assistance from the United Nations. On March 16, 1966, a program agreement was signed between the RLG and USAID whereby USAID agreed to fully support the National Resettlement Program (Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation 1980: 104–105). The program escalated in 1968, when large-scale refugee movements (briefly described above) began as fighting intensified (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2127–2132). In most cases, resettlement assistance was an integrated undertaking that included clearing new villages on land allocated by the RLG, building houses, roads, schools and dispensaries, drilling wells, preparing land for planting, giving the settlers seed, tools, insecticides, fertilizers and special agricultural training (O’Connor 1972: 1378). Brief descriptions of the main resettlement projects (the largest of which was the Vientiane Plain program for mostly Tai Phouan refugees from the Plain of Jars) can be found in the Appendices. [see Appendix 1: “Resettlement Projects in Laos,”].

Post Cease-Fire Refugee Support

With the exception of the periods just prior to and immediately following the February 1973 cease-fire, there was an increase in hostilities as the competing factions sought to expand and consolidate territory under their control. As a result, 118,000 new refugees were added to the rolls, and by October 31, 1973, a record number of 378,801 refugees throughout all of Laos were receiving food support (Shepley 1973: 1760). A good harvest followed, however, and by December 7, 1973, this number was reduced to 161,800 (Shepley 1973: 1760). Thereafter, virtually all short-term relief activities were discontinued, since few new refugees were generated (Wiseman 1975: 1935).

On December 8, 1972, it was announced by the US Mission in Laos that the project title of Refugee Relief and Resettlement would be renamed Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation to better reflect, and more effectively respond to, the changing political, security and economic environment when planning for the future direction of these projects (Richardson and Ramsey 1972: 2).

Assistance to refugees was subsequently modified to encompass two broad categories designated as “Food Support” and “Rehabilitation Support” (e.g., shelter, educational assistance and medical assistance). These two categories were, in turn,

subdivided to reflect the status of the refugee groups that received assistance: those refugees who were fully dependent on food and rehabilitation assistance, those who were partially dependent on food and rehabilitation assistance and those who received rehabilitation assistance only (USAID 1971c: 164–182).

US Begins to Withdraw

As of November 10, 1972, which was during the time leading up to the February 1973 cease-fire, all Lao and other ethnic irregular units organized by the CIA, commonly known as Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs), assumed the new name of Lao Irregular Forces (LIFs) in anticipation of demands by PL negotiators that all irregulars be demobilized prior to the formation of a coalition government (Conboy 1995: 403). The next step was initiated in 1974, as the CIA was phasing out its in-country advisors (all foreign military personnel not assigned to diplomatic status were required to leave Laos by June 4, 1974) (Castle 1993: 124). LIF troops were reduced in size and integrated into the RLA (Castle 1993: 410).

For the most part, dependents of the former paramilitary units in northern Laos that were integrated into the regular Lao army had been in refugee status for several years, and the cost of their food rationing, as noted above, was funded by the US Department of Defense (DoD). However, the DoD funding was scheduled to cease beginning July 1, 1974, which raised the question of how to deal with the hardships most of the estimated 95,000 dependents (about 46 percent of the people receiving food support in northern Laos as of June 30, 1973) would be subject to at that point. The option that prevailed was the reclassification of eligible dependents (27 percent of the 353,300 people receiving food support countrywide) as refugees who, like all other refugees, were served notice to start taking steps to support themselves (Williamson 1973: 30–33; Mann 1973: 129).

Terminal Phase of USAID Refugee Program

In April 1974, the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) was formed, and the terminal phase of direct USAID operational involvement in the refugee program began in mid-1974, when a representative from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) arrived in Laos and surveys were conducted in preparation for the eventual return of the refugees to their original villages (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2133). During the same period, the United States began to phase out its expansive military support network. By June 1974, Air America was no longer permitted to fly within Laos, but this did not negatively impact food delivery to refugees because overland routes began to open up (Conboy 1995: 412; Leary 1999).

By November 15, 1974, USAID was providing assistance to a total of 120,000 refugees (103,000 in feeding programs and 40,000 in resettlement programs, of which 23,000 were also in feeding programs). One year earlier, USAID was providing similar assistance to 378,000 people, with the decline directly attributable to efforts by refugees to take advantage of the previous two years of relative peace and increase their agricultural productivity. Unusually good weather helped to produce an exceptional harvest, which allowed USAID to revise its feeding policy. Except for special

cases, the distribution of rice was terminated as of December 1, 1974. All in all, by December 1974, most refugees were reported to have been adequately provided with agricultural equipment and seeds and with basic public facilities such as dispensaries, schools, roads, and potable water (Ramsey 1974: 74).

By late 1974, the Ministry of Social Welfare estimated that about 776,000 people—about 24 percent out of a total estimated population of 3.2 million (of which an estimated 750,000 people lived in PL controlled areas¹⁷) (US Senate 1973: 61)—were displaced during the war and were living in pre-cease-fire, RLG-controlled areas other than their original villages (Ramsey 1974: 74). The number of displaced people living in PL-controlled areas was unknown. The Ministry also estimated that 250,000 refugees on the Vientiane side desired to return to home areas on the PL side. However, no guidelines beyond the general language of the September 1973 Protocol had emerged by then to facilitate such moves, and the PGNU had only just begun to formulate some general plans (Ramsey 1974: 75).

In the meantime, by December 1974, at least 82,000 people returned, of their own accord, to their original home villages. Approximately 75,000 people moved to areas within the Vientiane side, while 7,000 people returned to the PL side (Ramsey 1974: 75). In March and April 1975, a group of mostly Tai Phouan refugees returned to the PL-controlled Plain of Jars from the Vientiane Plain via U.N. assisted airlifts, and by the late summer of 1975, a total of about 25,000 refugees had returned to both the Plain of Jars and northern Borikhane Province (Ramsey et al. 1976: 2198).

Perhaps the most significant disincentive faced by refugees contemplating a return to their homes in areas controlled by the PL was the widespread stigmatization of families because of the past association of a male member with the RLG and CIA-funded ADC/SGU military forces. This dilemma was magnified by the fact that many of these people could not be supported by normal cultivation in the areas to which they fled owing to land shortages, the lack of material assistance, taxation and restrictions on private animal raising, susceptibility to disease and, in general, the absence of economic autonomy and re-acceptance of paramilitary veterans by the Pathet Lao (Brown and Zasloff 1974: 43–45). Over time, refugees returning to former battle zone areas and areas adjacent to supply routes used by communist forces (including the Ho Chi Minh Trail) were also faced with the threat of unexploded bombs and other ordnance (UXOs).

The last massive evacuation of refugees took place during a three-day airlift of 3,000–3,500¹⁸ Hmong from Long Tieng to Nam Phong in Thailand, which culminated on May 14, 1975 when the last planes departed Long Tieng, one with Maj. Gen. Vang Pao on board. It was estimated that some 14,000 refugees were left behind (Conboy 1995: 415; Hillmer 2010: 162–168; Yang Dao 1993: 155–156). Others were left unsupported at remaining remote outposts such as Bouam Long, which was located north of the Plain of Jars. Although thousands more subsequently escaped to Thailand, it was “a time of enormous confusion.” On May 29, a “terrible and unforgotten massacre took place

¹⁷ Of the estimated 750,000 people who lived in PL-controlled areas, about 500,000 lived in northern Laos, 130,000 in central Laos, and 120,000 in southern Laos (US Senate 1972: 61).

¹⁸ MacAlan Thompson, *pers. comm.*, January 28, 2014.

[when PL] soldiers fired openly on a crowd of several thousand Hmong refugees at Hin Heup Bridge across the [Nam Lik] River, the point of access to Vientiane” (Lee and Tapp 2010: 15). While many Hmong felt betrayed by Vang Pao, others still trusted him and believed that at the end of the day he would come to their rescue.

On May 27, 1975, an agreement was signed between the PGNU and the American Charge d’Affaires (the US ambassador had departed in April) that the USAID Mission would be terminated by June 30. Termination was completed on June 26, when the acting USAID director left Vientiane and an Embassy Diplomatic Note to that effect was delivered to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ramsey et al. 1976: 1953). At the time of USAID’s departure “virtually all refugees [ca. 143,000] had achieved a degree of physical well-being and economic self-sufficiency that enabled them to be dropped from the refugee rolls” (Wiseman 1975: 1940; Ramsey 1974: 74).

Statistical Summary

During the period from FY 1962–FY 1973 (through June 30, 1973), USAID delivered 322,797 metric tons (MT) of rice, 38,946 MT of US Food for Peace PL-480 agricultural commodities, and 74,295 cases of canned meat to refugees. Of these commodities, 176,773 MT were delivered by air (as of June 30, 1973) to 204 drop-zone sites and 118 airfield sites. The number of refugee recipients averaged nearly 115,000 during the period 1963–1968, and from 1969 to 1972, the number averaged 225,000 people.¹⁹ The total cost of the Refugee Relief and Resettlement Project alone (FY 1962–FY 1973) was \$56,982,000 (excluding other projects such as education, public health and air transportation), with an average for the three-year period FY 1970–FY 1973 of \$18,000,000. With respect to medical assistance, the average annual patient treatments totaled 1,400,000 refugees who were (as of June 30, 1973) served at 150 dispensaries and two hospitals (Knott 1973: 1599–1600).

Days after leaving Laos, USAID’s acting director, Gordon Ramsey, was asked: “After all these years, all the expenses [incurred by USAID/Laos, of which the refugee program was a priority component] and now to have it all end so ingloriously, was it worthwhile?” Mr. Ramsey’s response was, “I think we’ve done a hell of a lot of good things for this country. Maybe we did them wrong, but the results are here.” (Simons 1975: A18)

Post-1975 Flight from Laos

Although refugee movements within Laos during the post-June 1975 era are not covered in this paper, nearly 10 percent of the population of Laos, some 300,000 people—mostly Hmong and Lao, but also Khmu, Iu Mien, Tai Dam, and other ethnic minorities—made the decision to become international refugees and face the challenges of beginning a new life in countries around the world. Their exodus took place both during and after the period in which the PL took steps to officially take over

¹⁹ These numbers vary somewhat from averages noted earlier in this paper.

and form the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in December 1975, thereby marking the end of the Kingdom of Laos.

Conclusions

“Political memories” based on violent wartime recollections are “important for understanding social relations and interactions” between people of opposing factions that emerge during the postwar period (Baird 2014: 65). In Laos, issues relating to “political memories” prompted the Lao PDR to send about 40,000 people formerly affiliated with the RLG (including members of the royal family) for ‘re-education’ (Baird 2014: 65). Of this number, select individuals were sent to remote concentration camps. “Political memories” were another factor that led to post-1975 insurgencies by anti-communist elements in select areas of Laos that continued into the 2000s.

As noted above, these “political memories” stigmatized that group of refugees aligned with elements of the RLA and RLG more generally, as they contemplated returning to their homes in PL-controlled areas. While many of the people uprooted by the war returned to the land from which they fled, some people, for security reasons, including Hmong and other ethnic groups—especially those who fought against Communism—were resettled by the Lao PDR away from the remote areas where some fought to recover their land from the Communists during the war (Baird and Le Billon 2012: 295).

While the Lao PDR's Constitution defines Laos as a multiethnic state that seeks to create unity, post-war land allocation has been an important consideration for those who were displaced, mostly subsistence farmers. “Land is a unique, valuable, and immovable resource...[and is] therefore a very strategic socio-economic asset...” (USAID 2005: 2). For those whose political alignment was with the RLG during the war, “memories of a war that supposedly ended in 1975...are contributing to shaping contemporary rural landscapes in Laos” (Baird and Le Billon 2012: 291).

Indications are that “post-conflict settings often see dramatic shifts in political power, attempts to settle ‘old scores,’ and/or the establishment of new land laws” (USAID 2005: 6), which can be important in shaping the policies of land allocation and power relations. “Spoken of in the shadows, these political memories continue to stigmatize and incapacitate those [in Laos] on the ‘wrong side...” (Baird and Le Billon 2012: 291, 298).

Within Laos, population displacement continues to this day to clear the way for large-scale land concessions and farmland acquisitions (often referred to as ‘land-grabbing’) and so accommodate land-based economic projects initiated mostly by foreign investors (notably Vietnam, Thailand, Japan and China). At the same time, Hmong and Khmu “are being encouraged, coerced, possibly even forced, to move down to lowland areas where there are more economic opportunities, productive agriculture and better access to government services such as education and health” (IFAD 2012: 21). Many ethnic minority people (as well as ethnic Lao) have also migrated to Thailand in search of economic opportunities (IFAD 2012: 16).

A further complication faced by resettled refugees—regardless of the basis for their “political memories”—is their exposure to those former battlegrounds that are littered with UXOs. A Lao PDR government survey indicates that some 50,000 people

were UXO “victims” during the period from 1964 to mid-2008 (Sisawath et al. 2008: 20; Coates and Redfern 2014: 7).

We have seen how thousands of civilians were torn away from their territories in the course of the Second Indochina War and how the impact has carried over into the post-conflict period. The victims of this war—especially ethnic minorities—suffered severely from the negative social, economic and political effects wrought by their displacement. “Land is often a significant factor in widespread violence,” and, especially for those refugees who remained in Laos, land “is also a critical element in peace-building and economic reconstruction in post-conflict situations” (USAID 2005: 2), a seemingly cyclical phenomenon that has plagued the people of Laos for centuries.

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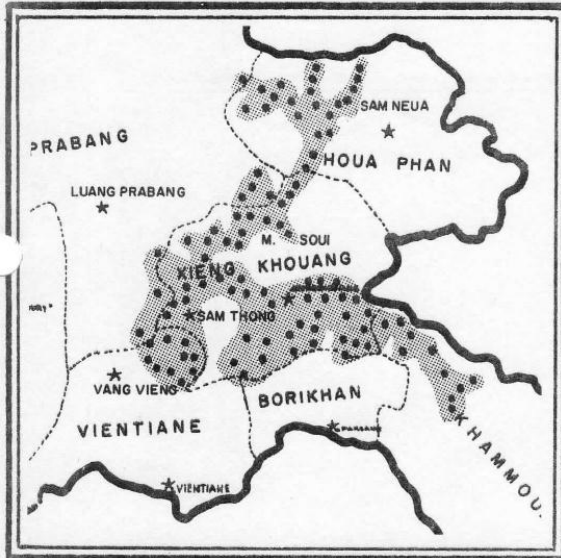
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Maps Appendix:

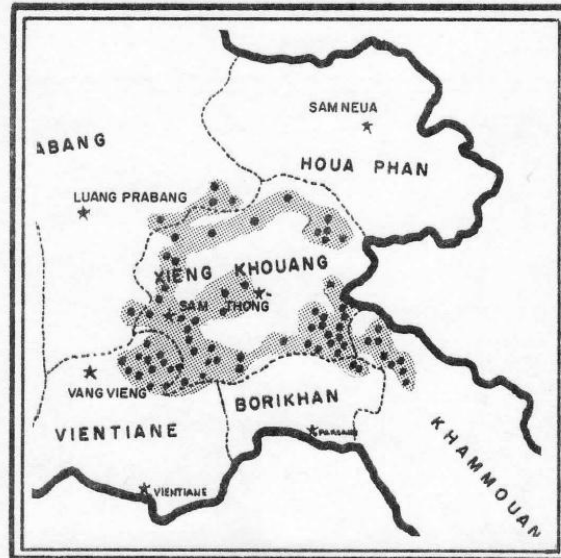


Figure 1. Laos in the 1960s

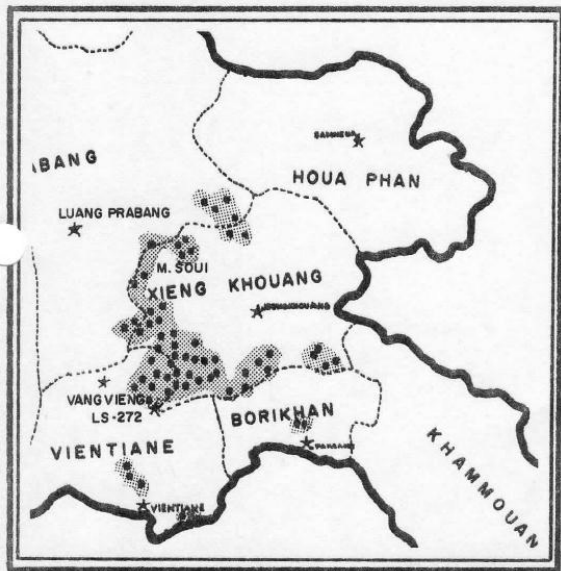
NORTH VIETNAMESE ATTACKS IN NORTHEASTERN LAOS HAVE FORCED THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE OUT OF THEIR TRADITIONAL HOMELANDS INTO SAFE HAVEN AREAS.



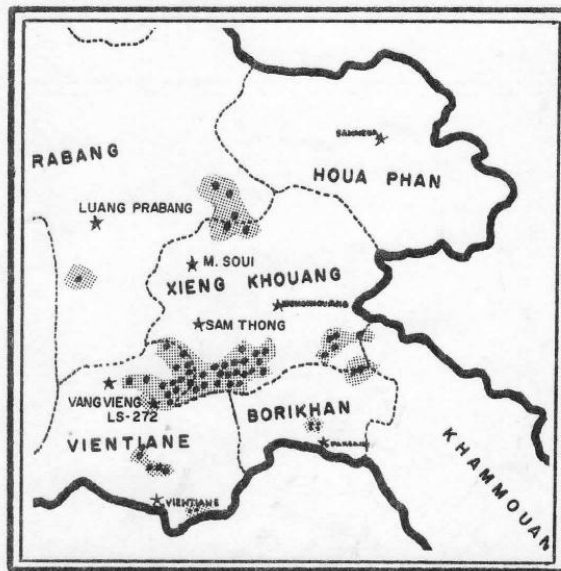
REFUGEE LOCATIONS FROM 1963 TO 1968



REFUGEE LOCATIONS FROM 1968 TO 1970



REFUGEE LOCATIONS FROM 1970 TO 1971



REFUGEE LOCATIONS FROM 1971 TO PRESENT

Figure 2. Refugee Flow in Northeastern Laos 1963-1972

Refugee Locations (April 1971)

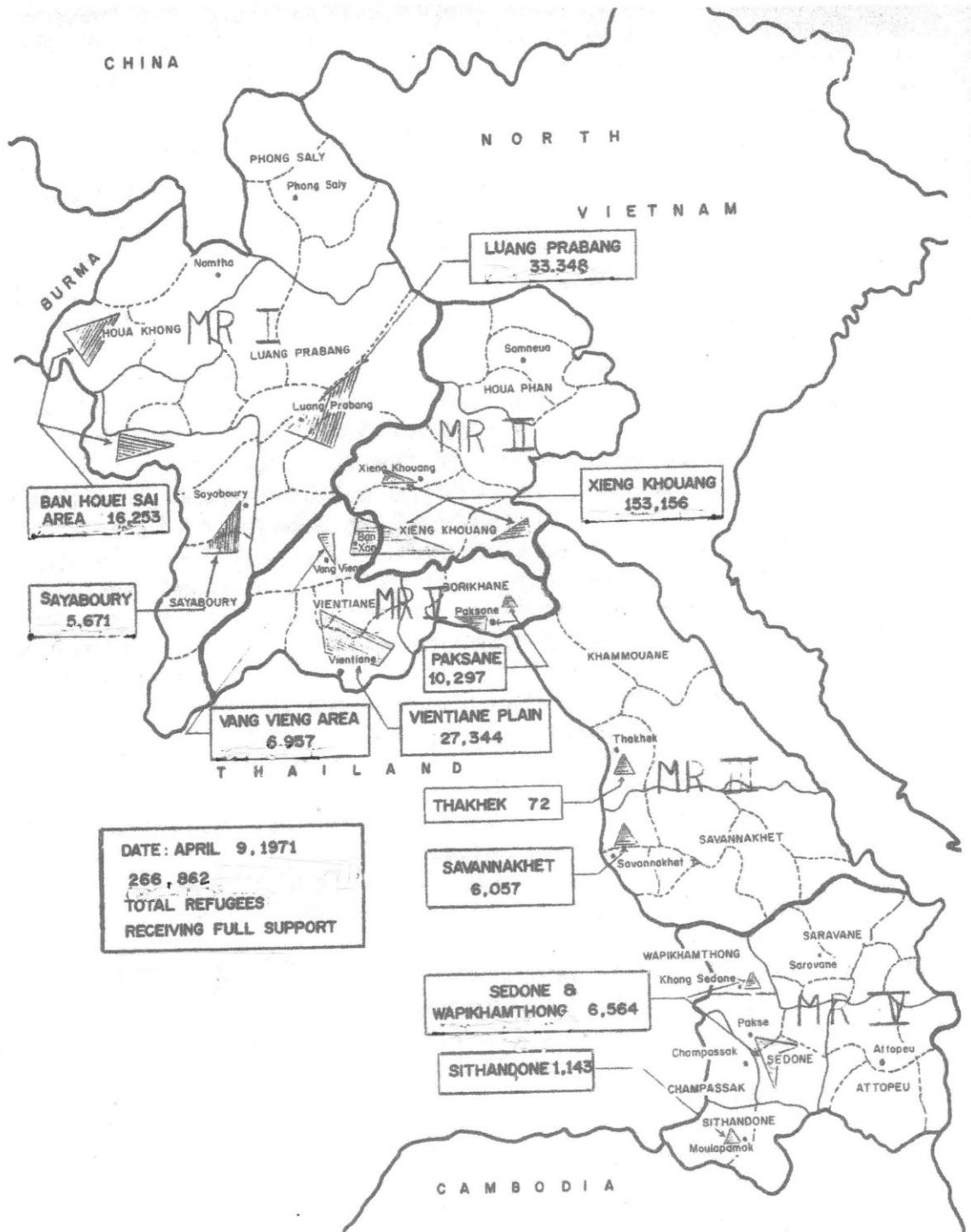


Figure 3. Refugee Locations (April 1971)

Appendix 1. Resettlement Projects in Laos (based on Ramsey 1976: 2127-2131)

- 1) Houay Nam Phak – Approved in 1968, the first integrated relocation project was located in Houay Nam Phak, 25 km south of Pakse. Prompted by poor security conditions on the Bolovens Plateau, refugees began to move into Houay Nam Phak in April 1969. Some 1,400 refugees were relocated in this project.
- 2) Paksane – A number of relocation villages constructed in the vicinity of Paksane accommodated refugees who fled south from the southern fringe areas of the Plain of Jars during the heavy fighting of 1970. About 75 percent of these people were Lao and tribal Tai (Tai Dam and Tai Daeng), and 25 percent were Hmong and Lao Theung.
- 3) Seno – In late 1969 nearly 3,000 civilians were evacuated prior to the battle for the strategic town of Muang Phine and were relocated to the Seno Military Camp east of Savannakhet.
- 4) Vientiane Plain – The initial settlers were Tai Phouan airlifted from the Plain of Jars in February 1970. Later, in 1971, several thousand other refugees fled from the Long Tieng area to the relative safety of the Vientiane. In all, 27,000 refugees were resettled in 27 specially constructed villages on the Vientiane Plain.
- 5) Thasano – In July 1971 a large tract of land was allocated as a site for relocating refugees from the Muong Phalane area in Savannakhet Province. Shortly thereafter, an extension was added for refugees from the Dong Hene area, and the project eventually included 11,500 refugees.
- 6) Hin Heup – After the Vietnamese captured the Plain of Jars in December 1971 and subsequent pressure was placed on the Long Tieng area in 1972, a large group of 6,000 refugees, originally from Houaphanh Province, relocated to the northern reaches of the Vientiane Plain near the Nam Lik River.
- 7) Long Nam Khan – With the presence of some 40,000 already in the vicinity of Luang Prabang city, in late 1971 it was decided to relocate an additional several thousand Laos Theung from northern Luang Prabang Province to an 86,000-acre area of land between Xieng Nguen and Muang Nane.
- 8) Phu Ba Chiang – In October 1971, work began developing a relocation area in a forest preserve at the foot of Phu Ba Chiang in the greater Pakse area. However, owing to security issues, the work was temporarily suspended.
- 9) Tha Khek-Khammouane Province – The relocation efforts in this area were focused on assisting several thousand civilians who fled following the attack on Nam Thorne on October 28, 1972. Many of the refugees had originally been relocated from the Kham Keut area in the early 1960s. Owing to the poor agricultural conditions in the area, many of these people migrated north to the Paksane area.
- 10) Houay Nam Ngam – Officially designated as a relocation project in early 1974, Houay Nam Ngam, situated between Ban Houei Sai and Ton Pheung, was set up to handle the large influx of refugees generated by the PL and North Vietnamese push on Houa Khong Province in late 1972 and 1973. Important locations that were overrun during this period included Vieng Phu Kha, Nam Yu, and Muang Meung.

- 11) Ban Xon – Although never designated as an official relocation site, several projects were undertaken to accommodate the many refugees from Xieng Khouang Province who relocate in this area, which served as USAID’s operations center for northeastern Laos following the fall of Sam Thong in March 1970.

Appendix 2. Online Maps of Laos

Air America 1967–1973. *Air Facilities Data Laos*.

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MR2 Maps. —<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/SEAiT.MR2Maps>, last accessed January 17, 2014.

MR4 Maps. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/SEAiT.MR4Maps>, last accessed January 17, 2014.

MR5 Maps. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/SEAiT.MR5Maps>, last accessed January 17, 2014.

Why Do They Weave? : The Role of Marriage Rites in the Textile Production of Lao-Tai Women in Houa Phan Province

Nagisa Ito¹

Abstract

Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phan Province, Laos, are nationally and internationally famous for hand-woven textile production. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the cultural reasons that women in these areas weave so much and so often. The villagers' lives are based on the division of work between men and women, and weaving is categorized as one aspect of women's work. Because all Lao-Tai women in these districts must master the skill of weaving, the majority of women engage in textile production. This ability of all women to weave is a salient feature of textile production in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts and indicates that weaving textiles is embedded in the cultural context of village life. Today, this cultural context is changing rapidly, but women continue to weave textiles for their own use as well as for sale.

I have conducted research in Houa Phan Province since 2010 and have stayed there for a total of eleven months. Based on this research, I identify the reasons that Lao-Tai women in the districts continue to weave, focusing especially on marriage customs and textiles as gifts that are exchanged.

Introduction

Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phan Province (Fig. 1), located in the northeastern part of Laos and bordering Vietnam, are famous both nationally and internationally for textile production. These areas are among the biggest producers of hand-woven textiles in Laos. I first went to Laos in 2007 to do research for a master's degree. I visited weaving workshops, shops and some villages in the capital of Vientiane and interviewed owners, weavers and merchants. I found that many weavers, both in workshops and villages, came from northeastern Laos, and that much of the cloth and woven articles sold in the shops were also brought from northeastern Laos. I most frequently heard Xam Neua and Xam Tai referred to as the origin of both textiles and weavers. A Lao merchant explained, "Weaving is something running in the blood of Xam Neua women." In this paper, I intend to show what makes the province such a big producer of textiles and weavers.

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Previous work on textiles and weaving by Tai-Kadai ethnic groups reveals that woven textiles play significant roles in various rituals, such as weddings, funerals and healing rituals (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992; Connors 1996; Cheesman 2004a; Gittinger 2004; Bunyaratavej 2004; Kanlaya 2001; McIntosh 2006). Some textiles are woven and used for specific rites (Cheesman 2004a, 2007; Gittinger 2004; McIntosh 2006). These studies show that textiles, which were indispensable for social life, were produced by women as part of a sexual division of labor (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992; Connors 1996; Cheesman 2004a; McIntosh 2007). The villages where I conducted my research in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts² have ceased to use hand-woven textiles for rituals, as is true in many villages, and as several studies have noted (Gittinger 2004; McIntosh 2007). However, all women in these districts possess weaving skills and engage in some part of textile production. For example, young girls who have not mastered weaving techniques help their mothers; elderly women who have poor eyesight wind yarn for their daughters or granddaughters.

It is a distinctive feature of the region that all women are engaged in textile production and have weaving skills. Women continue to weave textiles, not only for sale, but also for personal use. Interestingly, these women do not have to produce textiles for personal use, because they can buy whatever they want in the market today. Still, they continue to weave textiles for their own use, as well as for sale, because weaving is configured as a part of their culture.

Research Methods

I used the following three anthropological methods for my research: (1) participant observation, (2) villager interviews, and (3) documentation of textiles.³ I have conducted my research in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phan province



Figure 1: Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts in Houa Phan Province

² Please see 'Research Methods' section.

³ I took photos of the textiles and interviewed villagers about names of the producers, the purposes and the year of production, the materials used, and so on.

Province, Laos, since 2010 and have stayed there for a total of eleven months while affiliated with the National University of Laos. The argument of this paper is based on this research.

I studied Lao-Tai villages in three areas of Xam Neua and two areas of Xam Tai Districts: Muang Vaen, Muang Xang and Nong Khang in Xam Neua District, and Muang Kouan/ Muang Na and Tao Village in Xam Tai District. Among them, I focused primarily on the Muang Vaen area in Xam Neua District and the Muang Kouan and Muang Na areas in Kouan District (Fig. 2). The oral traditions of both the Muang Vaen and the Muang Kouan/Muang Na areas state that they have been Buddhist since their ancestors settled there and that they were once tributary *muang* of the Lan Xang Kingdom. Documents presently in the Thai National Library in Bangkok were originally sent from the authorities of the Lan Xang kingdom to the chief officials in Houa Phan province.⁴ The date on the oldest document is 1600.⁵ This shows that the Lao-Tai polities of Houa Phan became tributaries to the Lan Xang Kingdom at least by the end of the 16th century. The record of these documents

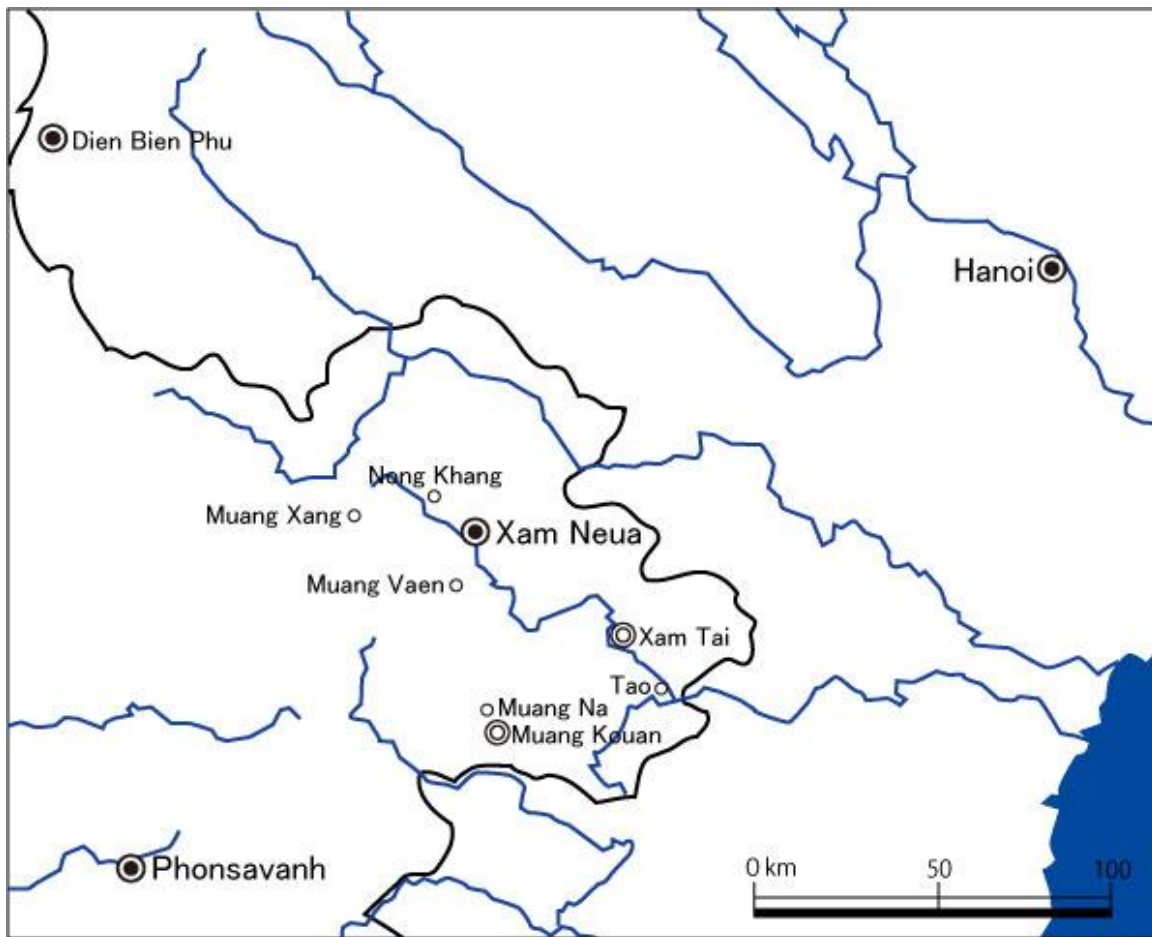


Figure 2: Location of the research areas and villages

⁴ These documents are included in the Bai Choum collection in The Thai National Library in Bangkok. Fifty are written in old Lao writing, or ‘*nangseu lao bouhan* (ໜັງສືລາວບູຮານ).’ Twenty-one are documents prepared under the authority of the Lan Xang Kingdom and sent to the chief officials in what is now Houa Phan Province (Phaibounwangcharoen 2000). Michael Vickery (2003: 20–23) cites a grant of authority from the King of Vientiane to the chief official of “Xamneua.”

⁵ Although the documents do not prove when the people became Buddhists, there are no other reliable historical records to disprove the oral history of the villagers stating that they have been Buddhists through the ages.

coincides somewhat with the oral history of the villagers.

The Muang Vaen area is located along the Xam and the Vaen rivers; the latter is a tributary to the Xam. The Vaen River area is located about 35 km from Xam Neua town, and the Xam River area is located about 10 km farther east of the Vaen River area. It was the Lao Phout, Buddhist Lao, who historically settled in the Muang Vaen district; all Lao-Tai villages in the area are Lao Phout. Every Lao village has a '*vat* (ວັດ),' a Buddhist temple. Oral tradition says that about 500 years ago, these people came from 'Ka ya pha khan (ກາຢາຟາຂ້າງ),' said to be located in present-day Vietnam (Silithong et al. 2011: 11–14). One of the documents in the Thai National Library was sent to the chief official of Muang Vaen in 1806. Thus, the district of Muang Vaen was in existence at least by then.⁶

Muang Kouan and Muang Na, located in the southern part of Xam Tai, used to belong to Xam Tai District. In 2012, the southern part of Xam Tai became a new district and the Muang Kouan village became the district capital. Muang Kouan is located about 36 km from Xam Tai town, and Muang Na is about 7 km farther Xam Tai. Villagers in these two areas have close relationships; they have formed an intermarriage sphere and frequently visit each other. Oral tradition says that the Lao Phout of Xam Tai came from Luang Phrabang and Vientiane by around the 14th century (Silithong et al. 2011: 5557). At that time, Xam Tai had 10 *muang*, which included both Muang Kouan and Muang Na.⁷ Today, villages in the Muang Kouan and Muang Na areas do not belong to Xam Tai District, but they were part of the *muang* of Xam Tai⁸ in the past. People in the newly constituted Kouan District and in Xam Tai District visit each other frequently and know one another well.⁹ While these two areas—the Muang Vaen area and the Muang Kouan/ Muang Na area—do differ in some ways, the differences are minor when it comes to textiles and their production.

All villages that I studied, except Muang Kouan village and Tao village, are populated by Lao Phout inhabitants. These two villages, however, are populated both by Lao Phout, who were the first settlers according to their oral history, and Tai Daeng, who have not converted to Buddhism. The Tai Daeng in these two villages hold shamanic beliefs called '*nap theu phi* (ນັບຖືຜີ)'. In Muang Kouan, villagers stated that the Lao Phout who came from Vientiane were the first settlers and that the Tai Daeng came from Vietnam after the 1880s when the French incorporated the region into their colony, French Indochina.¹⁰ In Muang Kouan village, customs of the Lao Phout and the Tai Daeng are similar and intermarriage is common. It is difficult

⁶ I conducted research in six villages in the Muang Vaen area and spent most of the time in Muang Vaen village, which contained 85 houses and 566 people in 2013.

⁷ I conducted research in four villages in the Muang Kouan and Muang Na area. Muang Kouan village is the district capital. It has schools, a hospital and a market, and had more than 350 houses in 2010. The villagers stated that Muang Kouan village had about 30 houses in the 1970s and about 80 houses by the end of the 1980s. At that time, only Lao-Tai people lived there. After the beginning of the 21st century, Hmong and Khmu also resettled in Muang Kouan, often from villages in the surrounding mountains. The village became the district capital in 2012, and the number of houses increased to more than 700 in 2013. The original settlers lived next to the paddy fields, and the newcomers built houses on the outskirts of the old village. I spent most of my time in the old village of Muang Kouan and conducted research there with the earlier settlers.

⁸ Two of the documents in the National Library in Bangkok were sent to Muang Xam Tai in 1738 and 1806.

⁹ Thus, I refer to Xam Tai District as also including the Muang Kouan and Muang Na areas in this paper.

¹⁰ Muang Kouan village has a Buddhist temple and an old stupa. Unfortunately, the date of the stupa is unknown.

to distinguish the ethnicity of one group from the other on the basis of textiles, or on their component designs, motifs or weaving techniques.¹¹ Therefore, I refer to the people and textiles as Lao-Tai¹² in this paper.

Contemporary Textile Production in Xam Neua and Xam Tai

In this section, I outline and describe features of present-day textile production. This will permit the reader to see what has changed and what has not.

Setting up the loom:¹³ ‘*Ki* (ກີ),’ or looms, are rather simple and are constructed by putting pieces of lumber together. Women or men bring the pieces and put looms together when weavers need them and take them apart and put them away when they are not using them.¹⁴ Weavers have several ‘*feum* (ເຜີມ),’ or reeds.¹⁵ Each reed is used for a specific kind of cloth. First, women choose a reed and prepare yarn and then ‘*khon houk* (ຄົນຫຼັກ),’ or wind yarn that will be the warp onto a warping frame according to the number of sections between the teeth in the reed. The warp yarn is then removed from the frame and one side of the loop is cut. After that, they bring a set of heddles¹⁶ and a reed through which warp threads have already been threaded, left over from a cloth previously woven on this set of heddles and reed. Weavers ‘*seup houk* (ສືບຫຼັກ),’ or thread and sley, in order to tie the new warp threads to ones that have previously been threaded through the heddles and reed set-up. All threads of the new warp are tied to the previously threaded warps. Next, the new threads are pulled through the heddles and reed to sley new yarns. Weavers then bring the whole set-up of warp, heddles and reed to the loom, lay bars onto the top of the loom frame, suspend the heddles and reed with string and put the warp on the loom. Weavers tie one end of the warp yarn to the breast beam and the other end around the top bar of the *ki* frame located over the weaver’s head, so that she can adjust the tension from her seat. After setting the warp, weavers prepare to set in the heddle system, either a supplementary weft¹⁷ or a supplementary warp, if they want to weave patterns on the textiles.¹⁸ Thus, when weavers start to ‘*tam houk* (ຕ້າຫຼັກ),’ or weave, they already know what they will produce. That is why the villagers usually call a cloth by a specific name (for example, ‘*sin* [ສິນ],’ the traditional tube skirt; ‘*pha*

¹¹ Cheesman points out the similarity of designs and motifs in a study of Xam Neua style healing cloths, which have shamanic origin but have been adapted to Buddhist aesthetics (Cheesman 2007).

¹² Lao-Tai is a translation of ‘*lao-tai* (ລາວ-ໄຕ)’ in the Lao language. The name is from the ethno-linguistic classification of ethnic groups by the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) (Messerli et al. 2008). I use this name because the villagers identify themselves primarily as Lao-Tai who are Tai-Kadai-speaking people in Laos.

¹³ For a more detailed explanation of weaving techniques, please see Kanlaya (2001), Cheesman (2004a), and Nanthavingdouangsy (2006).

¹⁴ The looms and weaving tools are usually made by male relatives.

¹⁵ Weavers obtain reeds in various ways. Some reeds are made by fathers or husbands; others are bought from other villagers or in the market.

¹⁶ Heddles are called ‘*khao* (ຂົ້າ).’ Women often make them by themselves with synthetic threads. In the past, they made them with cotton threads.

¹⁷ Supplementary weft techniques are of two types: continuous and discontinuous.

¹⁸ In the villages where I conducted research, people did not use the weft *ikat* technique. Villagers said that it was not until the 1990s that they learned and started weaving weft *ikat* cloth for sale. For personal use, weavers only use a minimal warp *ikat* on some *sin*.

biang [ຜ້າບ່ຽງ],’ shawls to wear to the temple; ‘*na pha nang* [ໜ້າຜ້ານັ່ງ],’ faces of floor cushions), even while they are still weaving it; they rarely use the word ‘*pha* (ຜ້າ),’ or cloth, to refer to it.

Traditionally, weavers use silk and cotton yarn. They breed two kinds of silkworms, tropical and temperate, and they distinguish three colors of cocoons: yellow, light yellow, and white.¹⁹ They grow cotton in fields using shifting cultivation. I have seen only one kind of cotton, which was white in color, but I have not seen the cotton plants, which I plan to do in future research.

The Textiles They Weave: Women weave both for personal use and for sale. Informants stated that they started selling textiles around the year 2000.²⁰ ‘*Sin* (ສິນ),’ the traditional tube skirt for women, has become the most dominant product since 2009,²¹ although ‘*pha* (ຜ້າ),’ or cloth,²² is also still popular. Today, 100-percent silk textiles are produced for sale only.²³ Weavers seldom weave 100-percent silk textiles for their own use. They also use cotton and now synthetic yarn to weave textiles for sale, but these prices are much lower than for silk textiles. Most textiles



Figure 3: ‘*pha khao* (ຜ້າຂາວ),’ or white cotton cloth, Muang Na (2010).

woven with cotton or synthetic yarn are *sin* sold to other villagers for daily use, while 100-percent silk textiles are taken to sell in cities such as Vientiane and Luang Phrabang.

For personal use, women mostly weave *sin*. Besides *sin*, they weave the items for the brides’ trousseau, called ‘*kheuang kha* (ເຄື່ອງຂາ).’ I will give details of marriage customs and the brides’ trousseau later. Women also weave ‘*pha biang* (ຜ້າບ່ຽງ),’ shawls to wear to the temple; ‘*pha khao* (ຜ້າຂາວ),’ white cotton cloth (Fig. 3); ‘*pha da* (ຜ້າດາ),’ cloth with which to carry a baby (Fig. 4); and ‘*pha ap* (ຜ້າອັບ),’ towels for bathing. Today, when they weave textiles for themselves, the cloth is rarely entirely silk, but is usually a combination of cotton and silk or synthetic yarn.

¹⁹ Informants said that they call the colors ‘*daeng* (ແດງ),’ ‘*saet* (ແສດ),’ and ‘*khao* (ຂາວ).’

²⁰ Villagers stated that machine-made silk threads were also easily bought at this time, facilitating the production of 100-percent silk textiles for sale. Vertical heddles also became common at almost the same time that textiles began to be sold.

²¹ Since 2009, the major market for hand-woven textiles has been domestic rather than international

²² They call textiles of rectangular shape ‘*pha* (ຜ້າ),’ which are sold to foreign tourists, and, they believe, used as wall hangings.

²³ Cloth used to decorate around the top border of a mosquito net is made completely of silk. That is the only example of 100-percent silk textiles for personal use that I discovered during my research.

Except for 100-percent silk textiles, which are exclusively for sale, the line between cloth woven for sale and for personal use is rather ambiguous. When asked whether the textiles are for sale or for personal use, weavers often answer, “Both are possible. If someone wants to buy it, I can sell it. If my family likes it, I can keep it for us.”

Use of Textiles Today: As I wrote in the introduction, the villagers in the areas where I conducted research have ceased to use special woven textiles for rituals. However, here I give several examples of previously woven textiles that I observed being used during fieldwork.

When a ‘*mo mon* (ໝໍມົນ),’ or shaman, conducts healing rituals, carried out during a ‘*boun sang khan* (ບຸນສັງຂານ)’ ceremony, he dons the same type of woven item used as a blanket for babies and as a door curtain (Fig. 5). During a ‘*boun song sa kan* (ບຸນສົງສະການ)’ funeral ceremony,²⁴ a textile with the same design produced for door curtains is used to cover the coffin when family members take it to the ‘*pa xa* (ປ່າຊ້າ),’ or graveyard.

During ‘*boun than* (ບຸນທານ),’ a funeral ritual for Lao Phout, relatives prepare a bed for the deceased.²⁵ The textiles surrounding the bed are not special but common ones for daily use. Moreover, some villagers use both cloth bought in the market and hand-woven cloth together (Fig. 6).



Figure 5: ‘*mo mon* (ໝໍມົນ),’ conducts a ‘*boun sang khan* (ບຸນສັງຂານ)’ ceremony, Muang Kouan (2012).



Figure 4: ‘*pha da* (ຜ້າດາ),’ or cloth to carry a baby, Muang Vaen (2013).

Thus, for this ceremony, they do not seem to distinguish between hand-woven and commercial textiles, much less hand-woven textiles for special use and those for daily use.

This mixed use of textiles is common for textiles for daily use as well. Villagers do not distinguish between hand-woven textiles and ones bought in the market and

²⁴ This ceremony is held by both Lao Phout and Tai Daeng.

²⁵ The beds are called ‘*khong than* (ຄອງທານ).’ In Muang Vaen, the beds have a decorated pole in the center; these beds with center poles are called ‘*meng* (ເມັງ).’

use both types in the same ways. In short, while specific textiles for rituals have disappeared,²⁶ female villagers continue to weave textiles for daily use, as well as for sale, without strictly distinguishing between them. Weaving is still viewed as an important duty, '*viak* (ວົງ),' of women; thus, weaving skills are still common.



Figure 6: '*meng* (ເມັງ),' or beds for the deceased, surrounded by cloth that was bought in the market as well as hand-woven cloth, Muang Vaen (2010).

Weaving is women's work

Among the Lao-Tai people in the Xam Neua and Xam Tai areas, all individuals are divided into two genders: '*phou xai* (ຜູ້ຊາຍ),' or men, and '*phou nyng* (ຜູ້ຍິງ),' or women. Their daily work is also divided into two domains: men's work and women's work. For example, when a '*boun* (ບຸນ)' is held, that is, when a host family treats guests to a feast serving the meat of domestic animals, fish, sticky rice and alcohol, men organize the rites and accept guests in public. However, steamed rice and alcohol, which are indispensable to such feasts, are exclusively prepared by women. In other words, *boun* can only be held when male and female family members (e.g., husband and wife) cooperate. In such divisions of labor, weaving is categorized as women's work.

My research shows that the majority of Lao-Tai women in these villages possesses weaving skills and is engaged in various stages of textile production.

²⁶ I saw cloth for a '*mo mon*' only one time during my research. I also have seen foreign tourists come to the village with pictures of ceremonial textiles several times. They asked if there were such textiles there, and the villagers always answered that they did not make them anymore. These data indicate that villagers know about ceremonial textiles but do not now make them.

Indeed, the level of skill and preference of women varies; some women are highly skilled weavers while others are not. Some women prefer to stay at home to weave, while others prefer to work outside the home. However, even the women who are not as good at weaving and prefer to work outside the home still take part in weaving. Regardless of a woman's preference or productivity, all women have certain weaving skills and produce textiles in the villages where I conducted research.

However, informants rarely regard weaving as '*asip* (ອາຊິບ),' an occupation. They say their *asip* is '*het hai het na* (ເຕ້ໂຮ່ເຕ້ໂນງ),'²⁷ or farming. They grow rice in the paddy fields and practice shifting cultivation on the slopes of the mountains. They grow plants and vegetables among rice plants or in small gardens. They keep domestic animals such as buffaloes, cattle, pigs, goats, chickens and ducks, and have ponds to raise fish. Women take care of the fireplace in the home and cook for the family, look after babies and small children, and do other tasks. Weaving is one of women's responsibilities and part of their regular workload, as is farming.²⁸ In this way, weaving is a common skill for women.

Weaving and Marriage

In Xam Neua and Xam Tai, weaving is seen as important women's work; thus, all women commit to textile production. One of the reasons for this is that weaving is directly connected with marriage customs. Villagers say, "Women in Xam Neua/Xam Tai, if they cannot weave, they cannot get married."²⁹ Weaving is linked to marriage, because women must learn how to weave and prepare '*kheuang kha* (ເຄື່ອງຂາ)' the brides' trousseau, by the time they get married.³⁰ This custom exists today, even though parts of it have been abbreviated or changed.³¹ Marriage is an extremely important event in a villager's life. When people meet for the first time, they usually ask each other what village they live in and whether they are married or not. This convention indicates that marital status is important, since it demonstrates the life stage they are in and how the person should be addressed: formally, as married and mature members of society, or not. In other words, if a person is not married, that person is not seen as a mature and independent member of the society.

Lao-Tai people in Houa Phan Province construct patrilineal families. Only sons (not daughters) live with parents after marriage, except when parents have no son to take care of them. Property is supposed to be divided equally among sons, while daughters normally do not inherit any property. This is because daughters are supposed to marry into another family, become daughters-in-law to that family and inherit property through their husbands. This custom affects rites for ancestors and funerals.

After marriage, a woman joins the groom's family and shares the

²⁷ The meaning of this phrase is 'to make fields of shifting cultivation and rice paddies.'

²⁸ McIntosh (2007) points out that weaving skills are learned as informal education for women.

²⁹ They said, "*Tam houk bo ben/dai leo, ao phoua bo dai* (ຕ້າຫຼຸກບໍ່ເບັນ/ໄດ້ເລ້ວ, ເອົາຜົວບໍ່ໄດ້)."

³⁰ Many previous studies have reported that woven textiles are indispensable for marriages of Lao-Tai people and that there is a custom that the bride's family prepares textiles as gifts for the groom's family (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992, Connors 1996, Kanlaya 2001, Sumitr 2003, Cheesman 2004a, Gittinger 2004, McIntosh 2007).

³¹ For example, they can buy some of the items in the market; thus they do not necessarily weave all of them.

responsibility to conduct rites for the ancestors of her husband's family. Hence, a Tai Daeng woman married into a Lao Phout family becomes Lao Phout and follows Buddhist customs, while a Lao Phout woman married into a Tai Daeng family follows Tai Daeng customs. When a woman passes away, her funeral is held using the same rituals as her husband and she is buried beside him.³²

In addition, Lao-Tai have taboos regarding the selection of a marriage partner: cousins and brothers- and sisters-in-law cannot marry. In this system, all married women in a house are from outside the family and the single women in that house will soon marry into another family. Thus, for women, a bride's trousseau is very important since the items are given to their new relatives as she joins her husband's family.

I interviewed 158 women³³ in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts regarding their trousseau. Seventy interviewees provided information about the types and amounts of cloth assembled for their trousseaus. Interestingly, even though the amounts varied, the items were the same:³⁴ a large, rectangular pillow;³⁵



Figure 8: 'pha kang (ຜ້າກັງ),' or a door curtain, Muang Kouan (2012).



Figure 7: 'mone tao (ໝອນເຕົ້າ),' or a big pillow and 'pha nang (ຜ້ານັ່ງ),' or floor cushions, Muang Kouan (2012).



Figure 9: mung (dam) (ມັງ[ດ່າງ]) or a mosquito net, Muang Kouan (2012).

³² This statement is based on research in Muang Kouan. Neither Lao Phout nor Tai Daeng cremate the dead in this village.

³³ I interviewed women in 10 villages located in the areas mentioned in the 'Research Methods' section.

³⁴ Sumitr (2003) reports on the items for the trousseau of Tai Daeng women in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts. The items he lists are the same as mine: *sin*; blankets for babies; door curtains; mosquito nets; (small) pillows; floor cushions; sleeping mats; and big pillows.

³⁵ The large, rectangular pillow is called 'mone tao (ໝອນເຕົ້າ)' in the Xam Tai area and 'mone ing (ໝອນິງ)' or 'mone kao (ໝອນເກົ້າ)' in Muang Vaen. It is characterized as 'mone nyai (ໝອນໃຫຍ່),' a big pillow.

'*pha nang* (ຜ້ານັ່ງ),' a floor cushion (Fig. 7); '*mone (noi)* (ໝອນນ້ອຍ),' a (small) pillow; '*seua (none)* (ເສືອນອນ),' a mattress for sleeping; '*pha kang* (ຜ້າກັງ),' a door curtain (Fig. 8); '*moung (dam)* (ມຸ້ງ(ດ່າງ),' a mosquito net (Fig. 9); '*pha hom* (ຜ້າຫົ່ມ),' a blanket; '*pha toum* (ຜ້າຕູ້ມ),' a baby blanket (Fig. 10); and *sin*, a tube skirt. I provide five examples of brides' trousseaus (three from Muang Vaen and two from Muang Kouan) in Table 1.

| No. | Village | Year | The number of the items | | | | | | | |
|-----|----------|------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|---------|--------|---------------|------------------|------------|
| | | | mosqui- to net | door curtain | sleeping mattress | blanket | pillow | big pillow | floor cushion | <i>sin</i> |
| 1 | M. Vaen | 1981 | 1 | some | 10 | 80 | 40 | some | 40 | 70 |
| 2 | M. Vaen | 1993 | *1 | 3 | 8 | 10 | 20 | 2 | 20 | 20-30 |
| 3 | M. Vaen | 2006 | *1 | 1 | *some | 4-5 | 20 | 2 | 20 | 90 |
| 4 | M. Kouan | 1984 | 1 | 4 | 16 | 10 | 20 | 1 | 20 | 30-40 |
| 5 | M. Kouan | 2008 | 1 | 4 | 24 | 16 | 20 | 1 | 20 | 20 |

*: market purchase

Table 1: Five examples of brides' trousseaus



Figure 10: '*pha tum* (ຜ້າຕູ້ມ),' or a blanket for babies, Muang Kouan (2012).

These examples show that the types of trousseau items appear constant and common throughout this area. The choice of items for the brides' trousseau itself is significant. First, many of the items are gifts for the groom's relatives. The *sin* is a typical example. These garments are given to the groom's female relatives, such as the bride's mother-in-law and her new sisters-in-law. Brides say that a big pillow is given to their father-in-law. Floor cushions are often given to the groom's relatives if there are a sufficient number of them in the trousseau.

Second, except for *sin*, all the items in the trousseau are for household use (Figs. 11, 12). These items include mosquito nets, sleeping mattresses, blankets and pillows, door curtains that partition the communal space for sleeping and floor cushions that are indispensable when hosting guests. Door curtains and floor cushions are frequently exchanged for new ones when sons marry

and new ones have been provided as gifts from their bride's trousseau. In this manner, these items are closely connected to the house, or '*heuan* (ເຮືອນ).'

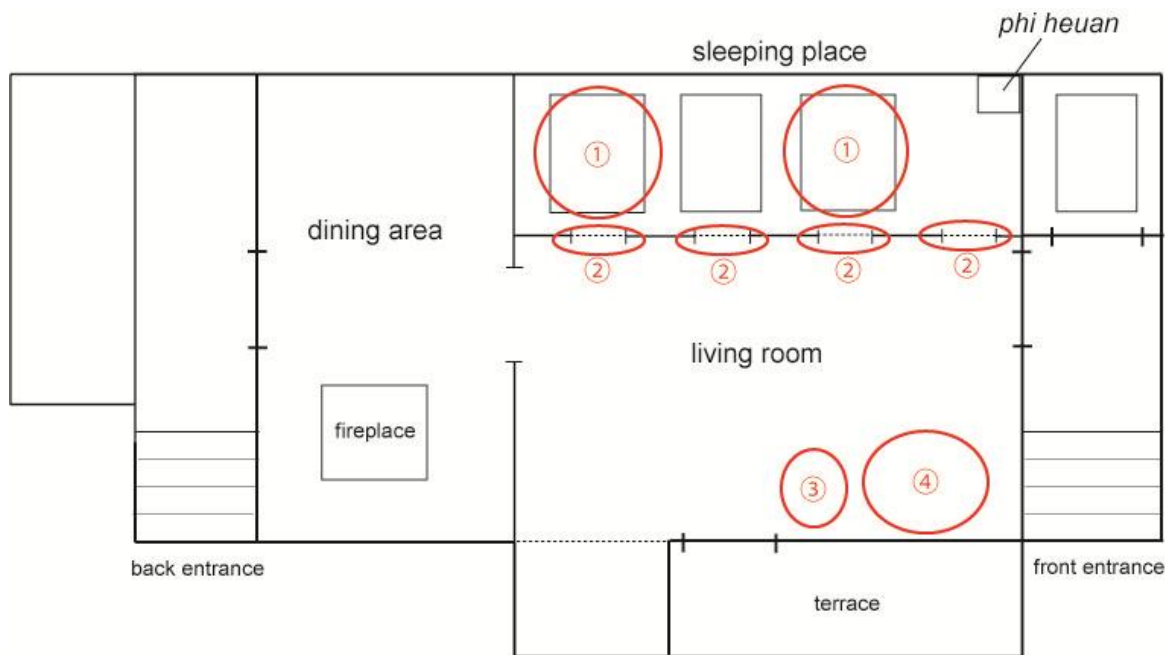
A new bride, indeed, furnishes her new home. Marriage binds people to a house, where they give birth and raise children. The house is the setting where a woman develops and strengthens relationships with people, mainly the groom's relatives, with whom she cohabits.



Figure 11: ‘*heuan* (ເຮືອນ),’ or a house in Muang Kouan (2013).

In Xam Neua and Xam Tai, a Lao-Tai couple getting married holds two ceremonies. The first is the engagement ceremony,³⁶ in which the groom’s relatives visit the bride’s house and ask her relatives and ancestors for her hand in marriage. The groom’s father and his brothers discuss the engagement with the bride’s father and his brothers in the living room and agree on the terms. This discussion is held in the space in front of the ‘*phi heuan* (ຜີເຮືອນ),’ or spirit house.³⁷ Female relatives do not join in this discussion but do

attend and observe the negotiations from behind their male relatives.³⁸



- ① A mosquito net, sleeping mats, blankets and small pillows
 ② door curtains ③ big pillows ④ floor cushions

Figure 12: The inside of the ‘*heuan* (ເຮືອນ)’ pictured in Figure 11.

³⁶ The ceremony is called ‘*chot pavat* (ຈົດປະຫວັດ)’ for a formal engagement and ‘*lom phai* (ລົມໄພ້)’ for a simple one. It is also called ‘*dong noi* (ດອງນ້ອຍ),’ or small wedding.

³⁷ In Muang Kouan, when the engagement ceremony was held in 2011, the hosts opened the curtain door of the space enclosing the ‘*phi heuan*.’ After an agreement had been reached, a low table was brought into the space and elderly male relatives had dinner in front of the ‘*phi heuan*.’ In Muang Vaen, an informant told me that the purpose of the engagement ceremony is to obtain permission from the bride’s ancestors in the ‘*phi heuan*,’ although people do not pay much attention to the ancestors today.

³⁸ Village officials often join the discussion as observers of the terms of the engagement.

After the engagement, a bride prepares textiles for her trousseau for the second ceremony, called '*dong nyai* (ດອງໃຫຍ່),' or big wedding, which is held approximately a year later. The groom's family is expected to pay a '*kha dong* (ຄ່າດອງ),' a bride price that includes the cost of the two marriage ceremonies. Correspondingly, the bride's family prepares the bride's trousseau, primarily consisting of gifts for the groom's family.

I will now describe the process of *dong nyai* that I observed in Muang Vaen village in March 2013. Both the bride and groom were teachers in the two local high schools, and they already had two children.³⁹ The engagement ceremony had been held a few years ago. On the morning of the *dong nyai*, the bride's family held a feast at their house in Phiang village, about 10 km from Muang Vaen village. After the groom and his relatives reached the bride's house, the feast began. The bride and her family counted and packed the bride's trousseau and loaded the items onto a truck. Guests of the bride's family gave money and rice⁴⁰ to help them. Several guests also contributed '*pha nang* (ຜ້ານັ່ງ),' or floor cushions, and '*mone (noi)* (ໝອນນ້ອຍ),' or (small) pillows, to add to bride's trousseau. After the feast, the groom's relatives took the bride and the trousseau to the groom's house. The bride's relatives, excluding the bride's parents, went along with them. It was '*khalam* (ຄະລຳ),' or taboo, for the bride's parents to go with their daughter to attend the ceremony in the groom's house. This part of the rite is called '*song phai* (ສົ່ງໄລ້),'⁴¹ or to take/send the daughter-in-law (to the groom's house).

When the groom and bride reached Muang Vaen where his parents lived, they exited the car and walked to his house holding umbrellas that were given to them by the groom's mother. The groom's mother also gave the bride a set of weaving tools to carry to her new home. In front of the groom's house, seats were set up and goods, including the bride's trousseau from her parents' house, were placed on the seats. The bride and her relatives sat next to the goods and waited for the ceremony to begin, at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The groom's relatives came to the house one-by-one to help and to attend the ceremony. The groom's female relatives brought *sin*, which would be given to the bride, and handed them to the groom's mother. While waiting for the ceremony to begin, the groom's family provided dishes of food and alcohol to the guests. At the beginning of the ceremony, the groom and the bride walked to the front entrance of the groom's house, carrying the umbrellas and, for the bride, the set of weaving tools that the groom's mother gave to her. Outside the front entrance, the groom's mother waited for them with a bowl filled with water. She poured water on the groom's feet and then did the same to the bride's feet. This part of the rite is called '*hap phai* (ຮັບໄລ້),' or accepting the daughter-in-law.

³⁹ If a woman gets pregnant before the engagement, the relatives of both sides have a meeting to negotiate whether the couple will get married. If the conclusion is affirmative, they are engaged. If their decision is negative, the relatives of the baby's father must pay compensation to the woman's family, and usually the baby is adopted by another couple. I met two women who were engaged, and each had a baby but did not finish the marriage ceremony because their fiancés went to school in town. Before the marriage ceremony, the women and their babies lived in their parents' house. One of them had a marriage ceremony when her child turned two. Then she moved to her husband's house with her child.

⁴⁰ They usually bring '*khao san* (ຂົ້າສານ),' or threshed uncooked rice, to help the bride's family hold feasts for guests.

⁴¹ In Xam Neua dialect, the word '*phai* (ໄລ້)' is pronounced '*pheu* (ເຝ້).'

Afterwards, the couple entered the house. In the center of the room was a low table for the '*het khouan* (ເຈັດຂວັນ)' rite; it held cooked meat of domestic animals, rice, alcohol, two eggs and cotton threads for '*mat khaen* (ມັດແຂນ),' or tying the wrists.⁴² The *sin* that the groom's female relatives brought for the bride were also placed on the table (Fig. 13), as was some money put on empty plates by participants.



Figure 13: *Sin* on the left side of the '*pha khouan* (ຟາຂວັນ),' or the low table used for the '*mat khaen* (ມັດແຂນ)' ceremony, Muang Vaen (2013).

The *mat khaen* rite was the highlight of the wedding, because the bride formally became a daughter-in-law, a member of the groom's family, once it was completed. When the *mat khaen* ceremony was over, all of the participants went outside to a field and had a feast, drinking alcohol and dancing until midnight.

This process shows that these ceremonies are necessary in order for the groom's family to accept the bride as a new member of the family and household. They will all live together in the same '*heuan* (ເຮືອນ),' or house, in which the groom was born, where his parents live, and where the spirits of their ancestors come and go. These are important steps, bringing the bride formally into the groom's parents' house; she cannot be a full member of the groom's family before the steps of these ceremonies are carried out. After the *dong nyai* ceremony, a bride leaves her parents' house to formally become a daughter-in-law living in her husband's parents' house as a member of their family.⁴³ The taboo that the bride's parents are prohibited from going to the groom's house with their daughter also illustrates the finality of the bride becoming a new member of her husband's family. As in this case, it was not unusual for a couple to have children before marriage in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts when I conducted fieldwork. Having children does not necessarily mean that a couple is married and co-habiting. The *dong noi* and *dong nyai* ceremonies must be held in order for the bride to become a full member of the

⁴² The ritual proceeded in the following way. The couple and their relatives sat around the low table. The '*mo a* (ໜ້ອາ),' reciter of prayers, sat in front of the couple and recited a blessing for them. After the recitation, the guests brought cotton threads to the couple and tied the threads around the couple's wrists.

⁴³ There is no regulation about which son should live with the parents. In this case, the groom's parents did not have any son living with them yet, thus the couple and their two children were expected to live in the husband's parents' house. However, in practice this case is somewhat exceptional. Because the bride teaches at the high school near the house where she was born, she and her children stay in her parents' house from Monday to Friday, come to the husband's house on Friday evening and stay there on the weekend.

groom's family, which means co-habiting in the same house.⁴⁴

The day of the *dong nyai* is the first occasion for the exchange of textiles between members of the two families. A bride brings her trousseau to the groom's house, and the groom's female relatives give *sin* as gifts to the bride's female relatives. Moreover, women in Xam Tai bring to their new home not only textiles but also a set of weaving tools when they get married. However, in Muang Vaen of Xam



Figure 14: Mother-in-law giving a set of weaving tools to the bride before the bride enters the former's home to conclude the marriage ceremony, Muang Vaen (2013).

Neua District it is customary for the mother-in-law to give a set of weaving tools to her son's bride (Fig. 14), as described above. Both customs indicate that women are supposed to continue to weave after (as well as before) marriage. In Muang Kouan village, a 35-year-old female villager showed me the *sin* she wove at the age of 30 and said, "I won't sell them because I want to give them to my daughters-in-law when my sons get married." Traditionally, women stop weaving at around 40 years old, in part because their eyesight is not sharp enough to weave intricate designs. Instead, they spin yarn for their daughters' textile production. Actually, women at that age do not need to weave because their daughters and daughters-in-law weave and give them textiles. From my observations, half or more of all *sin* that a woman owns were not bought from other sources nor were they woven by the owner, but were given to her as gifts by others.

Textiles as Property

Weaving is embedded in the marriage process, enabling the bride to become a member of the groom's family by living in the same *heuan*, or house. After marriage, women continue to weave and exchange textiles to develop and strengthen social relationships. The villagers of Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts

⁴⁴ The future bride is regarded as a full member of the groom's family only after the *dong nyai* ceremony is completed. However, after the formal engagement ceremony ('*chot pavat* [ຈົດປະຫວັດ]) is held, a woman can, in practice, live in either her fiancé's house or her parent's house. Sometimes a bride chooses to live in her fiancé's house, but more often she chooses to stay in her parents' house, especially in cases where her fiancé does not live at home (e.g., he is away at school). An engaged man continues to live in his parent's house, not in his fiancé's parents' house, except in the case in which he is going to marry into the bride's family because they do not have a son of their own to live with them. After the *dong nyai* ceremony, the couple lives together as relatives of the groom's family. If the groom's parents still have no son to live with, the newly married couple lives with them.

frequently exchange various things among themselves, such as rice, alcohol and occasionally money, as well as labor, to maintain their social relationships, since these relationships are critical to them. Hand-woven textiles are also gifts of exchange and help to strengthen social relationships. When we remember that daughters normally do not inherit property from parents and their lives depend on the families into which they marry, we can imagine the important role textiles play as gifts of exchange. Exchanging textiles particularly helps women maintain relationships among female relatives. Thus, it is logical that the day of the *dong nyai* ceremony is the beginning of these important relationships and is also the first occasion to exchange textiles between a bride and a groom's female relatives.

Therefore, textiles have value as gifts to develop social relationships. This role makes textiles valued property. Every house has a '*pavaem* (ປະເຄື່ອນ),' a lidded, cane basket, or a cabinet (that has replaced the *pavaem*), and both are usually kept locked. Unused hand-woven textiles are stored in the *pavaem* or in the cabinet, along with '*ngeun* (ເງິນ),' money, which includes both silver ingots and currency (Fig. 15). The grouping of these two precious objects shows that textiles should be regarded as property, not only because they can be sold, but also because they can be exchanged and thus play a crucial role in maintaining social relationships in village life.



Figure 15: Textiles and other goods stored in a '*pavaem* (ປະເຄື່ອນ),' or a lidded cane basket, Muang Kouan (2012).

Conclusions

In this paper, I state that village life in Xam Neua and Xam Tai is based on the division of labor between men and women; thus, marriage is crucial. I point out that weaving is categorized as women's work and is directly connected with marriage, since weaving produces items for the bride's trousseau. In Houa Phan Province, Lao-Tai people construct patrilineal families. Sons live with their parents and inherit property from their parents, while daughters normally do not inherit property. When a woman marries, she becomes a member of her husband's family. Based on this custom, women need ways to construct and strengthen relationships with relatives. Exchanging textiles is one of them. The day of the marriage ceremony is the first occasion to exchange textiles between a bride and groom's

relatives. In Muang Vaen, it is customary for the future mother-in-law to give a set of weaving tools to her son's bride, while in Xam Tai, the brides' parents prepare a set of weaving tools for their daughter when she gets married. As the customs show, even after marriage, women continue to weave and exchange textiles to develop and

strengthen these relationships. Textiles are regarded as valued property, partly because of the important role they play; thus, unused textiles are stored with money and in locked containers.

The title of this paper posed the question, “Why do they weave?” Women weave partly because textile production is a good source of cash income. However, women are also motivated to weave by their cultural context. Today, of course, weaving to earn money should not be ignored as motivation, and this motivation has also been changing their customs. I argue, however, that women maintain their social custom of weaving not only because they can sell textiles for money. On the contrary, women living in Xam Neua and Xam Tai Districts produce textiles because they are motivated to weave through a particular cultural context, since weaving is embedded in the marriage process through which a bride becomes a member of her groom’s family, living in the house of her in-laws. Marriage is the most significant rite of passage in village life for women and textiles play a crucial role in this process.

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Fashioning Lao Identity: Textiles, Representation and the Grand Fashion Show

Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black

Abstract

When models wearing contemporary Lao fashions stepped out on the runway of the Grand Fashion Show, they catapulted the question of how contemporary Lao fashion designers represent themselves, Laos, the Lao, Lao textile traditions, and their vision of contemporary Lao fashion into the limelight. In this paper, we focus primarily on questions of identity, representation and authenticity projected by fashion show organizers and designers. We draw on observations and photographs of fashions we took at the Lao Handicraft Festival Grand Fashion Show, interviews with designers and written material from the Festival and the fashion show. Using content and representational analyses, we examine the use of traditional Lao styles and elements as well as the contemporary Asian and Euro-American styles presented at the show. We find that most of the fashion-show designers emphasized past and current Lao fashions through the preservation of Lao styles and elements that emphasize their authentic origin and the unique cultural heritage of Laos. At the same time, they were redesigning these styles with the creative integration of elements from non-Lao fashions that potentially extend the styles across the borders of Laos and into the international world of fashion.

Introduction

The Grand Fashion Show of the Lao Handicraft Festival highlights Lao textile companies and their products. The Lao Handicraft Festival (the Festival) is an annual event in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. It is organized by the Lao Handicraft Association and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry; the Grand Fashion Show is one of its major events. The Grand Fashion Show reveals how the Festival and participating companies present themselves and their products and, in the process, how they represent Laos, Lao identity and culture, and Lao textile traditions.

Our project focuses on Lao textile designer-entrepreneurs who own and operate relatively small textile and fashion businesses that have developed out of the cultural and social changes in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR; also Laos) over the past quarter of a century. We examine how they use Lao textiles to create contemporary fashions and how they present themselves and their designs at a national handicraft fair fashion show. Specifically, we examine how the Tenth Annual Handicraft Festival in 2011 and its Grand Fashion Show represent Lao identity and Lao textile tradition. We ask what authenticity claims and concerns are expressed by Festival organizers and embedded in the marketing styles of Lao silk textile designer-entrepreneurs as they re-envision and reweave their traditional textiles for new markets. We explore how a Lao textile may 'change' as it moves across cultural

boundaries and into the international fashion milieu, taking on not only new styles but new shapes as well.

We begin by tracing the development of Lao textiles and textile companies. We then introduce the concept of identity and its representation and authenticity in fashion, and then present and discuss our observations from the fashion show.

Textiles in Laos

Textiles and textile production in Laos have a long and storied history (Bounyavong and Nanthavongdouangsy 2001; Nanthavongdouangsy n.d.; Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2004; McIntosh 2004; Van Esterik 1999). The textiles produced by the Lao weaving businesses we study are inspired by clothing, household items, festival wear, Buddhist ritual items, and trade goods produced by Lao village women and royal weavers. Women in some Lao villages specialized in silk textiles, but Lao women in all villages wove cotton cloth. This village-based weaving continued at least into the 1950s, though factory-made cloth from Hong Kong and Japan gradually displaced handmade cloth in many areas during the 1950s and 1960s. More than a decade of war (1962–1975) on Lao soil disrupted textile production and life itself in many areas (Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2004: 122–126). By the early 1970s, most village weavers in the Vientiane Plain had stored their looms (Barber 1979), with the exception of women in Hatsayfong District near Vientiane, who continued to weave elegant silk skirt lengths and skirt borders, marketing them locally and in the nearby capital city.

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party that came to power in 1975 viewed the elaborate hand-woven silks that Lao women had been making since at least the 14th century as the cloth of royalty and of the elite (Christie 1982; Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2004; Van Esterik 1999). The Party stifled silk production, but it encouraged the weaving and wearing of traditional cotton textiles using similar skills and designs. Closed borders, the resulting lack of factory-made cloth and government policy that Lao women wear traditional skirts (*sin*) also encouraged the return to weaving in both village and town. The end of the era of Soviet-style communism in the late 1980s brought economic liberalization to the Lao PDR. This included the promulgation of laws regulating outside investment, contracts, inheritance, property rights, trade and, by 1991, a constitution. Slowly and cautiously, private entrepreneurs began to open businesses.

When the master weaver and co-owner of Phaeng Mai Gallery in Vientiane won the 1991 UNESCO prize for her intricate and complex tapestry, Lao weaving received an important stamp of approval from a well-known international organization (Vallard 2011).¹ Several well-positioned women, including the UNESCO prize winner, established companies producing 'artistic textiles' based on traditional Lao silk weaving

¹ The prize-winning piece was both a tapestry (i.e., wall hanging) and a piece that utilized the weaving technique called "tapestry." For extensive discussion of this prize, see Vallard 2011.

techniques and motifs.² The emergence of these weaving businesses and their galleries heralded not only a revival of silk weaving in Laos but also movement of Lao textiles into the international market.

The success of artistic textile companies established in the 1990s inspired others to model their work on this success by establishing their own companies and—in some cases— ‘borrowing’ the loom modifications and designs of successful companies. In 2001, more than a decade after the end of socialism in Laos, only a few Lao businesses produced artistic Lao textiles for export. Even among the four companies we initially studied in 2001, three of them sold at least half of their textiles in Vientiane. By 2006, however, three of the companies were exporting at least 65 percent of their production (Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black 2010: 161–162). Recent economic development, especially in energy and mining, benefitted the Lao who are associated with these activities, mainly educated Lao and upper-level government officials. Members of their families are now also purchasing from some of these companies. Lao textile designers recently expanded their vision of Lao textiles as they move into new markets. In the process they have recontextualized Lao motifs, weaving skills and techniques, and clothing styles (Van Esterik 1994) demonstrating how Lao fabrics can be used to make sophisticated clothing for local elite and international venues.

Government policy has responded to the success of these textile companies. The owners of Phaeng Mai (one of whom won the UNESCO prize in 1991), working through the government-encouraged Lao Handicraft Association, were among the founders of the Lao Handicraft Festival, an annual event that began in 2002. In the same decade, the owner of Nikone, an active textile exporter, was praised as a model of Lao entrepreneurship in the government press. The Lao government supports the Lao Handicraft Festival every year. Importantly, owners of these companies have regularly received visas for international business travel.

These examples, the Nikone model of Lao entrepreneurship and the UNESCO prize winner, demonstrate that textiles not only serve to reproduce ancient motifs, they also have become signifiers of Lao nationhood after communism and conveyers of Lao government policies (Van Esterik 1999).³ Thus, these designers influence culture and images of economic success in Laos.

As represented in this study, the designers and their businesses are unique in several ways. Their work is based on still-living textile traditions involving intricate textile designs and techniques, their businesses were established and are owned mainly

² We use the term ‘artistic textile’ to designate complex and often intricate textiles integrating motifs and techniques drawn from one of several textile traditions found in the Lao PDR today and in the recent past. The weaving practices were well established and customary ways of creating everyday and ritual fabrics. These traditions are part of the “unique cultural heritage” touted by both Mr. Vongsay and Mrs. Chinda in their Grand Fashion Show speeches (see below). Some of the most common weaving techniques are supplementary weft (both continuous and discontinuous), tapestry and *ikat*. It may take a skilled weaver several months to make a larger piece with a complex and intricate pattern.

³ This phenomenon is not limited to Laos. For the role of silk textiles as symbols of Japanese and Thai society, see Yakimatsu et al. (2008). For the role of the kimono in delineating Japanese identity, specifically women’s identity, see Goldstein-Gidoni (1999). See McIntosh (2004) for textiles as signifiers of Phouthai (a Lao-related ethnic group) identity.

by women, and they are economically successful; some of them emerged in the uncertain economic and political climate of post-Soviet Laos.⁴

Identity, Fashion and Authenticity

Many scholars have grappled with the idea of identity (Mead 1985; Baker 1999; Eisenberg 2001; Maness 1993; Buckingham 2008). Eisenberg suggests that identities are not answers, ideals or ends, but rather questions, projects and journeys (2001). Since fashion is part of the culture that individuals experience, it can also become an important aspect of personal identity. Identity then is dynamic and multilayered—partly personal and unique, and partly social and shared (Buckingham 2008; Crane and Bovone 2006; Eisenberg 2001; Mead 1985; Cazden et al. 2000). Textiles, particularly when crafted into clothing, have the power to communicate messages about identity to a general audience through how they are produced, used, worn, or otherwise manipulated (Green 2009). Clothing and adornment reveal the wearer's conceived and projected identities as well as ideological values.

For example, Thai dress, including Thai skirts (*pha sin*) and T-shirts, became fashionable among the Tai of the Dehong Prefecture of China's Yunnan Province as a way of displaying wealth within their communities and expressing difference from the dominant Han Chinese, thus “destabilizing the cultural imbalance between themselves and the Chinese” (Siriphon 2007: 219). Across the border in Laos, in another example, skirts (*sin*) woven with Sam Neua techniques and designs were not popular among urban women in Vientiane during the first decades of the Lao PDR. However, as the Lao state became more ethnically integrated and weavers and textiles from Sam Neua⁵ became more visible in Vientiane and internationally, Sam Neua *sin* and textiles became more desirable. The increasing availability and fashionability of Thai clothing among wealthier Dehong Tai individuals in China and of Sam Neua textiles in Vientiane suggest that, indeed, fashion lies at the crossroads of collective and personal identity dynamics (Aspers and Godart 2013; Crane 2000; Kawamura 2005).

In their discussion of the approaches to the study of fashion, Crane and Bovone note:

Firms that produce fashionable clothing represent a particularly interesting case for the study of cultural production for two reasons: (1) the necessity to innovate by altering the symbolic values attached to styles of clothing. Several times each year new collections must be created which are expected to combine elements of previous styles with new and different ideas; and (2) the necessity to produce clothes whose symbolic values resonate with those of consumers ... (Crane and Bovone 2006: 321)

⁴ This study is part of our broader work on five artistic textile companies and their designer-owners based in Vientiane and marketing their products internationally. Our previous work focused on their personal histories and the commodity chain relationships of their companies. In this paper, we expand our previous work to encompass the fashion offerings of other companies as well. See Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black (2010; 2004); Ireson-Doolittle, Moreno-Black and Pholsena (2002).

⁵ A remote area of Laos peopled mainly by ethnic groups.

In particular, they suggest that small entrepreneurial firms—like those participating in the fashion show we studied—are likely to have face-to-face relationships with their clients that permit the firms' owners and designers to assess their customers' attitudes and tastes as the designers go through the process of defining and redefining the symbolic values that their clothing styles express (Crane and Bovone 2006: 322). The distinctive style of designers striving to develop their own character can incorporate shared memories and experiences (Ling 2011). These can include ethnic and cultural memories and experiences. Clothing designed with inherent hybridization can have the ability to resonate with cultural identity, resist colonial power, and create a dialogue with local communities and ethnic groups about cultural and political issues. The Grand Fashion Show we analyze presents numerous instances of such hybridization. As suggested by Hansen (2004), examining stylistic choices used by designers as a complex and heterogeneous process—as we do in our study—can clarify these dynamics.

Authenticity is tied to the concept of identity. Similar to cultural heritage, it is “a mode of cultural production in the present that has discursive recourse to the past” (Silverman 2007: 344; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Consequently, it is not surprising to find claims of authenticity at fashion shows that highlight cultural heritage. Authenticity seemingly refers to something that is genuine and real, has been well established, and is specified by custom. However, the literature demonstrates that authenticity can be based on more than the apparently static past. Graburn (1976) noted that authenticity is multiple and multidimensional, while Appadurai (1986) described a ‘machinery of authenticity’ requiring work by experts in museums and the academy to certify the authenticity of cultural items. Buyers, promoters and even social scientists who advise, exhibit or interpret the work of particular artisans can “become key partners in the ongoing creation of cultural realities” (Kasfir 1999; Price 2006: 608). In fact, this paper may become part of the ‘machinery of authenticity’ for Lao textiles and fashion clothing.

Cohodas' work on Karuk basket making among Native Americans of northern California showed how Karuk baskets became icons of Karuk identity to collectors (Cohodas 1999). This generated significant interest in northern California baskets and provided market opportunities for native basket weavers to create and sell their own innovative and unique works of basket art, based in part on techniques and styles of Karuk basket-weaving (Field 2009: 510). These “new” baskets made claims to authenticity *and* originality. Field used Cohodas' ideas in his work on indigenous San Juan potters and their pottery in eastern Nicaragua to identify four kinds of authenticity: ethnographic, original high art, engineered, and brand-named authenticities. Three of these are relevant to our Lao case. *Ethnographically authentic* objects “accurately represent a bounded, named culture, cultural group, or cultural identity” (Field 2009: 510). *Authentic original high art* must be “the product of a well-known and highly appreciated producer and identifiable and valued... itself” (Field 2009: 511). Finally, “the art and craft of minority groups can also be affixed with *name-brand authenticity*” (Field 2009: 511), much like items branded with a corporate logo.

Similarly, Wherry suggests, “Handicraft artisans and entrepreneurs sometimes create multiple meanings of authenticity to accommodate, modify, and at times resist, the effects of globalization on local culture and local economic life” (Wherry 2006: 5). In

his study of wood carvers in northern Thailand (see also Cohen [2000]), he demonstrated that interaction between producers, buyers and sellers in a particular political and economic situation produced various authenticity claims while contesting others.

Authenticity, then, can be multiple, multidimensional, situated, and subject to changing social, economic and political conditions. Identity, authenticity and hybridization are central elements of the Lao fashion scene as presented at the Grand Fashion Show.

Methodology

We attended the tenth Lao Handicraft Festival in October 2011. Our purpose was to learn how the companies we were studying and the broader community of Laotian textile producers presented themselves, their products and Laos itself at this national and potentially international event. We attended the Festival every day, observing the opening ceremony, craft demonstrations and the Grand Fashion Show in particular, and browsing the exhibition and sales booths of handcrafted textile producers from all over Laos. Speeches, brochures, observational notes, photographs of the clothing and models taken throughout the fashion show and interviews are our main sources of data.

For the purpose of this study, we used the tools of content analysis to identify and examine the ways Lao identity was represented in the clothing at the Grand Fashion Show, the material used to promote the fashion show and interviews with some of the designers. The project, grounded in anthropology/ethnography and sociology, was informed by overlapping theoretical approaches including feminist, representational studies (Babcock 1993, Silverman 2004) and analysis of the process of self-commodification (Bunten 2008). We drew on these to provide an understanding of how the fashion designers produced and reproduced Lao identity through the fashions they presented at the Grand Fashion show.

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of specific words or concepts within texts, interviews or artifacts. Researchers quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of words or artifacts, and then make inferences about the messages within the culture and time of which these were a part. In this study, in addition to written promotional material and narratives from interviews, we conceptualized the items of clothing highlighted at the fashion show as texts/artifacts that could be read and analyzed.

To conduct content analysis on the photographs, we began by grouping the fashions into categories and then examining the presence and use of traditional Lao styles, weaving techniques and inclusion of motifs. Both researchers working together reviewed all of the photographs. We also examined the use of non-Lao styles such as inclusion of Japanese or Euro-American styles and designs. Using representational analysis (Babcock 1993; Silverman 2004), we then constructed an analysis focusing on how these Lao fashion designers and the items they produced present and represent not only their personal identities, Lao culture and nationhood but also the fusion and border crossing of fashion elements of other cultures with Lao clothing.

Lao Handicraft Festival and Grand Fashion Show

The Grand Fashion Show was a ticketed gala event attended mainly by government officials, urban Lao women, a few accompanied by men, resident foreign diplomats and people involved in handcrafted Laotian textiles. Each of the ten participating Lao companies modeled six or seven outfits produced by their company. Nine of these companies were primarily textile companies producing fabric, home products and/or clothing. The main products of the tenth company were jewelry and accessories.

The Lao Handicraft Festival aimed to promote and develop Lao handicraft products that are unique and represent Lao identity. The Grand Fashion Show program made that clear. The inside front cover of the program contained only a few words: “Lao Handicraft Festival 10,” dates, location, “Lao Products, Lao Identity” and festival sponsors. The two opening speakers at the Festival, presidents of the two main sponsoring organizations, presented complementary visions of the Festival and perhaps of Lao identity itself. Mr. Kissana Vongsay of the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry observed that the main objective of the Festival was to

“enhance solidarity of craftspeople” and “to preserve...handicraft occupation[s] [in order to] promot[e], protect..., preserv[e], and present...Lao handicraft designs and products.”⁶

Secondarily, he noted that the Festival enables Lao craftspeople and exhibitors to “learn...new design and innovative techniques from other exhibitors...which might upgrade [product quality] and respon[d] to...domestic and foreign markets.”

Mrs. Chinda Phommasathit, president of the Lao Handicraft Association, said that the Festival highlights the “cultural heritage unique to Laos.” The Festival, she declared, will “upgrade product quality moving toward commodity production and export to overseas market[s]” and will “promote...new design[s].” The Grand Fashion Show was organized, she explained, “to provide opportunity for producers...customers...[and] media (both national and international) to meet, as well as [to] provid[e] [a] platform for...new designs in response to...demand.”

Mr. Vongsay focused on maintaining handicraft jobs and on preserving and enhancing production and product quality, while acknowledging the importance of market demand. Mrs. Chinda stressed innovation rather than preservation: future fashion would be new, more modern, and responsive to outside influences. The Festival itself was a celebration of Lao cultural heritage from its opening speeches, workshops and demonstrations of handicraft production, to its many display and sales stalls. Textiles from all provinces of Laos were on display, with textiles occupying more booths than any other single handicraft. The Fashion Show was one of the highlights of the Festival.

⁶ Festival speeches were given in Lao. Our quotes are from the official English translation made available to English-speakers in the audience.

Fashions and Clothing

The Fashion Show began with the introduction of a number of sponsors dressed in their best (see Photo 1 for one example). Their clothing represented current styles for Lao elite adults.

One company, Nor Phao, clearly anchored the show in the past, with clothing based on past royal designs created by just one man, a “direct descendant of the Royal House of Luang Prabang” (Chin 2013). Several designers, including Poum Poum, presented wedding attire based on past and current styles. Every textile company but one modeled at least one women’s outfit based on the *sin*, a traditional tube skirt featuring a lower figured border usually woven using a supplementary weft technique. All of Chinda’s collection, but only two designs from Your Silk, were based on the Lao *sin*. Some of the *sin* designs were contemporary interpretations,



varying in color, length and other features from the current styles represented by the sponsors.

Some *sin* outfits were topped by striking modern blouses: strapless blouses (Kheua Mai), blouses with ruffles (Poum Poum) or puffy sleeves (Lao Cotton), or blouses integrated with a small jacket. This *pha sin* outfit from Chinda, for example, introduced an empire waist blouse with vertical tucks across the bodice, lightly covered by the suggestion of a jacket (see Photo 2). Other *pha sin* outfits featured colors or color combinations not usually worn, such as a fuchsia *sin* (Ammalinh) or a turquoise blue blouse with a purple *sin* (Nor Phao).

Variations in color, length and blouse style indicated both variation in style by age of the wearer and changes in Lao women’s fashion. Contemporary

Photo 2: This *sin* by Chinda is similar to the styles represented by Lao women sponsors; the blouse, however, differs from those styles and is an example of Lao style with Euro-American elements.



Photo 1: Fashion show sponsors dressed in traditional Lao style clothing. The authors used this example and photos of three other sets of sponsors to represent traditional styles for elite Lao women.

fashion in nearby Thailand and other countries also may have influenced these designs. In short, Lao styles were being refashioned by a number of the designers to express a clearly Lao, but more contemporary, identity, while retaining many costume elements from past and current styles.

| Company | # of Outfits Offered | # Outfits Non-Traditional Style* | # Outfits Entirely Non-Traditional** |
|--------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Phaeng Mai | 6 | 6 | 2 |
| Your Silk | 8 | 5 | 5 |
| Poum Poum | 7 | 1 | 1 |
| Maicome | 6 | 5 | 3 |
| Ammalinh | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| Nor Phao | 7 | 1 | 1 |
| Lao Cotton | 8 | 7 | 1 |
| Chinda | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Kheua Mai | 8 | 6 | 2 |
| Total | 62 | 34 | 18 |

Table 1: Traditional vs. Non-Traditional Fashion Show Offerings, Lao Handicraft Festival 2011

* Outfits in the style of other Asian or European/American costumes (e.g. Vietnamese ao dai, circle skirt, pants suit).

**Outfits with no discernible traditional Lao design, technique, motif, or style elements.

Over one-half of the modeled clothing (34 out of 62, or 55 percent; see Table 1) was *not* based primarily on Lao styles as represented by the formal attire of fashion-show sponsors or on past royal styles as represented by the designs of the royal descendant. Some of these outfits (n=16) had Laotian elements, such as commonly used motifs or techniques. For example, a skirt and blouse ensemble by Lao Cotton featured a cap-sleeve tank-type shirt with shirring on the sides atop a drop-waist skirt with a wide, woven yoke utilizing discontinuous, supplementary weft technique and Lao motifs. Also, Pheng Mai's Mongolian jacket-collar striping used the *ikat* technique. Both of these techniques, supplementary weft and *ikat*, were drawn from local weaving traditions. However, some of the outfits (n=18) seemed to have little reference to a uniquely Lao or Laotian "cultural heritage." Instead, they seemed appropriate for events in nearly any world city. These included a navy blue suit by Your Silk, a salmon-colored pants suit by Ammalinh, and a jade-green, strapless tea-length dress with a sweetheart neckline and bodice detailing with contrast piecing by Kheua Mai.

In short, the show demonstrated both preservation and innovation in Lao clothing design as it elegantly presented updated styles, skillfully repackaged past elite styles, and flamboyantly displayed new and modern designs. Several companies employed a few commonly used motifs, stylistic devices, or techniques—or simply the skill of Laotian weavers—to move into a more international fashion arena.

We found this particularly true in two companies that participated in our larger research project: Phaeng Mai and Maicome. Phaeng Mai played a leading role in initiating and establishing the Lao Handicraft Festival, while Maicome is a newcomer to the Festival, but not to the textile business. Both found inspiration in the "cultural

heritage unique to Laos,” referred to by Mrs. Chinda, one of the introductory speakers. But their fashion collections seemed to be tailored for sophisticated Asian audiences both inside and outside Laos, rather than for Laos alone or for the global market. Indeed the fashion designer-owner of Maicome indicated her fashions were designed to “jump off the runway and [even] outside the country.”

Of the two companies, Phaeng Mai designs were more clearly based in the cultural and textile heritage unique to Laos. For example, a Phaeng Mai owner-designer reported that an ethnic Lao-Tai costume had inspired a black, full-length skirt topped by a red tunic with exaggerated side slits and with *ikat* triangles in the pieced v-neck collar (see Photo 3). Another Phaeng Mai offering was also ethnic Lao-Tai in inspiration, with its bold, red stripes on a black, silk tunic top. The remainder of her collection had various Asian inspirations. Two of these contained Lao *ikat* accent pieces: a Mongolia-influenced *ikat* jacket collar on a Vietnamese-inspired long jacket paired with long pants, and a strapless, *ikat*, color-block black top over a flowing, gold full-length skirt with a matching gold Japanese-influenced cummerbund (*obi*). Four of the six presented outfits contained some *ikat* or discontinuous supplementary weft— techniques long used in Lao weaving. Two ensembles, however, had no discernible reference to Lao elements: a red dress inspired by the Japanese *obi* and a green and gold suit with Chinese-style frog closings down the left side of its long, straight skirt.

The Phaeng Mai designer-owner told us she wanted to project “a general Asian or oriental image” in this collection. She said that she deliberately chose design ideas from Phouthai and Tai Dam (Lao-Tai ethnic groups) garments, as well as from clothing styles found in Vietnam, Japan, China and Central Asia. She reported that her major markets were in Japan, Singapore and Europe. She indicated that when people think of Phaeng Mai, she wants them to think about “high quality and modern design using traditional techniques transferred into the new modern market.”



Photo 3: A Phaeng Mai design inspired by the Tai Dam, a Lao-Tai group. Phaeng Mai also presented a second design inspired by a Lao-Tai group, the Phouthai.



Photo 4: Some outfits, like this pants ensemble by Maicome, did not contain any traditional Lao elements. For example, this Maicome offering had no bordered skirt, no star or other familiar motif, and no commonly used intricate weaving technique (e.g., *ikat*, discontinuous weft).

While only one Maicome fashion show offering included a Lao *sin*, two others included Lao elements, though in decidedly contemporary outfits. The modernized *sin* outfit combined bright colors, fuchsia and bright blue, with the fuchsia of the blouse echoed in pink diamonds incorporated into the design of the lower *sin* border and shawl. A distinctive pants outfit employed a common Lao woven motif in black to emphasize the black pants; a bright-orange, collared shirt complemented the black pants. A gold blouse with asymmetrical sleeves and a square of supplementary weft-figured weaving topped an orange, straight skirt. Maicome's three other designs, like the previous ones, were aimed at young people in Laos and other parts of Asia. These, however, did not contain any Laotian elements: a black, sleeveless shirt tucked into belted, white pants with a broad, folded waistband (Photo 4), a white, drop-waist, fringe tank dress reminiscent of American 1920s flapper style, and a dress with a 1950s structured bodice and long circle skirt, pieced with striped and solid matching colors.

Maicome's designer-owner indicated that her ideas for this collection came from magazines and TV. She wanted to update the Lao *sin* for younger Lao women, but she also wanted her products to sell outside of Laos. Her main markets were in Laos and Thailand. She reported that this collection would be featured in a Lao magazine after the Festival was over. Some ensembles from her collection appeared on the website advertising the next Lao Handicraft Festival.

Discussion

Traditions and authenticity ... are not self-evident categories—rather they must be defined and narrated in discourse....Tradition thus becomes not just something invented in an identifiable (recent) past..., but a way of talking about the past and the present through the identification of certain practices that require preservation. (Silverman 2007: 344; Cassia 2000: 289)

The Lao Handicraft Festival was designed as a series of performances to define, narrate, present, authenticate and market tangible artifacts of Lao handicraft traditions, Lao identity and Laos as a nation. From the opening speeches, to the many staffed booths, demonstrations of production techniques, workshops and the Grand Fashion Show itself, authentic handicraft traditions of Laos were presented as part of a “cultural heritage unique to Laos” (Mrs. Chinda’s speech) and in need of preservation (Mr. Vongsay’s speech). The association of Lao identity with Lao products was plainly presented in the fashion-show program: “Lao products, Lao identity.” Moreover, textiles from all provinces of Laos were on display, with textiles occupying more booths than any other single handicraft. The textile traditions of Laos were clearly a central part of this grand performance of cultural heritage and collective identity.

Events like the Festival and Fashion Show socially produce authenticity (Wherry 2006). Steeped in the Festival discourse of cultural heritage and handicraft traditions, even entirely non-traditional Fashion Show clothing carried at least the veneer of authenticity. The “machinery of authenticity” (Appadurai 1986) was at work, as speakers promoted the unique cultural heritage of Laos, buyers flocked to stalls of innovative items created using traditional techniques and even social scientists (the authors) participated by connecting Festival textiles and fashions produced for market with village textiles and clothing produced in the recent past. (Kasfir 1999; Price 2006). Three of Field’s four kinds of authenticity were evident at the Grand Fashion Show. “Ethnographic authenticity” (Field 2009: 510) was produced when designers utilized clothing styles or textile designs that accurately represented Lao culture or Lao identity like the *sin* produced by Chinda or *ikat* striping in the weaving. A unique and brilliantly rendered textile or piece of clothing, like the best of the royal Nor Phao collection, could be considered “authentic original high art” (Field 2009: 511). Some of the companies represented at the Fashion Show were approaching “brand-named authenticity” (Field 2009: 511). Discerning consumers recognized their work as distinctive and aesthetically beautiful. For example, Maicome was known for its high quality and its production standards, while Phaeng Mai was acclaimed for its exquisite Sam Neua tapestry pieces. For all of the companies participating in the Fashion Show, claiming an authentic cultural heritage could inform both marketing strategies and effective representations of Lao identity (Silverman 2007: 343).

Grand Fashion Show offerings were clearly ‘fashionable.’ That is, they offered both innovation and preservation of the ‘symbolic values’ of the designers and their consumers (Crane and Bovone 2006), sometimes in the same ensemble. Thus, a modern or innovative version of a Lao *sin* could represent its wearer as modern or cosmopolitan but still Lao, thereby representing both her personal and collective identities. Indeed, in non-governmental settings, a person makes a deliberate statement by wearing *sin* at all. Additionally, through the selection of design and motifs used on the *sin*, a person expresses an opinion about the *sin* as a national and cultural symbol. As Green (2009) suggested was true for the Highland Malagasy, we propose that the manipulation of particular Lao motifs and the incorporation of design elements from other cultures can express the wearer’s identity while addressing and exploiting the perceived understanding of Lao identity by others.

Correspondingly, a designer is able to reflect symbolic values and make statements about the relationship of Lao identity to other nations and cultures through

the construction of the *sin*-related garment. Designer-owners with different experiences and clientele responded with different kinds of fashions. Chinda, for example, whose clientele is almost entirely Lao women, presented mostly *sin*. Maicome, on the other hand, presented mostly outfits for younger people and for cosmopolitan Lao and non-Lao consumers. As Assam (2008) found in relation to kimonos in Japan, Maicome's reinvention of the *sin* into a more fashion-oriented garment may be viewed as a counter movement to more conventional styles.

Looking more broadly, we see that the clothing styles presented in the Grand Fashion Show reflect broader social and cultural changes in Laos and in the relationship of Laos to the international community. Our interpretation of the fashion show suggests that two processes are occurring simultaneously. Laos is moving outward to connect to the wider Asian and Euro-American worlds, while also moving internally to meld various previously distinct Lao ethnicities, all while deploying the trope of 'authentic cultural heritage.' Phaeng Mai and Maicome both create hybrid outfits. Phaeng Mai incorporates Phouthai and Tai Dam clothing colors and design elements in some outfits and combines traditional Lao techniques with style elements from other Asian countries in others. Maicome creates silk fabric and clothing that invoke the beauty and apparent timelessness of Lao textile traditions but that are presented in pants and dress styles more likely to be found in Thailand, Europe or the United States. Our analysis of interviews with two of the designers reveals their desire to represent Laos as able to contribute to and connect with the broader Asian fashion scene. The clothing included in the Grand Fashion Show demonstrates this connection through the incorporation and mixture of Asian, European and American style elements.

In moving outward, on the one hand, Laos and Lao identity are becoming more connected to economies and societies in a broader global context. Consequently, as Laos and Lao identity become more cosmopolitan, so do Lao clothing styles, especially through the fusion of elements from the clothing of Europe, America and other Asian nations. Not incidentally, growth of the Lao economy is creating an urban elite who can afford these fashions.

On the other hand, as Laotians become less rural and isolated and more urban or connected with urban centers, rural-based ethnic identities that highlight differences between ethnic groups may be in the process of becoming less salient. As a result, the creation of internal and international border-crossing fabrics and fashions, many of which contain traditional Lao designs or techniques, may anchor these offerings in an authentic cultural heritage. Even the fabrics and fashions that do not contain overt Lao elements but are handwoven in Laos using silk or cotton may therefore also be seen as authentic.

Designer-owners create designs for specific audiences. Most of the fashion-show designers emphasized past and current Lao fashions while redesigning them for modern Lao use. The continued use of more traditional elements in their updated, more formal clothing suggests the designers' targeting of an older, wealthier and more urban audience as well as the importance of retaining these elements for more ritualized family and religious events. The more contemporary and cosmopolitan styles may make Lao textiles more understandable and accessible to non-Lao, while the veneer of authenticity may further attract non-Lao to these products. Also, we speculate that elite Lao who operate in an increasingly international arena may find the styles with an

element of 'Lao-ness' more understandable and attractive than, say, Euro-American styles, and so be more likely to wear them. At least this must be the hope of these talented designers.

Finally, our study of the Grand Fashion Show of the Lao Handicraft Festival may provide an example of the standardization of Laotian ethnic identities, a process analyzed by Goudineau (2013). Standing on the borders between fashion worlds—both internal ethnic and international borders—has provided a vantage point from which to view one aspect of this ethnic standardization while observing the creative integration of costume elements that seems to extend across the borders of Laos and into the international world of fashion.

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Lao Filmmakers Break Free from their Cultural Chains

Scott Christopherson¹

Abstract

In this paper I analyze the evolution of Lao National Cinema by looking at several films, including: *Xieng Peun Chak Thong Hai Hin (The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars)*, *Boua Deng (Red Lotus)*, *Pai Thang (At the Horizon)*, and the Academy Award nominee *Neerakhoon (The Betrayal)*. I argue that since 1975, the Lao PDR government has acted as a hegemonic force, controlling the content and creative decisions of Lao film directors. Before the death of Kaysone Phomvihane in 1992, all feature films produced in Laos were propagandistic. Since his death and the collapse of communism in Europe, Lao films have slowly included more representations of religion and spirituality. Though films today still must pass through the Lao PDR Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and receive a stamp of approval before being distributed and broadcast, the tight grip and control of the government has relaxed somewhat. Only recently, with the government's more tolerant views toward the international capitalist market, Lao filmmakers are beginning to tell stories free of complete government control. This has led to a slowly evolving yet unique Lao National Cinema, not quite liberated from the oppressive creative cultural constraints of the political past, but with less creative control exercised by the Lao government. Though present-day Laos is more relaxed than it was in 1975, filmmakers must still navigate a difficult path as they try to create and publish their films.

Introduction

In their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat wrote, "Just as people of color form the global majority, so the cinemas of peoples of color form the global majority, and it is only the notion of Hollywood as the only 'real' cinema that obscures this fact" (Shohat and Stam 1994). In film studies, *Hollywoodcentrism* replaces Eurocentrism. Teshome Gabriel, the late University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) film studies scholar, takes this one step further when he defines Third Cinema as a cinema of decolonization and liberation. The goal of most National Cinema movements is to find a liberated and unique cultural voice that is different from the dominant Western films and stories found in Hollywood. Liberated National Cinema movements also aim to be creatively free from the control of hegemonic forces, especially those of their own governments. One Lao filmmaker, Som Ock Southiponh, is one of the first feature filmmakers in Laos. As the owner of a French-themed bakery in Vientiane, Som Ock was probably not entirely content leaning on the cultural vestiges of French

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colonial power just to make ends meet. Outside his day job, he has devoted his time to creating a Lao National cinema that does not rely on cultural influences from the West. He originally started out making Lao propaganda films for the government and he has been trying to establish a Lao cinema movement since then; he is still set on creating, as he puts it, a “domestic Laotian cinema culture, one that is independent and that captures the essence of Laos as a country, its people, and its deep-rooted culture and arts.” The landscape of Lao National Cinema has changed dramatically since 1975, and in recent years there has been an increase in Lao films and filmmakers. Many up-and-coming filmmakers built on Southiponh’s foundation and continue to carve out a culturally unique Lao National Cinema.

In this paper, I explore the evolution of Lao cinema from the 1980s to the present and I show that the political and cultural context surrounding the production of each film, and the main theme and content of each film, directly correlates with the shifting ideologies of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). I posit that the cultural and political climate in Laos has changed dramatically since 1975, allowing recent Lao filmmakers to break free from the stylistic and cultural influences of the propaganda of the Lao PDR, even if the political system in Laos has hardly changed since 1975 and filmmakers continue to be constrained by the political system in the country. In addition, I argue that the political, cultural, and creative constraints placed on filmmakers by the hegemonic Lao government buried the filmmakers’ creative voices for over 30 years. I show that the Lao PDR was very much anti-West in its ideologies and was a key to the creation of the Lao PDR’s “new socialist man” ideology. The Lao PDR exerted heavy creative control over films produced in the early post-1975 period. In this way, it severely limited the progression of a unique Lao National Cinema. Lao directors are only beginning to emerge as voices in a national cinema of liberation where they are creating a new wave of Lao cinema that explores neo-royalist Buddhist traditions, revealing a deep-rooted personal and collective spirituality. Lao filmmakers are more readily sharing their unique creative voices and beginning, albeit within a limited scope, to break free from the creative and financial control of the Lao PDR to create an emerging and liberated Lao National Cinema.

I will focus here on several Lao films, all produced after 1975. The fictional films are the first two feature films to appear in Laos after 1975, produced by the National Cinema Department and sponsored by the Lao PDR government both conceptually and financially. *At the Horizon* (2011), is one of the most recent feature films and highlights a new movement coined “the Lao New Wave.” *The Betrayal* (2008) is co-directed by a Lao-American refugee and a member of the American Society of Cinematographers, Ellen Kuras.

Dependence on the LPDR “Propaganda” Model

Xieng Peun Chak Thong Hai Hin (*The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, 1983) was the first feature film produced by the Lao communist government after 1975 and was a co-production with Vietnam. The film employed two directors, one from Laos, Somchith Pholsena, and another from Vietnam, Pham Ky Nam. This was the first feature film produced under the financial and cultural control of the Lao PDR. It is no coincidence that, in the creation of their first post-1975 feature film, the Lao PDR

government relied on the same country that helped them overthrow the Royal Lao Government (RLG). The co-production brought the same entities together that had produced the wartime coup and the government restructuring between the Vietnamese and the leaders of the Lao PDR. Kaysone Phomvihane, the leader of the Lao PDR, was half Vietnamese and educated in Hanoi. His ties were unmistakably Vietnamese, and his leadership represented a clean break from a feudal and imperialist-related past (Holt 2009: 170). The support of the Vietnamese became even more apparent after his death in 1992 when, two years later in 1994, the Kaysone Phomvihane National Museum was made possible by generous grants from the Vietnamese government (Holt 2009: 170). As Holt wrote, “Vietnamese support of a state cult centering on Kaysone was unqualified” (Holt, 2009: 170). The film was not a creative masterpiece by any means. In the vein of Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, this co-production was pure propaganda, supporting Kaysone’s political goals, delivered through a vessel of historical fiction.

The film digs into the past, highlighting a period when the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) and the RLG worked together during wartime. The story in the film takes place in 1958, leading up to the day of decoration when the Royal Lao Government (RLG) recognized the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) for their accomplishments and heroic efforts during wartime. The main conflict in the film stems from the decision of the RLG to allow only one representative from the LPF to receive honor on the day of decoration, fearing that too many LPF soldiers near the Capitol could lead to an armed struggle or an overthrow of the current regime. In the film, the RLG are in control of part of the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang. After being denied their request to send troops to be recognized in the Vientiane, the RLG send troops to enforce the government’s decree that only one LPF soldier receive the honor of decoration in the formal Capitol ceremony. Upon hearing this news, the LPF begin planning a middle-of-the-night escape to flee RLG control. The LPF escape being encircled by the Royal Lao Army troops and wage an attack on them. The LPF’s plan works perfectly, as they team with the Hmong and the Vietnamese to fight against intoxicated RLG soldiers. Depictions of both of these ethnic groups become an important cultural part of the film, as does the portrayal of the RLG and the LPF.

In the opening scene of *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, an RLG army general drives his army vehicle in his usual state of inebriation. After nearly driving off a cliff, the commander pulls over to confront a member of the Patriotic Front riding his bicycle and carrying vegetables picked from the garden. As the soldier salutes the commander, the RLG leader pulls the freshly picked vegetables from his bike and stomps on them repeatedly, yet the LPF soldier sustains his salute to the commander. This portrayal of the RLG commander as drunk and irascible is common in the film. In contrast, the LPF soldier’s calm and stoic response to the RLG commander’s tirade is indicative of the portrayal of the members of the Lao Patriotic Front. It implies that the actions of the LPF working class, as they fight back against their privileged RLG urban leaders by the end of the film, are justified, as was the revolution in 1975. This film acts as propaganda for the government of the Lao PDR as it attempts to bury any positive memory of the influence of the RLG.

The LPF, the precursor to the communist Pathet Lao, are portrayed as orderly, physically fit, diligent, and intelligent. In one scene, the LPF conduct a meeting and

everything at the table is perfectly symmetrical and organized. Each of the soldier's helmets is nicely placed on the table in front of them while they conduct business and plan their revolt against the power-hungry rightist government. This contrasts to the RLG officer meetings that resemble drunken parties more than planning sessions. The LPF are seen consistently training in the scenes leading up to the clandestine operation that occurs at the end of the film. The LPF platoon is also clad in white uniforms symbolizing their purity and nobility, while the RLG officers wear traditional army camouflage with red berets—obviously adopted from the French. On the shoulder of the RLG men is their country name *LAOS*, written in English text, in contrast to the Lao-script patch on the LPF soldiers, a subtle allusion to the RLG's supported from the West.

The film includes many themes indicative of films that film theorist Gabriel calls "Third Cinema." The most prominent themes are "armed struggle, class, and rural vs. urban" (Gabriel 1982:15-20). The entire film leads up to an armed struggle against the RLG upper-class enemies on the home front. The final armed battle shows the Vietnamese joining forces with the LPF and the Hmong² to overcome the RLG.

This film follows a traditional Hollywood fictional narrative, where the bad guys are bad and the good guys prevail. The film is mostly a spectacle of propaganda and the tone of the film that of a melodrama with two polarized sides. In this sense, the film is still tied to the Hollywood storytelling model. More important than the comparison to Hollywood, however, is the idea that a cultural constraint is controlling what the filmmaker can or is willing to do, stylistically and creatively. Rather than being controlled by a Western colonial power or being heavily influenced by Hollywood, the filmmakers are constrained by their own government's financial backing and censorship.

There's nothing uniquely Lao about the structure of the story or the way it is told; rather the film replicates Western Hollywood narratives with an emphasis on the formal properties of cinema and the three-act Aristotelian storytelling model. The film results in what Frantz Fanon might call an "uncritical imitation of colonialist culture (Gabriel 1982: 7)." And, more importantly, there is no creative deviation from the Lao PDR's model of propaganda. The Lao PDR acts as a hegemonic force on early Lao filmmakers, controlling their creative choices before, during, and after production.

There is also no religious rhetoric or symbolism in the film. Gabriel wrote, "Third World filmmakers attempt to give religion or spirituality a special significance in their works" (Gabriel 1982:18-19). Filmmakers free to tell stories as they wish without government control or censorship often emphasize spirituality to reflect a national cinema rooted in their own culture. However, this is not the case in *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, probably due to a conscious decision by the filmmakers to obey the political ideology of the Lao PDR government, which discouraged religion among the population in the early years in Laos (Holt 2009). In order to force the country to support the Lao PDR, the government initially removed most religious rhetoric and vocabulary from educational and governmental texts. Similar to this control over texts, the content in the first two feature films produced after 1975 were controlled by the

² It's important to note that the post-1975 Lao government portrayed the Hmong as working only with the Pathet Lao. This was an attempt to rewrite history so that it appeared as if the Hmong supported the Pathet Lao and the 1975 revolution. In reality, many Hmong strongly opposed and were enemies of the Pathet Lao.

Lao PDR and any mention of Buddhism or other religious ritual and rhetoric was explicitly omitted. This omission was meant to erase the history of the RLG. In addition to removing the religious vernacular from historical texts, the Lao PDR also infused non-Lao ethnic groups back into their historiography.

In an attempt to link the historiography of nonurbanized ethnic Lao with the Lao PDR and the revolution, *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars* shows the Pathet Lao working with the Hmong to defeat the RLG. In most of the LPF meetings, a Hmong leader is present and often voices his opinion as they plot to defeat the RLG. One of the most trusted soldiers, a young Hmong messenger, travels by horseback to deliver a message to RLG troops. After delivering the message, the commanding RLG soldier decides to hold him captive and play a cruel game. He tells the Hmong messenger that if he can break a horse that the RLG soldiers have not been able to break, he will be released. The soldiers laugh as the Hmong messenger struggles to mount the horse, but then the messenger quickly controls the steed and rides away from his captors. They begin chasing him throughout their camp and stumble over each other repeatedly as the Hmong boy makes his way effortlessly through the middle of their barracks. In the most significant sequence in this scene, the directors use slow motion to emphasize the importance of the Hmong in the Lao revolution. Immediately after the Hmong messenger mounts the horse, the film begins to play in slow motion to show his importance in the fight of the LPF against the RLG. Even he, the lowliest of soldiers in the LPF ranks, can outwit and outrun the highest-ranking Lao RLG soldiers. Here, the filmmaker is choosing to put the Hmong on a higher level than any RLG citizen. The use of slow motion in the clip glorifies the Hmong and puts them on the same level as the LPF soldiers. Through this portrayal of the Hmong, the Lao PDR tried to unify different ethnic minorities and form a historiography that connects the ethnic minorities with the creation of the Lao PDR-led nation-state.

Breaking Free From Creative Control

Cultural vestiges of France's colonialist influence are still evident in Laos today. In Third Cinema and in the creation of national cinema movements, filmmakers often play with or confront cultural influences of colonialist powers in their films to promote decolonization. Som Ock's film, *Boua Deng (Red Lotus 1987)* has elements akin to Gabriel's second category of Third Cinema, in which the films promote "the decolonization process" or are explicitly anti-colonialist. At the same time, Som Ock was still creatively constrained by the financial and creative control of the Lao PDR government. The government still controlled the film language and the way the story was told and the Lao PDR's ideology and censorship made its structural and creative mark on Som Ock's film. However, *Red Lotus* begins to subtly break free from the control of the Lao DPR with slightly more nuanced acting. Som Ock's wife played the main role and their intimate relationship provided a foundation that allowed Som Ock to direct her less melodramatically. Structurally, however, *Red Lotus* still fits the mold of melodrama.

Like *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, *Red Lotus* seems to fit the cast of a traditional Hollywood melodrama in which two sides, one evil and one good, fight until a male hero saves the damsel in distress, and in this case, goes on to defeat the evil

Royalists. Again, the RLG are portrayed as power hungry and the Pathet Lao as pure-hearted symbols of rural Laos. The Lao PDR guided and controlled the message that Som Ock would deliver in the film.

Red Lotus takes place on the Bolaven plateau in southern Laos in 1972, in the time leading up to the takeover and defeat of the RLG by the Pathet Lao, and it follows Boua Deng, a young woman living in a rural village in the countryside. Her father, Siang, a Pathet Lao supporter, is taken by the RLG and then Boua Deng suddenly has a new, much younger stepfather, who turns out to be a spy for the RLG. This stepfather has in fact killed Siang before becoming her stepfather. In a prior scene, the commander of Boua Deng's stepfather ordered him to have Boua Deng wed a wealthy RLG-supporting village member. Boua Deng refused because she was in love with Khammanh, a member of the Pathet Lao revolutionary army. In one scene, prior to the ultimate success of the revolution, Boua Deng and Khammanh meet and express their love on the eve before he leaves to fight.

In one strange sequence in the film, Boua Deng's government-spy stepfather is seen voyeuristically taking pictures of her while she bathes. In this portrayal of RLG officials, they are not only dishonest, they are also immoral and debased. In the end, her stepfather tries to kidnap and then rape her, but Khammanh comes to the rescue and shoots the stepfather while his Pathet Lao comrades back him up. The propagandistic theme throughout this film tells the viewer that the pure and virtuous rural Pathet Lao are more honorable and trustworthy than the RLG. The film also reflects the Lao PDR government's views of socialist morality.

Through this film, Southiponh is sending a message that Western modernity can never replace Lao traditional customs. In the film, the rural comes into conflict with the modern. Boua Deng acts as the cultural symbol of Laos, what it once was, and, ideally, what it should be. She wears traditional clothing indicative of rural Laos, and is a symbol of maintaining the national culture. In another clip, Boua Deng's RLG stepfather approaches her with a bag of Western clothes he purchased in the city, and while standing in front of her house deep in her village in the rural countryside, Boua Deng rejects her stepfather's gift. This is a symbolic representation, in which Boua Deng, a symbol of what Laos should stand for, rejects Western culture. This theme supports Gabriel's theory that "Wherever imperialist culture penetrates, it attempts to destroy national culture and substitute foreign culture: therefore, the struggle to preserve the cultural make-up of a society also constitutes a major area of concern for Third World filmmakers" (Gabriel 1982: 16). Another prominent theme focuses on anti-colonialist and anti-Western sentiments while also exploring the clash between the traditional and modern. This is shown through Southiponh's portrayal of members of the RLG who wear Western clothes and dance to Western music at a popular nightclub in Vientiane. At the club, the rest of the Vientiane locals are dressed in Hawaiian button-downs or short-sleeve, collared Izod-brand shirts with white or khaki slacks. The stepfather and his friends drink foreign beers like Heineken, instead of the state established Lao beer, and listen to a band covering the Beatles. On the dance floor, they gyrate and move back and forth like a group of Americans, with no sign of traditional Lao dance. Here, Southiponh depicts members of the US-backed RLG as Western, clearly forgetting their Lao cultural roots. They act as the antithesis to Boua Deng and Khammanh and the rest of the rural Pathet Lao community.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Lao PDR sought to create a “new socialist man” who possessed a high level of revolutionary morality and culture and was guided by a moral life (Pholsena 2006: 58). This new morality is clearly evident in *Red Lotus* in its depiction of the West in the nightclub, and in Boua Deng’s rejection of the West. According to Evans,

Arguably the interpretation given to the morality of the new socialist man by the LPRP was strongly conditioned by the [ethnic] Lao social environment. That influence explains the highly traditional and conservative as well as nationalistic cast of ideology. Reactions against Western fashion, music and decadent morality, exemplified by prostitution or simply the holding of hands in the street, largely reflected the values of elderly people (whose number included the party leadership), who are traditionally guides in such matters, and sexual conservatism of village culture. (Evans 1995:4)

Som Ock reflected this new morality, this new socialist man, in his film through Boua Deng’s character and his rejection of the West. Including the political ideology of the Lao PDR government in his film is a direct result of being controlled by the government’s political philosophy.

Boua Deng is strong and independent and her character is innovative, representing a woman as a powerful leader in Lao society a depiction that supports another theme common to emerging national cinemas—the emancipation of women. “In most Third World films,” Gabriel writes, “we witness the integral participation of women in all aspects of their struggle for decolonization and liberation, including their participation in actual armed struggle” (Gabriel 1982:18). Boua Deng is no doubt portrayed as an empowered woman throughout the film, yet her strong Pathet Lao lover Khammanh still must save her. At the end of the film, Boua Deng’s stepfather holds her at gunpoint in a marshy area in the countryside. Khammanh and his comrades follow the stepfather and one of them shoots him to free Boua Deng, who falls into Khammanh’s arms.

As in *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, there is little mention of religion in the film. The Lao PDR tried to erase many aspects of religious rhetoric that acted as the backbone of Lao cultural heritage, including any symbol of the king or royalty. The Lao PDR controlled information about the past in order to persuade their countrymen to support their own political philosophy. In *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, Evans wrote that “certain topics are not able to be discussed publicly, and discourses about the past, present, and future are monopolized by regimes which also attempt to control memory and the construction of it” (Evans 1998: 6).

After 1975, the Lao PDR government attempted to change the way citizens spoke. At the National Assembly in 1975, it was decided that the Lao language would be used in an administrative setting and people would be banned from using royal language for daily correspondence unless in poetry or others types of literature (Evans 1998:12-13). Evans wrote, “The abolition of royal language saw the attempt at an egalitarian reform of the language and so honorifics, like *sadet* (prince) or *tan* (sir), were pushed aside by the ubiquitous use of *sahay* (comrade)” (Evans 1998:13). This is evident in *Red Lotus* and *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, in which virtually no royal language is used.

Som Ock Southiponh was constrained financially and creatively by the government of the Lao PDR. He said,

Despite its length of 83 minutes, *Red Lotus* was very difficult to make because we had nothing, really nothing. The big problem in making such a film in Laos is that we didn't have money. *Red Lotus* was made for only about US \$5,000, so we had to use a World War II era Soviet camera that had a tendency to speed up at will and a cast that worked for nothing. I must confess that the budget and the 22-day schedule did not allow for much opportunity to shoot everything the way I wanted to. Due to the lack of equipment in Laos, the film was developed and edited in Hanoi, Vietnam, even though it was shot in Vientiane. (Southiponh 2009)

Som Ock reflected further on his experience making the film,

Making *Red Lotus* did make me feel that I would be better off working outside of the State Cinematography Company. I sensed that the only way I could really do the things I would like to do would be to turn independent. That's why I left the company in 1989 in hopes of establishing a small, private video production company. (Southiponh 2009)

Som Ock probably did not want to openly criticize working under a state-run production company, so he simply left. He was trying to set up his own national cinema within the Lao system, but that did not happen. No features were funded domestically in Laos until 2007, with the film *Sabaidee Luang Phrabang*. A new, government-run organization, the National Film Archive and Video Center, was established in 1991 and was the closest thing to resemble a production company. No independent filmmakers could make a living under the tight creative grip of socialist Laos and the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. A new group of filmmakers are currently attempting to do what Som Ock always meant to do—create a Lao National Cinema that is commercially successful, uniquely Lao, and free from the creative control of the government.

Lao New Wave Cinema

The Lao New Wave (which does not currently include Som Ock Southiponh) is a group of young Lao filmmakers trying to establish a new and unique Lao cinematic style. On their Facebook page, the Lao New Wave Collective wrote, “Our first aim is to change the face of the Lao movie industry” and “some of us are native to this country, and some are not, but our common passion is to produce quality images and stories.” I have met with several filmmakers from the Lao New Wave collective, including one of the founders, Xiasongkham Indouangchanthy, who is currently getting a master of fine arts degree in filmmaking at the City College of New York on a Fulbright scholarship. His going abroad to study is significant because it is an example of Lao cinema slowly spreading globally (he previously studied filmmaking in Australia).

One of the Lao New Wave's most prominent feature films, titled *At the Horizon* (*Pai Thang* 2011), reflects the growing movement in Lao cinema with a new emphasis on spirituality and religion. First-time feature filmmaker Anysay Keola directed *At the Horizon* after he completed a bachelor's degree in film in Australia and while in the course of completing his master's degree from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

The film follows the connecting stories of two men, Sin and Lout. Sin is a well-to-do son of a prominent Vientiane family who frequents nightclubs, listens to rap music, and seems intent on wearing Western clothes. One night, after a drunken fight, an intoxicated Sin drives his car through Vientiane. Distracted, he briefly looks up only to hit and kill the wife and child of a mute, rural man named Lout. Lout and Sin's lives collide when Lout tracks him down, aiming to enact revenge for the deaths of his wife and child, an act that is contrary to his kind demeanor as a loving father and husband. The rural and urban collide in this film as Lout confronts Sin and holds him captive while deciding what to do with him.

The film explores themes that juxtapose the urban and rural and the rich and poor. In one scene, the filmmakers cut from Sin listening to rap music in his leather interior Sport Utility Vehicle to Lout, who is seen driving along the countryside on a scooter with his wife and daughter, set against a backdrop of a breathtaking sunset. Keola chose to portray the upper class by setting the characters in a club as was done in *Red Lotus*. Sin's clothing and haircut are trendy, while Lout acts as a cultural symbol of the hardworking lower-class family man, determined to provide a more secure financial future for his daughter and wife.

At the Horizon differs from films like *Red Lotus* and *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars* in its exploration of spirituality and religion. In an intense plot twist, Sin's wealthy father and his entourage determine where Lout is holding Sin captive. They kill Lout as Sin struggles to stop them. Sin is torn about what he has done to Lout's family. Sin then makes sense of his situation by visiting his local temple and paying respect to Lout. To show that he has matured, Sin places pink sandals on Lout's altar in a cemetery to pay homage to Lout's daughter, who wore pink sandals in the film when she died. He then burns incense in a Buddhist ritual to pay his respects to the deceased. Themes of karma, afterlife, and reincarnation emerge as the story unfolds. In the final scene, Lout's family reunites as they ride together on their motorbike in what seems to be some sort of Buddhist afterlife or reincarnation. Anysay is clearly recognizing an afterlife and the importance of religious philosophy and thought in Laos. This is much different than in the early years of Lao cinema, clearly showing that today the Lao government is open to recognizing religion in their government-approved cultural products. In order to become more competitive in the international economic scene, beginning in the mid-1980s, the Lao PDR sought to utilize Buddhism, and became more open to the outside capitalist world. Economic and social liberalization favored an atmosphere of regulatory relaxation that led to the resurgence of Buddhist popular practices in everyday Lao culture (Pholsena 2006: 11). The collapse of communism thus led the regime to find a new form of Lao nationalism. As Evans states,

During the liberalization of the 1980s Buddhism, although flourishing, was still subordinate to the party's long-term aim of building socialism in Laos. The collapse of communism in Europe changed all that and the regime has turned increasingly to Buddhism in its search of new ideologies of legitimation, and of a reformulated Lao nationalism. This is especially apparent in the importance the media places on photographic or filming for TV the party leaders making merit during major Buddhist festivals. (Evans 1998: 67)

Evans calls this resurgence of Buddhism a “re-Buddhification of the Lao state” (Evans 1998: 67). The main character of the film isn’t characterized as completely evil or good. He is more complex, and he goes through a process of change and maturity.

At the Horizon breaks free from traditional Western storytelling and the stringent creative control of the Lao PDR’s strict political philosophy through its nonlinear story structure and in its reflection of inner spirituality. The film jumps between present reality and the past as it weaves in flashbacks, playing with narrative structure and time. The viewer is left to wonder what time and space they are actually witnessing.

Another film, produced and directed by a Lao refugee living in the United States, also uses nonlinear storytelling techniques, but first begins with the story of coming to America. *The Betrayal*, co-directed by Thavisouk Prasavath and Ellen Kuras, follows the story of Thavisouk’s family as they migrate from Laos to America between 1975 and 1980. The family was separated from their father, who was a soldier in the US-based Royal Lao Army and, as he put it, “told foreigners where to bomb in his own country.” Thavisouk’s family was left to fend for themselves and was ostracized by their community because of their ties to the former RLG. They bribed an official to smuggle most of the family out of the country into Thailand and were then sent to Brooklyn, New York as refugees. The film follows Thavisouk and his family as they adapt to life in the United States and experience the harsh realities of gang life and poverty over a period of 23 years.

The Betrayal explores themes of hybrid cultural identity that show the complexity of a Lao refugee living in America who is making sense of his heritage. Thavisouk recognizes his hybridity and uses the film to critique the government of both his homeland and his adopted land. He finds himself somewhere in the middle, not American and not Lao, and his film’s message is critical of both countries.

In the last phase of Gabriel’s theory of Third Cinema, where filmmakers have evolved and become more independent, the filmmakers “aim at a destruction and construction at the same time; a destruction of the images of colonial or neo-colonial cinema, and a construction of another cinema that captures the revolutionary impulse of the peoples of the Third World” (Gabriel 1982: 95). *The Betrayal*, although it was largely produced in the United States, with some scenes showing the author returning to visit Laos, has a tone that is more akin to the cinema of liberation. It fits more with what Gabriel said when he wrote, “It is a cinema founded on folk culture whose role it is to intervene on behalf of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America who must fight equally for political as well as cultural liberation” (Gabriel 1982: preface-8). In *The Betrayal*, Thavisouk is culturally liberating himself from the post-1975 Lao government, not just the Western world.

Thavisouk and Kuras are critical of the post-1975 Lao government and the United States government throughout the film. Not many Lao refugees have the opportunity to make films and they are rarely able express their criticism of the government that forced them to flee in fear. Thavisouk is one of a handful of Lao filmmakers, and the first to my knowledge to create a mainstream film that is openly critical of the Lao PDR. Though the film is more of a personal story, the underlying message of the film critiques the Lao PDR, pointing out on a personal level how the Lao PDR government tore his family apart while enforcing their political ideologies. Because

of the Lao PDR, Thavisouk lost his father, his brothers and sisters forgot their spiritual Lao heritage, and he was forced to fend for himself in America with little community support, either emotionally or financially, all of which is portrayed in his film.

With high hopes early on in the story, Thavisouk's family flew to the United States as beneficiaries of an American fiscal sponsor and were brought to a two-room apartment that they were forced to live in with two other families, one small Vietnamese family and a family of six Cambodians. Their large family of 11 took up the majority of the space in the small apartment. This living situation symbolized his family's struggle to find their own identity. In the film, Thavisouk comments that he feels like he is just another Asian. He says, "They'd call me chink, gook, dirty Cambodian, and slant eyes." And then, "They didn't know who or what a Laotian was." When they first got off the plane, Thavisouk thought they had landed on the wrong continent. He thought they were in Africa, because in Laos they taught him that white people lived in America and Europe and black people lived in Africa. He did not know that the United States was so multicultural. Thavisouk had to make sense of his own identity as part of the Lao diaspora now living in America and a part of that melting pot, and he tries to make sense of his role as a Lao-American throughout the film.

Referring to diasporic and exilic filmmakers, Hamid Naficy, a professor at Northwestern University, writes about diaspora filmmakers. "As partial, fragmented, and multiple subjects, these filmmakers are capable of producing ambiguity and doubt about the taken-for-granted values of their home and host societies. They can also transcend and transform themselves to produce hybridized, syncretic, performed, or virtual identities." He continues, "People in diaspora have an identity in their homeland before their departure, and their diasporic identity is constructed in resonance with this prior identity. Diasporic consciousness is horizontal and multisided, involving not only the homeland but also the compatriot communities elsewhere. As a result, plurality, multiplicity, and hybridity are structured in dominance among the Diasporas" (Naficy 2001: 14).

In Thavisouk's case, he is conflicted about his homeland. He does not idealize his home country, but seeks to navigate his complicated relationship with Laos and with America. He does not nurture a collective memory of his homeland, not idealized per se, but in a poetic and painful way. As he remembers his homeland, he confronts his current identity as a Lao-American fighting back and critiquing both countries. In this sense he is part of the revolutionary impulse evident in the more progressive stages of Gabriel's theories of Third Cinema. Thavisouk is exploring and analyzing the politics of his homeland along with the politics in America.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for Lao living in America is making sense of their role and identity within their own families. Like Thavisouk's family, many members of the Lao diaspora are without one or more of their parents or their siblings and extended family members. In *The Betrayal*, Thavisouk struggles to understand and perform his duty within his own family. In one scene, Thavisouk talks with his mother about making sense of his role as the eldest son trying to step in as a leading figure in the family. Thavisouk struggles because his father, who, many years after the rest of the family, eventually makes it to America, has a new family and Thavisouk's siblings are left without his support. Talking to his mother, Thavisouk says, "All of these crazy problems are tangling with my life and they are your responsibility, not mine."

Thavisouk is left grasping to understand his own identity within his family. This is a more internal type of identity struggle, another layer of complexity added to his situation.

Thavisouk portrays how American culture is invading his Lao heritage and religion as he questions his role as a Lao-American. Gabriel wrote, "Wherever imperialist culture penetrates, it attempts to destroy national culture and substitute foreign culture" (Gabriel 1982: 16). This theme is prevalent in various parts of *The Betrayal*. His sisters and brothers join gangs and Thavisouk struggles against his role in the family in America. Near the beginning, the film discusses America's role in the clandestine war in Laos. The United States was ultimately responsible for dropping hundreds of thousands of bombs in Laos, and then pulled its troops out when the Communists took over. The Royalists were left to fend for themselves and many were sent to concentration camps. In its portrayal of this, the film is a protest against America. Thavisouk blames the United States as the cause of the war that ultimately forced his family out of Laos and into America. In America, gang life helped destroy another part of their family. Through these facts and visuals, the film blames the United States for many of his family's problems. He is frustrated that the transition to America has changed his family culturally and it is clear that by moving there, the family has lost part of themselves, part of their unique Lao culture and heritage.

Thavisouk breaks free from the cultural constraints of the post-1975 Lao government in his representation of and openness about religion and spirituality in the film. Part of this is because he no longer lives in Laos and is co-directing and producing the film with an American. He shows that he tried to hold onto his religion but gangs and life in America soon overpowered his spirituality. The images of the film take on a spiritual quality that differs from mainstream Hollywood films or commercially driven documentaries. There are several lyrical and poetic scenes of fishermen and Lao natives working in the rivers and lakes of Laos. The elderly woman who narrates the scenes with Lao lyrical poetry supports the idea that Lao culture and heritage is rooted in deep layers of connection with ancestors and a life beyond this one. Kuras, a world-renowned cinematographer and member of the prestigious American Society of Cinematographers, shot these scenes in Laos and her shooting expertise combines well with Thavisouk's knowledge of Lao history and lyrical poetry to effectively portray Lao spirituality. The images are breathtaking and help to articulate while at the same time questioning a deep-seeded Lao spirituality. These images help the viewer realize what is at stake—the war started by the Lao PDR and carried out by the United States is now causing this beauty to disappear. These subtle and beautiful spiritual images are an attempt to infuse Lao spirituality and tradition back into their cultural rhetoric and also to critique the Lao PDR's role in destroying a part of the Lao cultural tradition and heritage.

The end of the film connects Thavisouk with his ancestral and spiritual Lao roots, despite the interference of the Lao and US governments. Thavisouk returns to Laos to reunite with his sisters who were left behind when his family came to America. Showing this scene at the end of the film is symbolic because it shows the viewer that he is liberated from the United States and it emphasizes the importance of maintaining and connecting with his Lao roots. He needs to maintain his language, his heritage, and his family. He is not going to let the Lao PDR stop him from staying connected to his

family and his faith. At the end of the film, Kuras elegantly films the most emotional and meaningful moment in the film. Thavisouk arrives at his old house and his relatives point out his grandmother, whom he has not seen since he left and only knew as a boy. They embrace as they both weep. His grandmother is the symbol of the ancient heritage and, after the journey of Thavisouk and his family, this heritage is what is most important. Much of the spiritual connection between relatives and ancestors was lost or buried as a result of the Lao PDR forcing thousands, like Thavisouk's family, to flee the country and bury their religious heritage. The film is Thavisouk's chance to voice his opinion and illustrate the damage done by the Lao PDR and how it changed the lives of citizens who were forced to leave their spiritual homeland. Thavisouk is one of a small group of Lao filmmakers still practicing today.

Another Lao filmmaker, Mattie Do, also managed to break into the international filmmaking community. In May 2014, Mattie, the only Lao female director in contemporary Laos, was invited to participate in La Fabrique des Cinemas du Monde at the Cannes Film Festival and Market. Following the success of her film *Chanthaly*, she was offered the opportunity to apply to the prestigious program that helps filmmakers from developing nations grow their film projects, find funding, and that pairs them with successful film mentors. Mattie talked about the new opportunity: "Laos has never had this opportunity before, and even when I applied, I didn't think it was even a remote possibility I could be accepted. Attending and participating in the activities of the Cannes Film Festival and Market is a dream come true! It's an honor that Douangmany Soliphanh and I can go to represent Laos during this historic event" (Lao 2014). This is the first time a Lao film director has had a formal presence at the Cannes Film Festival. She was accepted with her second feature film, titled *Nong Hak*. Her film is being funded by the Pepsi Lao Brewing Company. This type of private financial backing is a significant change from the point of the first feature film produced in Laos after 1975, *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, which was funded entirely by the Lao PDR and Vietnamese governments. This marks a shift in the future of Lao cinema, where filmmakers can break free from the financial control of the state and focus on creating something fresh that does not simply echo the political platforms of the government.

Conclusions

Lao cinema has evolved dramatically since 1975. During this period, Lao directors have been under the strict direction of the Lao PDR, and have been creatively constrained by their political situation. For over 30 years, the Lao PDR acted as a hegemonic force controlling the content and creative decisions of Lao film directors. The Lao PDR controlled the content, style, and structure of Lao directors' films and censored all films following the 1975 revolution. Though films today still must pass through the Lao PDR's Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and receive approval before going on to distribution and broadcast, the tight grip and control by the Lao PDR has relaxed. Only recently, with the Lao PDR government's more relaxed views toward the international capitalist market, Lao filmmakers are beginning to tell stories without being fully controlled by the government. This new freedom has led to a slowly evolving Lao National Cinema, liberated from the oppressive creative cultural constraints of the political past.

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The Cultural and Natural Heritage of Caves in the Lao PDR: Prospects and Challenges Related to Their Use, Management and Conservation

Nicholas Roberts¹

Abstract

This paper introduces the human uses for and values placed on caves and karst environments in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), and discusses some of the prospects and challenges related to their use, management, and conservation based on their value as cultural and natural heritage. In the Lao PDR, caves and karst have a broad range of uses and meanings, formed over long time periods that include prehistoric, historic, and contemporary phases. These uses have generated distinct values and meanings for diverse groups, including the Lao government, local communities, international researchers, and tourists. Caves are unique in that they fulfill, at least to some extent, all of the criteria for natural, tangible, intangible and historical heritage protection, making management of them difficult. The past, present and future importance of caves and karst and their multiple users and meanings has not been consistently taken into account in measures to protect or manage them. The increasing pressure from economic development practices, including logging, mining, and tourism, also compounds management and conservation. In order to sustainably manage and conserve caves and karst in the Lao PDR, they must be viewed as 'living places.' This will require the acknowledgment of their unique and crosscutting significance, their natural and cultural heritage and their current and historic uses and meanings. These characteristics should be identified and valued as part of any future conservation, social and economic development planning.

Key Words: Lao PDR; caves and karst; natural and cultural heritage management

Introduction

Karst, with its constituent of caves, makes up approximately 30,000 km² in the Lao PDR and is found in all of its provinces, making it a common and extensive feature in the national landscape. As natural places, caves and karst support high levels of natural biodiversity, geodiversity, rare species, the remains of extinct species, and provide essential ecosystem services (Clements et al. 2006; Kiernan 2011; Uhlig 1980). Caves and karst support many remote communities, with long-term interaction between people, caves, and karst indicated through the incorporation of caves in land-tenure systems (Kiernan 2011), community-based fisheries management (Baird 2006; Shoemaker et al. 2001), and general village-level economic and subsistence-based activities, including wildlife harvesting and gold panning (Kiernan 2009; 2011). Caves also support other social-cultural practices

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through their incorporation in the religious and spiritual beliefs of lowland Buddhists and upland non-Buddhist minorities (Chamberlain 2007; Kiernan 2009). In prehistory, caves were used as places for human habitation, mortuary practices and intermittent occupation (Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood 2000). A resurgence of cave occupation occurred during the Second Indochina War (American War) from 1965 to 1973 (Dreybrodt et al. 2013; Pholsena 2010; Prices 2007). Many caves, including those at Vieng Xai District and Houaphanh Province, have become key sites for the production and subsequent promotion of Lao nationalism and identity (High 2007). Caves and karst environments have become tourist destinations for their natural and cultural values and caves have been identified as having the potential to support economic and social development aimed at alleviating poverty in remote regions of the nation (Harrison and Shipani 2009; Kiernan 2013; Lyttleton and Allcock 2002).

Despite their history and potential, the cultural and historical heritage value of caves and karst remains poorly identified and managed and has been little studied nationwide. It is estimated that only 10 percent of the 30,000 km² of total karst area nationwide is protected within 10 national biodiversity conservation areas (NBCAs) (Day 2011; Day and Urich 2000). The Lao government has made little effort to manage or preserve caves and karst landscapes outright, and to thereby protect their natural and cultural value (Kiernan 2009; 2011; 2013). Rarely are the unique and significant values of caves and karst identified or incorporated into broader heritage planning either within or outside of current NBCA. Caves and karst are more often protected indirectly or by default when they are situated within larger NBCAs or are managed by communities who value them for economic, subsistence or spiritual reasons (Baird 2006; Shoemaker et al. 2001). Articulation of the meaning and human experience of caves and karst as used by ethnic Lao or ethnic minority communities, including the village-level management of caves and the experience of tourism in community-owned caves, is also highly limited (Suntikul et al. 2009).

Much, if not most of the research into cave and karst uses and their value is still in its infancy in the Lao PDR (Dreybrodt et al. 2013; Kiernan 2011; 2013; The Vientiane Times 2010). Research and management often occur in isolated or 'key sites' nationwide, including in the Nam Ha region in Luang Nam Tha Province, at *Pak Ou* in Luang Prabang Province, at Vieng Xai in Houaphanh Province and at Vang Vieng in Vientiane Province. Research findings about cave and karst use in these locations and the interconnection between environmental and cultural values and uses are generally not reported or linked across disciplines. The location and geographic distribution, physical condition and natural and cultural heritage value of caves and karst can be sourced from only a few detailed studies (Kiernan 2009; 2010a; 2011; 2013), with most reported information on caves and karst available indirectly from caving projects (Steiner 2013), archaeological research (MMA 2010; Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood 2000), economic development reports and assessments of tourism-based enterprises (Lyttleton and Allcock 2002; Manivong 2011; Rogers 2009; UNESCO 2008). Currently, there are no significant data sets that explain what is prevalent in cave or karst use over any significant time period. A shortage of baseline data and natural or cultural heritage management planning for caves and karst makes detailed analysis of values, uses and meanings extremely difficult. As a result, analysis must rely simply on linking examples of cave and karst

use to the problems and successes of management practices as they have been reported across research spaces and throughout specific time periods.

This paper provides background information on research associated with cave and karst in the Lao PDR, followed by a summary of the reported natural value of cave and karst environments in the country and the human uses for them (including prehistoric, historic, and contemporary use). A discussion of some of the prospects and challenges related to their use, management and conservation and to their unique and often crosscutting natural, cultural and historical heritage will follow. The unique values caves and karst hold to diverse groups of people, and issues arising from the growing use of caves by emerging actors, including the Lao government, local communities, tourists and heritage and other professionals, will form the basis of this discussion. Issues with the management of caves and karst nationwide are juxtaposed against increasing economic development pressures that have heightened the risk of damage or destruction to the caves and karst and the communities that use and rely on them. In this paper, I argue that caves and karst are 'living' places and that their sustainable use and management will require the identification, management and protection of their unique and crosscutting values, including natural and cultural heritage values, as well as an understanding of their new and old uses and meanings.

Cave and Karst Research in the Lao PDR

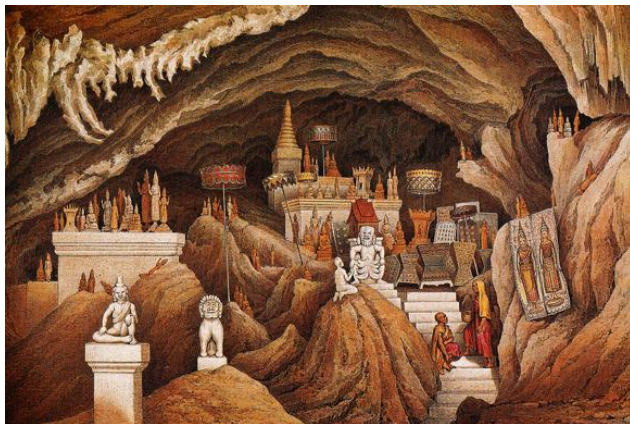


Photo 1: De Lagree and Sorrieu's 19th century representation of the interior of *Tham Nam Hou*, located near Luang Phrabang (De Lagree and Sorrieu, in Garnier 1873).

Caves and karst were first recorded by French cartographers and explorers in the course of their mapping and mineral exploration of French Indochina during the 19th and early 20th century. In the Luang Phrabang region, *Tham Nam Hou* was described by Francis Garnier and sketched by Doudart De Lagree (see Photo 1), the leaders of a French team that explored the Mekong River catchment between Saigon and the southern Chinese province of Yunnan between 1866 and 1868 (Garnier 1873). Caves in the Khammouane region were

explored by Jauques Fromaget during the mid-to-late 19th century (Kottelat and Steiner 2010). While he was exploring for mineral deposits, Fromaget discovered human fossils in the *Tham Hang* Rockshelter. Subsequent archaeological excavation work by Fromaget led to the discovery of another 17 anatomically modern human skulls in the rockshelter (Shackleford and Demeter 2011). During the early 1930s, another French archaeologist, Madeleine Colani, led prehistoric archaeological investigations in an unnamed cave adjacent to the *Plain of Jars* in Houaphanh Province. Colani speculated that use of this cave was connected to the iron-age culture located at the *Plain of Jars*. Other French researchers, including Edward Saurin, were also active as archaeologists in the Lao PDR during the 1930s and

1940s, but no other specific accounts of cave research are reported from them² (Kallen 2004).

Beyond initial investigations by French explorers and researchers, caves and karst in the Lao PDR did not receive significant or specific attention in natural or cultural scientific research until the 1990s. This period was marked by the easing of political and economic restrictions, following the 1986 New Economic Mechanism (NEM), which directed the centrally planned economy toward a market orientation, initiating regional and global market integration and the emergence of a new social and economic development initiative nationwide (Phimphanthavong 2012; Stuart-Fox 1997). During the 1990s, 'Western,' university-trained Lao national archaeologists from the Department of National Heritage began research and conservation efforts on key cave sites in Luang Phrabang and adjacent provinces (Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood 2000). When non-Lao Western archaeologists re-entered the country after 1990, sites like *Pak Ou (Tham Ting)* in Luang Phrabang Province became locations for intensive joint efforts to conserve Buddhist shrines located within the caves. Between 1992 and 1996, Lao government archaeologists, Australian archaeologists, and other conservation specialists coordinated a restoration project in *Pak Ou* that was sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (Egloff 1998; Egloff 2003; Johnson 1997; UNESCO 2004). Restoration and conservation followed international standards such as those developed by ICOMOS, and in most instances provided successful outcomes. The process did, however, raise a number of issues for managing and conserving caves considered 'living places.'

The historical built heritage of the Lao PDR gained UNESCO World Heritage status in 1995, with the official listing of the town of Luang Phrabang. The *Pak Ou* caves were also incorporated within heritage-management planning at Luang Phrabang as tourist sites, given their close proximity to Luang Phrabang and the historical connection of these caves to the town. The listing of Luang Phrabang also encouraged the Lao government to shift towards a 'tourist economy,' with the World Heritage site providing an economic resource that had the potential to mitigate rural poverty and discourage swidden cultivation, considered at the time to be environmentally destructive (Suntikul 2011). Following after Luang Phrabang, in 2001 Vat Phou Champasak in Champasak District, Champasak Province, also gained a UNESCO World Heritage listing as a 'cultural landscape.' The Vat Phou cultural landscape incorporated two sandstone rockshelters that contained Khmer inscriptions. These inscriptions were associated with the development and use of the historical cultural landscape of Vat Phou (Government of Lao PDR 1999). As with Luang Phrabang, Vat Phou has become a major tourist attraction, and it retains the local use of the Vat Phou complex for annual religious festivals and other community events.

During this period, archaeology continued to play a major role in cave research in the Lao PDR and by mid-2000, large-scale, jointly run archaeological projects had developed. These international projects involved Lao government archaeologists, Lao National Museum staff, the National University of Laos and

² Colani, Saurin and Fromaget were part of the *Ecole Francais d'Extreme Oriente (EFEO)*, an institute created in 1898 dedicated to the study of French Indochina, in particular its history, archaeology, and philology. The EFEO was based in Hanoi, Vietnam, and was not very active in the Lao PDR. Most work carried out there was between 1910 and the 1950s. See Kalen (2004) and Karlstrom (2009) for more information.

international academics and institutions. The partnerships supported structural capacity building for archaeology and international heritage management and conservation in many field sites nationwide. Jointly run, cultural heritage projects at the MMG-LXML Sepon Gold and Copper Mine, Savannakhet Province, have also been ongoing since 2006, incorporating archaeological surveys, excavations and research on the intangible cultural uses and values of caves within the mining tenement area (Chamberlain 2007; Mayes and Chang 2013). A Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP) has been in place at the MMG-LXML site since 2007 (Mayes and Chang 2013). The Middle-Mekong Archaeological Project (MMAP) has been performing archaeological surveys and excavations of cave sites (among other sites) in Luang Prabang Province since 2008 (MMAP 2009; 2010; White et al. 2009), including caves like *Tham An Mah* (MMAP 2013). Other collaborative heritage management planning at the Vieng Xai caves was ongoing during the 2000s, representing an effort to forge stronger cross-cultural cooperation and engagement there, including at a cultural heritage field school in 2006 (Wills et al. 2007).

Other science-based research projects involving caves and karst environments in the Lao PDR also progressed with the easing of political and economic restrictions in the 1990s. Importantly, biologically and geologically based research began to illustrate other significant values and uses related to caves, including their biodiversity, geodiversity and palaeontology. Research between 1996 and 2000 identified and recorded over half of the 510 species of fish ever recorded in the Lao PDR, and 128 species new to science were described from 1998 to 2000 (Kottelat and Steiner 2010). In addition, Baird (1998) conducted a survey of aquatic resources in karst environments in the Phou Hin Poun NBCA (now the National Protected Area or NPA) in 1998 that showed that the communities of fish species found within aquatic environments linked by underground caves differed widely, resulting in considerable fish community diversity. Throughout the first decade of the 2000s, new species continued to be found in caves. Surveys in Phongsali Province in northern Lao PDR also reported 19 new spider species for Laos, with eight species new to science (Guilbert 2007). In 2007, Middle-Pleistocene mammalian fauna remains were found in the *Tham Hang* Rockshelter in Houaphanh Province, highlighting one of the few preserved ancient and extinct faunal remains found in a cave in the Lao PDR (Bacon et al. 2011). In the Xe Bang Fai drainage in central Lao PDR, a new species of fish was reported (Kottelat and Steiner 2010), and a new species of spider was also discovered in the *Tham Nam Lot* cave in the Khammouane-Ke Bang karst in central Lao PDR (Lourenco 2011).

In the 1990s, caves and karst also came to be used for the purpose of exploration and adventure. At the time, the Lao PDR was considered a “blank spot on the world caving map” (Dreybrodt et al. 2013: 68), with only minor caving expeditions reported by French and Dutch groups in the early 1990s in Luang Phrabang Province, and at Vang Vieng and in Khammouane Province. In 2002, an international group of speleologists called the ‘Northern Lao-European Cave Project’ (NLECP) officially formed and began exploring karst areas in northern Lao PDR thought to have a ‘high’ potential for caving. The teams began to systematically research and document caves as they explored them (Dreybrodt et al. 2013), mapping their physical structure, including their length and location, and documenting their geology and geomorphology, flora and fauna and cultural value (Dreybrodt and Laumanns 2005; Dreybrodt et al. 2013; Prices 2007). In 2013, the Lao Cave Project reported on a decade of cave surveys and expeditions in northern

Lao PDR, stating that the group had been responsible for discovering 24 species new to science. Species included a blind cave fish, an ancient scorpion and a huntsman spider (Steiner 2013). Regular reports of their expeditions are documented through publications, conferences and on their website, including the total length of caves explored nationwide.³ The NLECP is one of a growing number of groups that continue to explore and document caves and karst in the Lao PDR.⁴

The transition to a market-oriented economy in the Lao PDR led to assessments of economic development activities and their direct or indirect social and environmental impacts. The environmental and socio-cultural effects of logging (EIA/Telepac 2008), mining (Barney 2009; High 2010), agricultural change (Kenney-Lazar 2012; Baird 2011) and dam construction (Singh 2009) demonstrate the emerging change in use and meaning of the natural landscape. Surprisingly, throughout the 2000s, examples of use or impact on caves and karst by natural-resource-based economic development activities were irregularly or indirectly reported. Since the early 2000s, however, feasibility studies and assessments of ecotourism and community-based tourism projects have evaluated the human use and economic value of caves and karst across a number of locations nationwide (Lyttleton and Allcock 2002; Rogers 2009). During this period, Vieng Xai, Vang Vieng, and the *Pak Ou* caves were identified as sites with potential for cave-based ecotourism and community-based tourism for pro-poor and economic development projects.

Anthropological or sociological research on the human use of caves and karst by modern Lao and ethnic populations also remained largely overlooked during the 2000s. Anthropological and ethno-archaeological research on continuity in cave use and the modern use of caves throughout tropical Southeast Asia is considered limited (Pannell and O'Connor 2005), with greater attention being placed on the prehistoric human use of caves and the role of caves in past social trends and transitions (Barker et al. 2005). In the Lao PDR, a number of minor studies, however, did illustrate the importance of particular caves. Ethnographic accounts of the Vieng Xai caves indicate they are symbolically important to the modern Lao state and provide the basis for a narrative interpretation of their political development and legitimacy (High 2007). A socio-cultural study in Savannakhet Province reported the use of caves in religious practices and their role within mythic and spiritual beliefs by Buddhist and ethnic groups residing there (Chamberlain 2007). In southern and central Lao PDR, research highlighted how human populations utilized caves and karst in subsistence and economic-based activities via community-based fisheries management practices (Baird 2006; Shoemaker et al. 2001).

Since 2009, comprehensive research has begun to illustrate the nationwide distribution, geological and geomorphological variation, unique biodiversity and human use and meaning attached to or associated with caves and karst (Kiernan 2009). This research also indicates the important economic, subsistence and spiritual roles that caves and karst can play for human populations in the Lao PDR, and the anthropogenic impact on cave and karst. In more isolated regions of northern Lao PDR, such as the Nam Ou Valley, caves and karst are incorporated within land tenure systems and economic and subsistence-based activities like agriculture, wildlife harvesting and gold-panning (Kiernan 2011; 2013). In locations

³ <http://www.laoscaveproject.de/>

⁴ For more information on caving groups and societies in the Lao PDR see: <http://laos.eegc.org/liens.php>

such as the Nam Ou, human activities, including land-use changes through agriculture, road construction and mining and tourist enterprises, are reported to be having an impact on geodiversity, biodiversity and the cultural values of cave and karst in the region (Kiernan 2012; 2013). The impact of economic development and social practices in this and other regions nationwide is identified as posing potential problems for the sustainability of cave and karst environments, both now and in the future. Research indicates the need to identify and prioritize specific heritage values in cave and karst environments, particularly the role of karst as a naturally functioning system with unique geodiversity. Regulated management practices were also suggested in order to sustain caves and the natural and cultural heritage values they contain and support into the future (Kiernan 2011; 2013).

Identified Natural Value of and Human Uses for Cave and Karst in the Lao PDR

Prehistoric Cave and Karst Use

The earliest documented dates for human occupation in the Lao PDR come from caves. Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, Houaphanh and Khammouane have the earliest recorded dates for prehistoric cave use, based on the number of caves and amount of karst in these provinces, and because most research has tended to focus on these provinces. The earliest dates for their use by humans in the Lao PDR are from Vientiane Province, where a human fossil (skeleton) buried in *Tham Pa Ling* has been dated between 46,000 and 51,000 years ago (LiveScience 2013). There has been criticism of the consistency of the stratigraphic dating of this fossil, but the age of the fossil has been confirmed and represents the earliest date of human occupation in the nation (Demeter et al. 2012), making this one of the earliest date for anatomically modern humans in mainland Southeast Asia (Higham 2012). Evidence does suggest, however, that humans began populating the area now included within the Lao PDR more consistently during the Mesolithic period or shortly after this time, about 20,000 years ago. Caves were also used regularly up to the Bronze Age, and were used consistently during the Iron Age for habitation and for mortuary practices (Higham 2002).

In Houaphanh Province, research in *Tham Pong* has reported Mesolithic-period human activity, with evidence of older human remains also discovered there. *Tham Pong* also includes a lower Neolithic burial site containing an adult buried on its back (Mouret 2004). In Khammouane Province, a high density of karst and associated caves reveal burial activity from the Upper Neolithic through to the late Iron Age, or around 400 BC. In *Tham Hang South* up to six human burials dated to the Neolithic period were recorded and are associated with pottery and ash blankets (Mouret 2004). Findings from Khammouane indicate the potential for the earliest prehistoric activity in the nation, with results from excavations in *Tham Hang* demonstrating that the cave and an associated rockshelter were occupied during the late Pleistocene to early Holocene periods (Demeter et al. 2009).

Luang Phrabang Province contains many caves with associated human activity dating from between 13,000 BP and the present (MMAP 2010). It is believed that caves in Luang Phrabang were used as part of a broader pattern of movement and trade between peoples and cultures along the Mekong and its tributaries (MMAP 2010). In *Tham Vang Ta Leow*, over 6,000 Hoabinhian stone cores and flakes were excavated, with two distinct periods of use and occupation identified. *Phou Pha*

Khao was occupied from at least the early to middle Holocene period and then again during the Iron Age. Up to six burial sites were cut through the initial occupation layer around 130-350 AD. Over 2,000 stone tools and almost 400 potsherds were found in association with the excavation (MMAP 2009). Human occupation in *Tham Hao Phou* dates from around 4,500 to 3,500 BP over two distinct occupations. Considered a late Hoabinhian occupation, this cave supported either a large population or use of the cave that spanned a long time period. A number of Iron Age burials cut through the Hoabinhian layer at around 2,840 to 1,340 BP and objects from the graves included pottery, bronze objects, iron implements and stone and glass beads. *Tham Nang An* is dated to approximately 1,000 BP, and contained a jar burial with human and animal bones and three axe/adzes inside. The rockshelter associated with *Tham Nang An* exhibited an occupation sequence similar to *Tham Hau Pu*, with initial occupation by Hoabinhian hunters and gatherers followed by a secondary occupation by Iron Age agricultural communities (Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood 2000).

At *Tham An Ma*, located close to the city of Luang Phrabang, research has identified a prehistoric occupation in the cave possibly dating to 13,000 BP (MMAP 2010). This cave also contains numerous Iron Age burials with a later sequence of secondary burials. A ceramic jar burial with up to three human skeletons was found in the cave, dated from between 600 AD and 500 BC. The remains of two other pottery vessels, stone tools, and hearths were also found in association with this burial and in other layers in the cave. A white disc found in it resembles those found in the Plain of Jars, indicating possible links to that region during the Iron Age.

In Xieng Khouang Province, only one (unnamed) cave had been excavated during the 1930s, by Madeleine Colani. Colani excavated the cave in association with broader excavation work at the central site of the Plain Of Jars, near a village named Ban Ang (Kallen 2004). The cave entrance had been enlarged by humans and two holes in the cave roof were considered human made and used as chimneys. Colani suggests the cave functioned as a crematorium, and hypothesizes that the cave was used for funerary rites, supporting the theory that the Plain of Jars was a crematorium and was associated with a wider regional society. Nonetheless, mystery still surrounds the origin of the people who built this complex and the use of these sites, including the cave, and local legend regarding the origins and use of the jars differs from Colani's theory (Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood 2000).

Historical and Buddhist Period Cave and Karst Use

In its early, historical period, what is today Laos was associated with the 'Indianization' of the region, the movement of *Tai* speaking people into the region and the development of state societies that included the rapid growth of Buddhism. The earliest recorded dates for the Buddhist use of caves in the region are in northern Thailand during the 15th and 16th centuries (Sidisunthorn et al. 2006). In the Lao PDR, the earliest recorded dates for the use of caves by Buddhists are in the Luang Phrabang region during the 16th century. However, Buddhism is recognized for its legitimizing influence in early state societies in what is today Laos since the 14th century, particularly around Luang Phrabang (Stuart-Fox 1986), and the use of caves for religious purposes by Lao royalty, monks, and lay people was reported to continue around Luang Phrabang over many centuries.

The *Pak Ou* caves in Luang Phrabang were transformed for use in Buddhist religious practices as far back as the 16th century, and constitute the oldest known

use of caves by Buddhists in the Lao PDR. Located on the west bank of the Mekong River, the cave complex has two chambers - one lower chamber, *Tham Ting*, and an upper chamber, *Tham Theung*. As many as 4,000 statues of the Buddha were housed in *Tham Ting* in the 1990s and represented the various positions and postures of the Buddha (e.g., standing, sitting or lying). These statues were set atop a platform constructed of brick. *Tham Theung* also contained a large stupa inside the cave chamber with an elaborate wooden door and an entry to the stupa (Egloff 1998; 2003).

Tham Ting was used by the Luang Phrabang royal family and for the extended lay practice of Buddhism in Luang Phrabang. The cave is linked to the rituals and symbolic process of Buddhism and performed an important function for the incorporation of the royal patronage of Luang Phrabang in coronation ceremonies, having been used for religious pilgrimage and in other uses by the royal family. The King of Luang Prabang is reported to have travelled regularly to *Tham Ting* to perform ceremonies for public demonstration, an important ceremonial legitimization of the relationship between Buddhism and royal patronage in the old kingdom (Egloff 1998). Other caves in Luang Phrabang Province, such as *Tham An Ma*, have large artistic murals depicting images of the Buddha or meditating monks that cover the cave or grotto walls. The earliest dates of these paintings are not known to the author, and the symbolism or use of these paintings is also unknown. Nonetheless, evidence from the *Pak Ou* caves and *Tham An Ma* indicate Buddhist cave use in this part of the Lao PDR from between the 16th and 21st centuries.

In southern Lao PDR, Vat Phou in Champasak Province contains a sandstone rockshelter and overhangs on the slopes of *Phou Kao* (Kao Mountain). For centuries, caves were reportedly used for meditation, and some were inscribed with symbolic religious inscriptions and iconography. Directly above the main sanctuary at Vat Phou is *Tham Lek*, an overhang that contains two inscriptions in Sanskrit and Khmer dating to the 7th and 8th centuries AD. The sandstone rockshelters and overhangs were reported to have been used in conjunction with and within the broader functions of the Khmer society of Champasak, including their incorporation into religious structures and ceremony and the natural elements of the sacred city that developed along the banks of the Mekong River from the 5th century AD (Government of Lao PDR 1999).

Pre-Buddhist spiritual beliefs about caves in what is now Laos have also been recorded in historical reports but are not commonly reported more widely. Overall specific information about the use and meaning of caves by pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist ethnic groups with animistic beliefs is very limited, and such beliefs and practices are much less recognised or understood than those of Buddhists. Non-Buddhist beliefs and practices incorporating caves include creation myths and legends of ancestral or other mythical beings. At *Pak Ou*, for example, *Tham Ting* was reported to be the location for a river spirit (referred to as *phi*) that was venerated by local people before the arrival of Buddhism sometime around the 14th century. Upon the arrival of Buddhism, and officiating it as the state religion during that century, the cultures that worshiped *phi* were urged to join their beliefs with those of Buddhism (Egloff 1998).

Post-Historical Religious and Spiritual Use of Cave and Karst

Caves and karst continued to be utilised for religious and spiritual purposes by ethnic Lao and those from other ethnic groups nationwide. Buddhist and

animistic uses of caves for spiritual purposes continue to the present day (Kiernan 2009). The *Pak Ou* caves are still used by Lao people as a Buddhist shrine (Kiernan 2010a; 2010b; 2011) and ritual practices by the local community include the offering of incense and flowers (Johnson 1997). Since the mid-1990s, there have been ongoing efforts to protect and preserve the Buddhist integrity of this and other cave sites by the Lao government, local monks and communities. The aim is to preserve and promote the spiritual value and historical material culture of Buddhism for the purpose of mediation, local worship and tourism (Egloff 1998; 2003; Kiernan 2009; 2011; 2013). However, the extent to which Buddhist monks following the Theravada tradition in the Lao PDR utilize caves for meditation and other rituals and rites is unclear. It is also not known whether Buddhist forest cave monasteries or ‘sacred caves’ are still active, as they are in neighbouring Thailand (Sidisunthorn et al. 2006).

Caves continue to be identified as important places for various ethnic groups in the Lao PDR and some ethnic groups have been reported to incorporate caves and karst within cosmological belief structures and mythical narratives. In Savannakhet Province, some caves provide a residence or locality for ancestral and forest spirits of some Mon-Khmer language-speaking groups. Ancestral and other spirits often reside in caves and also live in forests, mountains and rice fields. These spirits are regarded by ethnic Brou people as ‘guardians’ of the places and function as ‘protectors’ of local clan groups. Spirits that reside in caves are called upon for ceremonies throughout the lunar and agrarian calendar year. Villagers propitiate spirits regularly to keep their families and their villages healthy and their crops prosperous (Chamberlain 2007; 2010). In Luang Namtha Province, the *Vieng Phouka* karst is the location of an annual ceremony in January in which a local shaman entices large fish from the cave to provide a feast for those present at the ritual (Kiernan 2009).



Photo 2: Khamtay Siphandon chairs an administration meeting in a cave shelter in Vieng Xay, Houaphan Province, during the American War period (LNTA 2014)



Photo 3: Caves in the Vieng Xai area were modified to accommodate for schools and revolutionary seminars during the American War period (LNTA 2014)

American War (1965-1973): Use and Impacts on Caves and Karst

The use of caves during periods of conflict can be traced back to the Lang Xang period, hundreds of years ago. However, wartime impacts on caves during the 20th century, particularly between 1965 and 1973, had a far more noticeable and long-lasting influence on both the physical condition of caves and karst and on how caves came to be used and valued by Lao people (Kiernan 2010b; 2012). Many caves in Xaignabouly, Luang Phrabang, Xieng Khouang, Houaphanh, Vientiane (Kiernan 2009) and Savannakhet provinces (Pholsena 2010) were heavily impacted during the Second Indochina War. Evidence of heavy bombing raids by US forces and forced wartime occupation of these and other caves has been preserved in both the physical structure of many caves and the material and physical objects left behind from the conflict (Kiernan 2009). Many caves were modified by revolutionary forces to accommodate guards and soldiers, were transformed into living quarters and offices and were also modified for use as training and re-education centers. Some caves in Vieng Xai even had human-made interconnecting tunnels, hospitals and a cinema built into them (see Photos 2, 3 and 4) (High 2007; Kiernan 2010b).

Caves became essential semi-permanent shelters for villagers who lived along the eastern border with Vietnam to avoid air-bombing raids (High 2007). Pathet Lao leaders were also forced into caves during the war, and in the Vieng Xai region, they eventually centered their operational command there (Stuart-Fox 1997). After a cease-fire was called between the American and Vietnamese governments in 1973, the headquarters of the Pathet Lao temporarily shifted and was established adjacent to the caves, continuing to operate in newly built

administration centers outside the caves (High 2007). The experience of living in caves during the American War still sits firmly in the memories of many Lao people around the nation (Pholsena 2010). The caves at Vieng Xai are a memorial site protected under national heritage legislation as a significant heritage site based on their wartime legacy and contribution to national development, with Houaphanh Province and the caves increasingly promoted by the Lao National Tourist Authority (LNTA) as ‘the birthplace of Laos’ (Manivong 2011). In recent years the Vieng Xai caves have become a major tourist attraction for their wartime legacy and are increasingly considered a location for ‘dark tourism.’

Subsistence and the Economic Use of Cave and Karst

Cave and karst environments have played an important role in local economic and subsistence activities for many rural people in the Lao PDR, and were important places in prehistoric and hunter-gatherer lifeways (Higham 2012). Karst water catchments are recognized for providing human populations with suitable environments for growing wet rice and for swidden cultivation, and in general, karst provides wild food resources and supports intermittent seasonal occupation for hunting and gathering purposes (Kiernan 2011) (see Photo 5).



Photo 5: A village situated within a karst landscape in Khammouane Province (Photo: Nicholas Roberts)



Photo 4: Caves in Vieng Xai also provided medical services for civilians and soldiers during the American War period (LNTA 2014)

Caves and karst areas associated with hydrological systems are recognised as supporting subsistence-based activities for rural populations, with caves and karst often incorporated into local land tenure systems (Kiernan 2013). In Khammouane Province, some caves provide refuge for fish in dry-season pools until the caves are flooded out again by monsoon rains. Young fish are looked after by local villagers in the dry season and brooding stocks are not

eaten by locals during this time (Baird 2006; Shoemaker et al. 2001). In the Nam Ou Valley in Luang Phrabang Province, the Nam Ou River and its tributaries are used for fishing, gold panning and even micro-hydroelectricity generation by villagers (Kiernan 2013). *Tham Pakeo* is used for harvesting bats for food and also possibly for trade. Other caves, such as *Tham Pasang*, are reportedly used as a temporary habitation for fisherman, with structures being built in a cave entrance to support their intermittent occupation (Kiernan 2011). Site-specific research is limited, however, and the long-term or contemporary use and value of caves and karst for subsistence and economic purposes is not well known.

Tourist Cave and Karst Uses

International tourism in the Lao PDR was officiated around 1989 (Yamauchi and Lee 1999), however it was not until 1996 that restrictions on obtaining tourist visas for foreigners eased (Schipani and Marris 2002). Since the mid-1990s, visitor numbers and revenue raised from tourism have become a major component of the Lao economy.⁵ Tourism has become an increasingly important component of development policy, providing important economic revenue at the national level, and enabling an alternative path to economic development and poverty reduction in many rural and remote communities of the Lao PDR (Harrison and Schipani 2007; 2009; Suntikul 2011). The economic value of caves and karst as tourist destinations was identified across a number of locations nationwide from the late 1990s. Some of these locations included *Pak Ou* in Luang Phrabang (Egloff 2003), the Vieng Phoukha to Muang Sing region in Luang Namtha (Lyttleton and Allcock 2002) and at Vieng Xai in Houaphanh Province (Suntikul et al. 2009). The Nam Ha Ecotourism Project (NHEP) in Luang Namtha Province began in 1999 and was one of the first major tourism projects in the Lao PDR (Schipani & Marris 2002). NHEP incorporates a variety of caves as destinations for tourists among other natural and cultural heritage destinations (Harrison and Shipani 2007). The NHEP has been the longest-running and most successful project of this type and continues to provide economic benefits for communities engaged in the project (Equator Initiative 2012; Harrison and Shipani 2007; Schipani 2006).

By 2012, over half of tourists visiting the Lao PDR visited 'natural' sites, including caves, with the remaining tourist destinations either cultural or historical sites (Lao Statistics Bureau 2012). The most popular locations visited by international tourists include *Pak Ou* in Luang Phrabang, the Vieng Xai caves in Houaphanh, and the caves at Vang Vieng in Vientiane Province (Harrison and Schipani 2009). The LNTA, through support from international agencies, aims to protect and promote the nation's environmental and cultural resources through sustainable social and economic development, including tourism (Harrison and Schipani 2009; Kiernan 2011; UNESCO 2008). However, recent reports across a number of locations nationwide indicate that damage to caves, karst and other ecological and culturally valued sites is occurring through tourist operations (Kiernan 2011; 2013). Other reports highlight a need to link the economic and social development goals of the Lao government and private tourism operators with those of local communities engaged in community-based tourist operations (Suntikul 20011; Suntikul et al. 2009; 2010). Economic investment in structural and

⁵ Between 1995 and 2012, the Lao Statistics Bureau (2012) reported that annual tourist numbers increased exponentially from 346,460 people to 3,330,072 people, with annual revenue from tourism also increasing exponentially from US \$24.74 million to US \$513.58 million over the same period.

regulatory procedures is required to prevent damage to the ecological and cultural heritage of caves, both now and in the future, and to achieve environmental sustainability and ongoing and effective community economic and social development (Harrison and Schipani 2009).

Use, Management and Conservation of Caves and Karst: Prospects and Challenges



Photo 6: Entrance to *Tham Pakou*. Savannakhet Province (Photo: Nicholas Roberts)

Many caves and much of the karst in the Lao PDR can be considered 'living places' that contain multiple, cross-cutting and often competing past and present values, being actively incorporated within an ideological and geographical landscape (Pannell and O'Connor 2005). This is reflected through the variety of uses and values caves have had in the past, and the uses and values they continue to have as natural places that support local and national cultural traditions (see Photos 6, 7, 8 and 9) (Kiernan 2009; Latinis and Stark 2005; Sidisunthorn et al. 2006). Increasingly, modernity is placing pressure on caves to be self-supporting as ecological places in their own right, while also relying on their capacity to support existing traditional uses and values amid recent social changes and economic development activities. The uses and values found in caves and karst in the Lao PDR have become multifarious and often compete with each other, with new uses

and values superceding or replacing the old. In many instances, people are ascribing new uses and values to caves, with older uses and values as the basis from which they perceive, use or wish to use caves, and increasingly there is a desire to obtain something from a cave (Sidisunthorn et al. 2006). Caves are becoming increasingly useful and valued by non-local Lao or ethnic minorities, the Lao government, developers, tourists, and researchers (see Table 1, next page).

Table 1: Examples of Uses of Caves and Karst in the Lao PDR.

| Place Name | Location | Identified Prehistoric Use | Identified Historical Use | Identified Contemporary Use | Management or Protective Framework | Management or Regulatory Bodies | Heritage Recognition | Identified Current and Potential Heritage Issues |
|-------------------------|------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|--|--|
| Tam Ting (Pac Ou Caves) | Luang Prabang Province | None | Location for local phi cult prior to the introduction of Buddhism; Buddhist temple & location of Buddhist religious use since 16 th Century | Tourism; Archaeological research; Provincial, district and village-level economic development; Village-level economic & subsistence practices | Not known. Adjacent to the World Heritage Town of Luang Prabang | UNESCO; Lao National Government; Provincial, district and village-level | Historical (<i>national</i>) and Cultural (<i>langthab</i>) | Limited and under-resourced management and unregulated tourism has disturbed natural and cultural values, increasing risk of theft and vandalism of cultural materials (Buddha Statues) and damage or loss of prehistoric and historical cultural heritage materials and knowledge |
| Tam Hang Rockshelter | Houaphanh Province | Anatomically Modern Human Burials; Extinct Mammal Fauna | Cave explored and excavated by Fromaget during mid-to-late 19 th century | Scientific research for Archaeology and Palaeontology; Provincial, district and village-level economic development | Not known. (Ongoing research in archaeology and palaeontology) | Not Known | Not Known | Limited or lack of identified ongoing protective measures increases the risk of disturbance and/or destruction of the cave rock shelter and the loss of prehistoric/ historical material heritage. Increased risk of theft to cultural and natural heritage, artefacts and objects |
| Vieng Xai Caves | Houaphanh Province | None | Headquarters of Pathet Lao and centre for Lao resistance during the American War Period (1965-1973) | Tourism; Archaeology; National, provincial, district and village-level economic development practices | Lao PDR Law on National Heritage (2005) | LNTA; UNWTO; ADR; other NGO; Deakin University (Australia); Provincial, district and village-level | National Historic Heritage Listed Site | Unsustainable or unregulated tourism infrastructure and tourism activities increases risk of damage to the cultural and natural heritage of caves. Safeguarding cave heritage and community values and knowledge of caves is required for sustainable cave management and local economic development |
| Nam Ha Region | Luang Namtha Province | None | Caves used by upland ethnic groups for economic, religious use and spiritual purposes | Tourism; Provincial, district and village-level economic development; Village-level economic, subsistence use, and spiritual beliefs and practices | National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA) | DAPQ; UNESCO; LNTA; NGO; Provincial, district and village-level | Natural (<i>biological</i>) and Cultural (<i>langthab</i>) | Illegal logging, agricultural expansion, roads development and unregulated tourism threaten biodiversity values and cultural/natural heritage of cave and karst. Safeguarding heritage and community values and knowledge of caves is required for sustainable cave management and local economic development |
| Hin Namno | Khammouane Province | None | Historical material and cultural activities in caves located within the NBCA have been identified through archaeological studies | Tourism; Provincial, district and village-level economic development; Village-level economic, subsistence use, and spiritual beliefs and practices | National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA) | LNTA; DAPQ; WWF; other NGO; Provincial, district and village-level | Natural (<i>biological</i>) & Cultural (<i>langthab</i> & <i>intangible</i>) | Enforcing NBCA regulation is required to prevent illegal natural resource use, for sustainable tourism development and future village-level expansion or resettlement. Ongoing biodiversity and social impact assessments and archaeological research is required to identify and manage local heritage values |

The variety of uses for and values represented by caves and karst to some extent meet all of the categories required for national heritage protection, including natural heritage, historical heritage, and tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The Lao *Law on National Heritage*, introduced in 2005, provides the legislative framework for the protection of natural, cultural and historical heritage nationwide, recognizing significance on local, national or international levels (National Assembly 2005). Even though there is a provision for this within Lao heritage legislation, a low percentage of caves and karst are identified and protected nationwide, including in existing heritage management frameworks. Further, heritage management irregularly plans for or promotes multi-heritage uses and values of caves or karst. As has been identified by other research, when heritage values in caves or karst are not identified or managed appropriately, cave and karst environments and heritage values become at risk for



Photo 7: Decaying ancient wooden statues of the Buddha in a natural shrine at the rear of *Tham Pakou*, Savannakhet Province (Photo: Nicholas Roberts)



Photo 8: Material residue from cave use during the American War period. These include a broken glass syringe and a button from a military uniform. *Tham Pakou*, Savannakhet Province (Photo: Nicholas Roberts)

damage or degradation (Day 2011; Day and Urich 2000; Kiernan 2009; 2011; 2013; Lyttleton and Allcock 2002). When assessing its role, it can also be argued that heritage legislation and the use of heritage practices are part of nationwide social economic development initiatives (Sourya et al. 2005). This generates three questions: Why is heritage managed and protected? For what is heritage managed and protected? Who decides what type heritage is managed and protected?

A number of factors underlie these questions. The Lao PDR has limited financial and human resources or technological capacity and training to apply singular or even various and often overlapping natural, cultural and historical uses for and values associated with caves into frameworks for management and conservation (Kiernan 2009). Often heritage management practices



Photo 9: An offering of rice on a cave stalagmite made by local villagers to ancestral spirits. *Tham Pakou*, Savannakhet Province (Photos: Nicholas Roberts)

fail due to a breakdown in communication between village, district, provincial and national agencies, which each have the responsibility, but not the training or capacity, to protect and promote heritage sites. Often the failure to fully understand, interpret and apply heritage and other legislation at one or more of these officiating levels occurs concurrently. In the Nam Ha National Protected Area, for example, a National Protected Area Management Unit (NPAMU) has been developed. Its objective is to monitor and manage legal and illegal development activity within the



Photo 10: Prehistoric and historic artefacts are sold to tourists at street markets in Luang Phrabang. Some of these objects were looted from caves located nearby (Photo: Nicholas Roberts)

park. Protected area legislation and multi-level management systems, however, are unable to prevent illegal logging and peri-urban expansion, and destructive agricultural practices continue to damage and destroy significant natural heritage, including caves (UNESCO 2008). Cultural heritage items and sites are also being damaged, destroyed and looted by the same processes (see Photo 10). In Sepon, Savannakhet Province, cultural heritage management planning has been developed alongside mining activities to promote the cultural heritage of local communities and their natural heritage, including caves (Mayes and Chang 2013). However, minimal evidence of heritage-based outcomes has been reported by the mining operation outside of media releases. It thus cannot be established if other mines are being regulated to manage and preserve community values and protect significant natural environments like cave and karst in management planning or during operations, a worrying situation given the increase in large-scale mining nationwide (High 2010).

History has strongly influenced the development of current heritage management in the Lao PDR, with the root of modern heritage management practices tracing back to French scientific research during the 19th century (Kallen and Karlstrom 2010). The use of archaeology, and a focus on tangible and scientific practice in the past, has been reinforced since the 1990s by international influences emerging in Lao national heritage training and programs. Following the tradition of international influence, the Lao *Law on National Heritage* passed in 2005 and is built off ICOMOS and UNESCO principles and protocols of heritage management. Applying 'European' values of heritage conservation and management in non-Western nations has long been considered problematic because "different historical and philosophical perspectives towards authenticity, spirituality and historical significance" consider and value heritage differently and apply different motivations and strategies for management (Winter 2014: 125). More often than not, European heritage values and practices generate conflict with existing traditional ideology and management practices if they are applied without the consideration or consent of local community deliberations on 'heritage' (Smith 2007). As a result, archaeology, sites, buildings and structures take precedence over both natural heritage and intangible heritage. Cave geodiversity and biodiversity, and intangible values like myth, music and historical narratives are not identified or protected as 'heritage' as regularly as tangible structures or sites. The Lao PDR has no formal inventory of the nation's intangible cultural heritage and no element of intangible cultural heritage is inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List (UNESCO 2012).

Applying international heritage management and conservation values like *preservation* to the Lao PDR is considered a "conflict in terms" (Karlstrom 2005: 339), where Buddhist ideology and value structures that promote a nonmaterial, impermanent attitude to material things pervades social thought and action. Buddhist temples and sacred objects used for making merit enable social practices important to individuals in the Buddhist culture, where material things can be sacred objects that contain spirits or hold affective powers. Conscious decay or destruction of physical structures and items, including temples, is accepted and at times ritually practiced, depending on the symbolic or representative value that material structure or item contains (Karlstrom 2005). This issue has been encountered in Luang Phrabang, where UNESCO practitioners were considered by some to be insensitive to local cultural values during the planning of infrastructure and economic development for the World Heritage town. Officials reportedly

overlooked local interpretations of how space is used, constructed and made meaningful, and local aspirations for sustaining and developing the towns 'authenticity' during heritage planning (Suntikul 2011). As a result, conflict between local communities and heritage planners continues over the use, management and conservation of buildings, temples and other places in Luang Phrabang.

Lessons can also be learned from the *Pak Ou* caves (*Tham Ting*) in Luang Phrabang Province, where efforts to conserve and restore Buddhist shrines and material structures in the caves have been ongoing since 1992 (Egloff 1998; Egloff 2003; Johnson 1997; UNESCO 2004). The restoration project, coordinated between the Lao government, international specialists and the local community, has struggled to manage or promote the heritage values in the caves effectively, with relations between project groups breaking down at times in disagreement over management and conservation methods (Egloff 1998; 2003). The local community used these caves before 1997, and has increasingly shared the use of the caves with heritage professionals and a growing number of tourists. Inadequate safeguarding of heritage materials still occurs, and has allowed vandalism and looting of Buddha images within the caves to persist. Poorly regulated tourism and visitor management at the caves has also led to environmental impacts on soil resources in some locations (Kiernan 2011). The question of who should be responsible for regular maintenance of tourist-based infrastructure remains open. Revenue earned through tourism at the caves is not fully reimbursed to the local community or reinvested to maintain tourist facilities. The lack of investment in infrastructure to maintain the natural values and the cultural infrastructure of the caves has reportedly created negative experiences for locals and tourists alike (Egloff 2003; Kiernan 2011; UNESCO 2004).

An ongoing issue for managing Lao heritage is the use of heritage by the government to promote or 'authorize' history for social and political control. As a political tool, heritage is used to endorse or authenticate nationalistic values and regulate a national social identity, generally through the promotion of specific people, sites, monuments and texts (Tappe 2013). This interpretation of heritage denies its other forms and its other significant values and meanings, including historical events in Lao history and contemporary society, and risks the loss or destruction of other forms of heritage through neglect or the denial of their significance. The authorisation of Houaphanh Province and the caves at Vieng Xai as the 'birthplace of the Lao PDR' by the LNTA is an example of this. These caves are among the few cave sites (the other is *Pak Ou*) protected under national heritage legislation, with their Second Indochina War history used to promote tourism and nationalism. A ceremony is now held there annually to commemorate the revolution and the citizens who died in the 'revolutionary struggle' (AsiaOne 2014). In much the same way, the Lao Government promotes and manages historical Buddhist values and Buddhist cave use as national heritage. Buddhist caves often contain what legislation describes as 'national treasures'—principally temples, standing Buddhist sculptures and statues made of wood, clay, silver and gold. The discourse of the *Pak Ou* caves legitimates a tangible link between the modern Lao polity and the Lang Xang Kingdom that reigned in the area beginning in the 14th century. Other values not identified as heritage at the caves include the ancient belief in a river monster that was worshipped prior to the introduction of Buddhism in the region, and current beliefs in spirits (*phi*) including the worship of spirits by the *Pak Ou* community (Egloff 1998).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the heritage management of caves and karst in the Lao PDR is contending with rapid economic development practices that have an impact on natural heritage, tangible places and intangible cultural traditions and practices nationwide. The Lao economy is increasingly dependent on natural resource extraction and the manipulation of the environment to generate revenue, with natural resources by far the largest of all goods and services exported by the country in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). Growing national and regional demand for natural commodities from extractive industries like logging, mining and energy production from hydroelectric dams contributes greatly to the development of these industries. In 2011, total exports from natural-resource industries contributed 27 percent of GDP in the Lao PDR, increasing from 5 percent of GDP in 1999 and replacing agricultural production, which contributed 57 percent of GDP in 2005, providing the highest contribution to GDP (Menon and War 2013). In 2007, forest loss was occurring at a slow rate in the Lao PDR compared to other Southeast Asian nations. Adding to these pressures, however, were population growth, poverty and illegal logging, rendering already protected areas seriously imperilled (Laurance 2007). There is very little, if any, documentation of whether natural resource development is having an effect on caves and karst (see Photo 11). Communities in some rural and remote locations are moving off of traditional land and away from traditional subsistence and economic activity because of the pressure resulting from resource development activities and new cash-crop agricultural projects (Rigg 2006).

In light of the view that many caves are 'living places,' pro-poor and community-based tourism projects are currently an alternative that is arguably more sustainable for communities and the environment than is mining, logging and dam construction. It is possible to promote tourism while achieving environmental protection and sustainable economic benefits in remote communities. Nonetheless,



Photo 11: Mining haul roads encroaching on *Tham Bing* (top and center of picture) in Savannahket Province. A forested buffer-zone has been implemented to safeguard the natural and cultural values of the cave from mining-based impacts (Photos: Nicholas Roberts)

research indicates that more work is required to improve the visitor experience for tourists and the role of communities in cave-based tourism to make such tourist operations profitable and sustainable. In Vieng Xai (Suntikul et al. 2009; Suntikul et al. 2010) and Vang Vieng (Rogers 2009), tourists and community members were questioned about their tourism experiences. At Vang Vieng, visitors reported frustration and disappointment in the lack of access to caves and in the signage or interpretation at 'tourist' cave sites when visiting these areas. Local communities at Vang Vieng (Rogers 2009) and Vieng Xai (Suntikul et al. 2010) have expressed a clear interest in engaging with the tourist industry, but they also acknowledge that they have little understanding of what tourists want or how to provide for tourist needs. Communities in Vieng Xai have expressed the desire to control tourism within the community through local business and employment, stating that the Lao government and trusted private-sector organizations should provide financial and structural development and training to community members (Suntikul et al. 2010).

To be successful, community-based or ecotourism projects may require as much support as the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project (UNESCO-NTA 2004), which has been substantially assisted both structurally and economically by the Lao government and foreign donors since 1999. Regulating private-sector, pro-poor tourism and donor-assisted, community-based tourism is both a current issue and one that will be important in the future in order to manage the sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage sites like caves and karst and to develop a tourist infrastructure that produces sustainable economic outcomes for communities (Harrison and Schipani 2007; 2009). Natural-resource sustainability will be perhaps the most critical factor in sustaining tourist projects (Lin and Guzman 2007; Manivong and Sipaasueth 2007), because as the tourism industry will continue to be highly dependent on natural and cultural heritage resources like cave and karst, it will be essential to minimize the risks to these assets and resources.

Conclusions

Cave and karst environments are natural features in their own right, and they play an important role in supporting biodiversity and communities in the Lao PDR, particularly those in remote regions. The Lao PDR is currently undergoing rapid economic development, and how cave and karst environments adapt to changing social and economic circumstances remains to be seen. Modernization and globalization have also brought new values and meaning to karst landscapes and the caves they contain, creating competition for ownership and control of these places, their resources and their local communities. To manage these transitions and minimize impacts on specific natural and cultural resources like caves, heritage management will need to be performed with a greater degree of rigor and flexibility than is currently the case. There is a need for ongoing training and capacity building within Lao government departments to meet current and future challenges. Stronger multi-level heritage protection, including ongoing training and capacity development, across Lao government departments will also be required. Identifying localized values and uses of caves and karst and incorporating these into the emerging and competing uses and meanings in heritage management practices is essential to sustaining natural and cultural diversity. Ongoing commitments to nature conservation and community development practices through sustainable projects that support economic development, including tourism, could be part of a

long-term strategy to support cave preservation while fostering community development, particularly for remote communities. This will require structural and financial input from Lao government agencies and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and cooperation with tourists—and most importantly from local community members, who in many instances are the custodians of caves and karst and who hold the knowledge to sustain these natural places and make them culturally significant.

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Listening to Women Fishers on the Sekong River: Fostering Resilience in Village Fishery Co-Management

Charlotte Moser

Abstract

The accelerated economic development of landlocked Laos, combined with extreme climate variables, points to dramatic transformations in subsistence fisheries on its rivers. In the country's first Fisheries Law, adopted in 2009, co-management of village fisheries is required as a way to promote sustainable development at a local level. The co-management model, however, does not stipulate participation by women fishers, important stakeholders who make up almost one-half of all Lao fishers and whose work contributes directly to family nutrition and well-being. Based on fieldwork conducted in fishing villages on the Sekong River in southern Laos in 2013, this paper takes an ecosystems approach to discuss how the country can build resilience and social cohesion into fisheries by incorporating women and their knowledge into village fishery management. In the process, the health of river ecosystems and food security will improve, while women fishers will acquire new skills to help them avoid 'poverty traps.'

Introduction

The concept of resilience is central to effective adaptive management of ecosystems. Developed by ecologist C.S. "Buzz" Holling in the 1970s as a theory for managing complex ecosystems, resilience theory suggests that an ecosystem is resilient if it has the ability to remain cohesive during periods of extreme perturbations or what are called 'shocks' (Holling 1973). Rather than "bouncing back" to a former equilibrium, an ecosystem is resilient if it can absorb changes in internal and external variables and still persist, albeit in a somewhat different yet robust form. As a manager of natural resources, Holling wrote that long-term expectations about agricultural productivity, for instance, may even 'fragilize' an ecosystem by undermining complex factors that support the resilience of the system as a whole, potentially leading to its eventual decline or collapse. Now widely applied as a risk management tool by many sectors focused on long-term security (in finance and urban planning, for example), the resilience framework remains particularly relevant to complex agricultural systems where biodiversity is threatened by development and by global phenomena such as climate change. Holling introduced the concept of adaptive management for ecosystems as a practical application of resilience theory. A key component of the adaptive management concept is the acquisition of new knowledge through continual learning to prepare citizens living within an ecosystem to absorb the inevitability of change without losing cultural coherency.

A management approach based on resilience...would emphasize the need to keep options open, [...] and the need to emphasize heterogeneity. Flowing from this would be not the presumption of sufficient knowledge, but the

recognition of our ignorance: not the assumption that future events are expected, but that they will be unexpected. The resilience framework can accommodate this shift in perspective, for it does not require a precise capacity to predict the future, but only a qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they may take. (Holling 1973: 21)

Co-management of ecosystems has evolved as an effective adaptive management methodology that promotes sustainable development premised on the concept of resilience (Berkes 2004; Charles 2004; Olsen et al. 2004; Lebel et al. 2006; Arthur et al. 2012). Highlighting the need to take all stakeholders into account in managing natural resources, co-management strengthens the implications of participatory governance by promoting shared goals and communal values in preserving an ecosystem (Jentoft et al. 1998; Gutierrez 2012). Under this model, local or regional government is the co-manager of natural resources with local users, and so some level of decentralization of government is necessary for co-management to exist (Berkes 2004; Folke et al. 2007). In co-management, the communicative and collaborative process through which regulations are formed—who participates, how debates are structured, how knowledge is employed, how conflicts of interest are addressed, and how agreements are reached—are just as important as government regulations (Jentoff et al. 1998).

By the late 1980s, as it opened up to economic expansion and improved its transport and communication sectors, Laos had coalesced its policy decision making within the central government while simultaneously decentralizing governing authority to provinces and districts. During its many years of isolation, Laos had retained relatively high-quality natural resources. Beginning in the 1990s, a number of international organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and bilateral and multilateral donors began providing financial and technical support to document and monitor the health of wildlife species in Laos, many of which were eventually added to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Redlist of Endangered Species (Timmins 1993). In addition to IUCN, these conservation efforts were conducted by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the Netherlands government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, and a number of other NGOs. Attention to the country's biological diversity led to an examination of the policies and practices shaping the management of Laos' natural resources and the government's role in supporting sustainable development (Baird 1996; 1998b; 1999). The potential for developing hydropower by building large-scale dams on the Mekong River and its tributaries in Laos had been debated since the 1950s, but by the late 1990s, with Laos' rapid economic expansion under way, analysis of the impact of hydropower development increased (Shoemaker 1998; IRN 1999). More recently, Friend (2009), Baird and Shoemaker (2008) and Baird (2011) have written about how dams would affect wild capture fisheries and the migration of fish spawning in the Mekong and Sekong Rivers. Linkages between economic development and affected fish populations, and food and economic security, have been discussed in the context of trade-offs (Ziv 2012), food-led regional development (Arthur 2011) and environmental degradation and natural resource-dependent populations in Laos (Fenton 2010).

A major transborder river, the Sekong River begins in the Annamite Mountains, just over the border from Laos in Viet Nam, and flows south through the country's southernmost (and two of its poorest) provinces—Attapeu and Sekong—before crossing into Cambodia where it joins the Mekong River at Stung Treng Town near the border. The Sekong watershed includes several river tributaries, including the Xekaman, Xesou and the Xe Pian Rivers; many streams and ponds, among them the Houay Ho; and one of the country's major wetlands, the Beung Kiat Ngong Wetlands in adjacent Champassak Province. Because of its waterways and wetlands, aquatic life is abundant in southern Laos, where the people consume more aquatic resources than anywhere else in the country; more than 70 percent of animal protein in daily diets is derived from aquatic resources (Hortle 2007). Almost 80 percent of rural people living in southern Laos engage in fishing activities daily (FAO 2006).

“Participation by Women Fishers in Community-Managed Fisheries in Sekong River Basin, Lao PDR” was a two-month local water governance project conducted in 2013 by the author.¹ Its objective was to gather anecdotal information about how women fishers are integrated into village-based fisheries management with the goal of informing the creation of two new village-based fishery management committees slated by the Mekong River Commission for the Sekong basin in late 2013 (World Bank 2012-2014). With technical support from IUCN-Lao PDR, focus groups were arranged in six villages in the Samakhixay and Saysettha districts of Attapeu Province in southern Laos. Villages were selected based on their prior involvement in Fish Conservation Zones (FCZs) set up in the Sekong basin and their participation in local fishery management. Making up one of the country's poorest and least densely populated areas, with a total land area of 139,056 hectares, these districts have a total population of under 32,000 people, living in sometimes remote villages and supporting themselves almost entirely through subsistence wet rice farming and fishing. Almost 60 percent of the population is lowland Lao, with the remainder from Oy, Brao, Alak, Talieng and Nya Heun ethnic groups (ADB 2012).

Over a two-week period in early 2013, 95 fishers, including 55 women, participated in focus groups in Ban Hom, Ban Saphaonthong, Ban Vaththat, Ban Xaysy, Ban Sokkham, and Ban Sakhae. The principal village fishing grounds were the Sekong River; its tributary, the Xekaman River converging at Attapeu Town; Houay Ho Dam Reservoir to the north; and nearby ponds and streams. The area has no year-round rice field irrigation, but in the rainy season women fish in flooded rice paddies. An additional CPWF grant to IUCN-Lao PDR supported a one-day Mekong Water Dialogue in Attapeu Town at the end of the field study that included participation by selected women fishers and village heads from the study as well as officials from the Provincial Office of Natural Resources and Environment (PONRE) and the Lao Women's Union.

¹ Charlotte Moser, a consultant for IUCN, conducted this independent research project with grant support from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) Challenge Program for Water & Food Opportunity Fund (CPWF) and The Asia Foundation-Lao PDR.

Co-Management of Village Fisheries: Who Makes Decisions at the Local Level?

Analysts strongly believe that decision making at the local level is key to sustainable development and an essential tool for adaptive management to ensure the resilience of an ecosystem (Pomeroy 1998; Jentoft 1998). A study in Chile (Gutierrez 2012) found that co-management of fisheries is most effective when community leadership is proactive and promotes social cohesion, defined as working toward the well-being of all its members, working toward decreasing exclusion and marginalization, creating a sense of belonging, promoting trust and offering its members the opportunity for upward mobility. In Laos, natural resource co-management involves a balance between governance oversight at the central and provincial level and actual implementation through village fishery management committees. The fishery sector in the country began to adopt practices of adaptive co-management in the early 1990s (Baird 1996, 1998; Claridge et al. 1997; Pomeroy 1998). By late 1993, local governments in a few villages on the Mekong River had established a process for allowing villages to voluntarily set up regulations for managing aquatic resources (Baird 2006). Regulations adopted by villages included establishing FCZs—essentially no-fishing zones—in the mainstream Mekong, banning destructive fishing methods like dynamite and electroshock, managing natural ponds and rice-field paddy wetland areas, protected flooded forest habitat, and conserving and sustainably managing frogs and juvenile fishes (Baird 1998b; 2005; 2006).

The design and implementation of co-management projects in Lao village fisheries now varies widely from district to district (Baird 2006). Some are dominated by the politics of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, requiring endorsement from village or district officials with little real decision-making powers being devolved to resource users (Baird 2006). In such cases, the co-management label that implies local participation by the local community may be more symbolic than actual, and in reality, represent a form of top-down management that promotes homeostasis rather than resilience. Nevertheless, when Laos adopted its first Fishery Law in 2009 in consultation with international and regional fishery policy groups,² village fishery co-management became a requirement (Cacaud et al. 2008). *Guidelines for Fisheries Co-Management* (Lao PDR 2009), adopted by the Department of Livestock and Fisheries, aimed to provide district and provincial authorities with the necessary steps for the promotion and maintenance of village co-management of fisheries. The final guidelines were developed as an output of the project "Aquatic Resources Management to Improve Rural Livelihoods (ARL) of the Xe Kong Basin," a project conducted by World Wildlife Fund-Lao PDR from 2005 to 2009 that established FCZs in 26 locations in the lower Sekong River (WWF 2009). The ARL project was itself an outgrowth of efforts begun in the previous decade to promote participatory planning by managing FCZs formed throughout southern Laos (Chomchanta et al. 2000; Baird 2006).

² Participants in the process were the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO-Legal Service and the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific), WWF, the Mekong River Commission's Fisheries Programme, in particular its Fisheries Management and Governance Component, the Asian Institute of Technology and the WorldFish Center (SE Asia Regional Office).

From the outset, village fishery committees typically were appointed by village heads, rather than elected, to oversee enforcement of the FCZs. To reduce conflict over territorial rights to fishing grounds, the committees were authorized to impose fines for destructive fishing practices, and for poaching by fishers who came to village fishing grounds from other areas. However, the *Guidelines for Fisheries Co-Management* provide no clear option for village response to other issues important to managing river fishing, such as changes in water quality affecting fish populations, or to specific requirements about which stakeholders should participate in village fishery decisions. Instead, the guidelines state only that “as much as possible, the needs of women, poorer households, and minorities should be given specific consideration” (Lao PDR 2009:10). How much benefit a village receives by maintaining an FCZ, or what difference broad representation of stakeholders might make to sustaining an FCZ, has not been examined in Laos, though the Chile study (Gutierrez 2011) that measured these conditions has had interesting results. While follow-up evaluations on the success of the FCZs and the village fishery committees in Laos have apparently not been conducted,³ in 2012, as part of a US \$26 million grant to the Ministry of National Resources and Environment (MoNRE), which is part of the Mekong Integrated Water Resources Management Plan (MIWRMP), the World Bank stipulated that two additional village-based fishery management committees be established on the Sekong River that were to be designed and administered by managers at PONRE in Attapeu (World Bank 2012-14).

The Absence of Gender Mainstreaming in Small-Scale Village Fisheries

Improving the well-being of rural women has been an emerging development priority for Laos (Murray et al. 1998; Cleaver 2000; Ireson-Doolittle et al. 2004; Chamberlain 2005). Though by no means universal, the diverse ethnic groups that make up Laos have traditionally given broad authority to women, including matrilineal residence, inheritance of land by daughters, and women’s control over money and management of family finances (Chamberlain 2006:15). Agricultural women are involved in domestic pursuits, such as tending gardens and gathering foods from forests and wetlands to feed their families, while men find meat through either hunting or fishing. The introduction of laws and regulations imposed by external authorities, along with the conditions that require such regulations, may reflect social or environmental upheaval—for instance, a lack of access by both genders to productive natural resources—that promotes the replacement of a traditional complementarity between the genders with a more stratified, even oppositional state of gender relations more in line with Western practices. The argument has even been made that, as a result of Western influence in Laos, women’s rights are replacing women’s power (Chamberlain 2006).

All women in Laos over the age of 18 are automatically members of the Lao Women’s Union (LWU). The LWU, founded in 1955 as one of the country’s four official mass organizations, was originally part of the Lao Patriotic Women’s Association, which aimed at mobilizing women to participate in the struggle for national independence. By

³ Personal communication with Victor Cowling, Technical Advisor, WWF Greater Mekong Programme, Vientiane, April 3, 2013.

law, every village in Laos must appoint a female representative to the LWU to serve as a bridge between the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the government, and Lao women (World Bank 2013). The main function of the unpaid LWU representative, who serves on the historically all-male village council, is to preserve the existing social order by supporting the traditional roles of women as wives, mothers and household managers.

LWU comes to our village one or two times per year. They teach us how to work with men and have good social development, be a good mother, how to keep things clean. They also teach us about believing in government policy. (Moser 2013:11)

Generally, village women interviewed in field studies regard taking on the LWU role as a time-consuming duty, adding the responsibility for organizing village cultural functions to their already overloaded domestic schedules (Moser 2013). Since the mid-2000s, however, Laos has made other efforts to increase the responsiveness of national policies toward women. The National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW), created in 2003 to formulate women's policies, has a National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (2011–2015) and is now focused on advancing human rights for Lao women, particularly in regard to health care, education, economic opportunity and reducing violence toward women (World Bank 2013).

While it has periodically called for the election of more women as village chiefs, the LWU has not historically encouraged, or provided training for, leadership and decision making by women (Ireson-Doolittle et al. 2004; LWU 2012). In Lao villages, a clear division of labor exists between the public and private spheres for men and women. As heads of households, men generally speak for households and are elected or appointed to positions of authority within village social and political organizations. With the exception of widowed or divorced women who are considered heads of households, village women restrict their non-work activities to the private, domestic sphere and to community social matters. Economic divisions, even within the informal economy of most Lao villages, also exist in households (Ireson-Doolittle et al. 2004). Men are expected to be the primary earners in the family. Large fish caught by any family member are sent to market while small fish become food for the family. Income is turned over to wives who, as the household money managers, use it to buy additional food and to pay for other family needs. One important exception is the role of women in fish trading in Laos (Walker 1999), a more formal and complex economy where women play a significant role as traders of fish, other foods and household goods. In the study of fish trading in Attapeu published by the Living Aquatic Resources Research Center (LARReC), for example, it is noteworthy that all three large-scale fish traders in the province were women, providing cash when necessary to small-scale village fish traders and fisher traders, who were primarily men (Phonvisay 2006).

In 1995, Laos was a signatory to the Beijing plan adopted by the UN Conference on Women attended by an LWU delegation as the country's official representation. Three environmental actions were adopted at the conference: 1) to involve women actively in environmental decision making at all levels; 2) to integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programs for sustainable development; and 3) to strengthen or establish mechanisms to assess the impact of development and

environmental policies on women (Earle 2013). Subsequent to the Beijing meeting, analysis of gender mainstreaming in fisheries has been conducted worldwide and led since the late 1980s by the UN's Fishery Industries Division of the Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Haque 1988; Abbasi 1994; Tietze 1995). The first Global Symposium on Gender and Fisheries, held in Malaysia in 2004 and sponsored by the Asian Fisheries Society (Global Symposium 2004), has made particular contributions to the advancement of gender studies in Asia Pacific fisheries (Vunisea 2008; Williams 2012; Lentisco 2012) and elsewhere (Matthews 2012).

A flurry of gender mainstreaming activities took place in fishery management agencies at the Lao central-government level in the decades following the Beijing conference (Kusakabe 2002, 2006, 2010; Hartman et al. 2004; Lentisco et al. 2012). In 1999, the Department of Livestock and Fisheries began training women for aquaculture and community fish pond management, a high government priority for commercial development and a sector widely promoted throughout Southeast Asia as a fishery activity that women could integrate into their daily domestic activities (Kusakabe 2002; Williams 2012). Similarly, in the 1990s, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) began tracking involvement by women in fishery management in the four Lower Mekong countries (Sriputinibondh 2004; Kusakabe 2006, 2010). In 2004, the MRC gender program published research about Lao women fishers' access and rights to natural resources (Hartmann 2004), leading to additional research on the topic (Chamberlain 2005). In 2010, an important step was taken when the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, working with the FAO, published the *National Gender Profile of Agricultural Households*, the country's first effort to disaggregate gender data from Laos's agriculture sector, including fisheries (Lao PDR 2010). This baseline data is important because it allows analysis to focus specifically on gender as a key factor in improving fishery management and policy.

Gender mainstreaming in Lao fisheries, nevertheless, appears to have stayed at the national administrative level with very little analysis conducted on the village impact of national gender mainstreaming in natural resource management. Fishing is a livelihood in Laos that is passed down through generations of women. This is true in Attapeu Province where significantly more women than in any other province in Laos engage in subsistence fishing, almost equalling male involvement in fishing (Lao PDR 2010). While generalizations about strict gender divisions of labor can be misleading, river fishing with larger gear is widely considered a male activity (World Bank 2013). Men fish on rivers, casting nets from boats, and women fish in wetlands but also in rivers with scoop nets and other small-scale gear, using simpler, more traditional gear (Claridge et al. 1997). Women also provide important support services to their husbands' river fishing, such as paddling boats, mending nets, collecting bait and keeping accounts, activities that are unacknowledged or undercounted as part of the financial cost of fishing. While men will sometimes also fish in wetlands, particularly during the dry season and if families are especially poor and cannot afford boats, typically only women and children (both male and female), gather aquatic resources from flooded rice paddies, streams, marshes and other lowland floodplains (Meusch et al. 2003).

These distinctions align with other gender divisions in rural Lao families. Accustomed to acting in the public sphere, men will often travel long distances to find

productive fishing grounds such as the reservoir created by the Houay Ho dam where the government has introduced the rapidly reproducing Nile tilapia. Wetlands, usually located closer to villages, are more accessible to women, and fishing in them can more easily be incorporated into their daily domestic routines. Along with less marketable fish from the rivers, the small fish, frogs, turtles, crabs, and shrimp that women harvest from wetlands are lower-quality aquatic products that bring in a lower unit price in markets but that still retain high nutritional value (Fenton 2010; Kawaraziuka 2010; Arthur 2011). They are more often consumed than sold. With declining fish stocks in the rivers, many women report fishing in wetlands two or three times per day, often with other women and children, to prepare adequate meals for their families (Moser 2013). If fish or other protein sources are not found, however, people sometimes depend on garden vegetables, non-timber forest products, or aquatic plants for food, limiting the nutritional variety in their diets. As one woman in Attapeu put it:

If we catch enough to eat, we go fishing once a day. If not, we go more. In the dry season, if our husbands catch big fish, we try to sell it in the market. We eat what we can't sell or what the women catch in the paddies or ponds. We get vegetables from the ponds and we eat bamboo. (Moser 2013:7)

Aquatic resources from rice paddies, marshes and other wetlands are important but often-overlooked sources of nutrition for families in Laos (Meusch et al. 2003; Halwart 2003). The economic value of wetland food contributed by women to maintaining family health and nutrition deserves greater attention. Some data are available that measure the economic value of wetlands to community livelihoods. In 2010, when the government submitted an application to declare the Beung Kiat Ngong Wetlands in southern Laos a Ramsar Wetlands Site of International Importance, it was estimated that resources from the wetlands, particularly fish, frogs and aquatic vegetables, contributed US \$850,000 annually to the local economy (IUCN 2011). In neighboring Cambodia, a household study in the wetlands of Ream National Park estimated that wetland fishing contributed 65 percent of household income for families living around the wetlands (Horwitz 2012).

Women and Village Fishery Decision Making: Excluded—or Hidden in Plain Sight?

Fishing in rice paddies, marshes and other wetlands is a category of wild capture fishing included in the Fishery Law and in the *Guidelines for Fisheries Co-Management*. Yet about 90 percent of village fishery committees in the 2013 study were made up of men who fish on the river and are typically appointed by male village heads, not elected by villagers (Moser 2013). Considering the importance of wetland catches and women's small-scale catches from rivers and streams to daily family nutrition, the absence of women on fishery management committees reflects an imbalance in village representation. The method for assembling the fishery committees may be responsible for this. In its 2003 report, "Governance and participation in Laos," Sida, the Swedish aid agency, noted that women were more likely to be in leadership roles if they were elected rather than appointed (Chagnon

2003). This suggests that appointments by elite males maintain traditional social order while elections in which women participate are more likely to challenge the social order. In fieldwork conducted in fishing villages in 1998, the FAO identified the following reasons for lack of leadership by women: the traditional role of women in Lao culture that confines them to the domestic sphere; the lack of experience by women in speaking in public; and women's lack of confidence in having knowledge about the issues (Murray et al. 1998). Nearly fifteen years later, in 2013, almost identical sentiments were expressed during fieldwork with Sekong women fishers (Moser 2013). Even though they might possess expert knowledge from assisting their husbands in river fishing or fishing independently in wetlands and rivers, women acknowledged that they lacked confidence to speak up in front of men. When village chiefs were asked why more women fishers did not serve on fishery committees, they replied that women were believed to be unsuitable to serve because they did not understand the rules and regulations of fishery management imposed by the Fishery Law (Moser 2013). Though they may agree with men's decisions, the possibility of overlooking women's priorities is evident.

Another explanation for the lack of involvement of women in fishery management committees emerged in field interviews in 2013. Though the recommendation to explicitly include women in decision making had been made before (Murray et al. 1998; Kusakabe 2002; Nelson 2009), the *Guidelines for Fishery Co-Management* adopted by the Lao government in 2009 do not stipulate the participation of women fishers as key stakeholders in the community decision-making process. Without women being specifically included in the language of fishery regulations, it comes as no surprise that village fishery committees, appointed by village chiefs, are not compelled or likely to include many or any women fishers. As one woman in Attapeu stated,

In the past, women wanted to participate on the fishery committee, but the men did not allow this. Women weren't asked to be on the fishery committee. This is men's work. Men make the decisions. (Moser 2013:12)

Interventions by superordinate authority, such as laws and regulations, have been identified as one way that women can escape social traps (Cinner 2008). In fact, when asked during the field study what would happen if women called a meeting to promote gender mainstreaming in village fisheries, women responded that men fishers would only attend if required to by district officials.

During the 2000s, recognizing the importance of gender equity in reducing poverty in Laos and other Southeast Asian countries, multiple UN agencies, notably UNESCO, ILO, IFAD and UNDP⁴, produced guidelines and conducted a gender sensitivity training program in Laos (Aksornkool 2002). Evaluations of the effectiveness of this effort cannot be found. However, during the Mekong Water Dialogue coordinated by

⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

IUCN in Attapeu at the end of the 2013 study, the lack of gender sensitivity emerged as a prominent issue. Women fishers in the study, as well as male village chiefs and natural resource managers from the districts and Attapeu Province, attended the daylong workshop. In breakout sessions, men acknowledged that there were gaps in how women were integrated into village fisheries. These included men's weak response to understanding the importance of women in fishery management work, gaps in adequately conveying regulatory information to women, and a lack of understanding about how dismissing them made women feel. Women also felt that village and district authorities should give more importance to fishery work performed by women and that an ongoing women's discussion group to build leadership skills was needed (Moser 2013).

Other developing countries have also experienced gender divisions in activities in small-scale fisheries. Though there are cultural and political differences between the countries—notably in the different stages of their civil society development—analysis of activities of women fishers in the floodplain wetlands of Bangladesh, for instance, can provide some comparisons to women fishing in Lao wetlands (Sultana and Thomas 2008). Starting in the 1980s, improving the position of women became a focus of the NGO movement in Bangladesh, which made strides in the empowerment and economic emancipation of women. Building on the country's program to extend micro-credit to women, a network of community-based organizations (CBOs) helped coordinate fishery management projects that were gendered. In an analysis comparing women-only, men-only and mixed management fishery committees, it was found that women-only projects placed greater value on participatory processes, the mixed projects on community-wide action and norms, and the men-only CBO on setting rules. More criteria for successful floodplain resource management were identified by committees that included women than committees that had no women. Pressure for community compliance with sanctuary and fishing rules came from women who control what is cooked, what is decided based on group discussions, and decisions about what to catch or not to catch by their own hands.

Parallels capitalizing on women's environmental knowledge can also be drawn from agricultural projects developed in response to climate change. A project in Bolivia, coordinated by local and international NGOs, engaged women farmers in the Aymara communities known as *yapachuris*, or 'sowers,' to use their knowledge to avert risk caused by extreme climate variations in the high-altitude plains of the Andes (Nelson 2009). Women *yapachuris*, whose traditional responsibilities include storing grains and seeds for future planting, are being trained to monitor bio-indicators of climate and weather-related hazards. This climate-prediction project has led to reductions in crop losses from drought, hail and floods, as well as more stable and predictable markets for local crops. By combining their traditional knowledge with new technical skills, Aymara women have helped adapt more effectively to climate change for the benefit of the entire agricultural community.

Building Ecological Resilience by Listening to Women

Looking at the Sekong village fishery committees established in 2009, it is instructive to compare the resilience of committees that included women with ones that did not. In 2013, of the six villages that were targeted for FCZs in 2009, five had either abandoned management of their FCZ or had chosen to never create one. The only village fishery committee that was still functioning was the one for which a woman had the responsibility of keeping records. Though it is undocumented, the greater compliance associated with the FCZs may account for a reduced concern with illegal fishing practices, previously identified as the fishers' primary concern, in 2013. Increased population along the Sekong, and more importantly deteriorating water quality, were cited instead as the primary reasons for abandoning FCZs in 2013. Because of the growth in population along the river, villages have been unable to control fishing in their FCZs if a nearby village stopped managing its FCZ, allowing newcomers to become accustomed to unrestricted fishing (Moser 2013).

For most women and men fishers alike, however, the greatest concern was the deteriorating quality of the Sekong water, primarily due to river dredging for gold primarily by foreign companies granted mining concessions by the Lao government. In focus groups, villagers often recalled the clear waters of the Sekong in the 1970s before pointing to buckets of muddy water drawn that day from the river. Riverbank erosion during the rainy season that was triggered by agricultural development along the river and increasingly heavy rainfall, and river-bottom dredging by mining companies, were identified as the main causes of the degraded water.

Since three years, fishing on the river has been difficult because water quality is so bad. It makes no difference if we have a FCZ because, if the water is bad, the fish go somewhere else. (Moser, 2013:9)

The degradation of the Sekong River water was first recorded in the 1990s, when the central government's Department of Water Resources began to require environmental impact assessments (EIAs) from commercial developers clearing forests for rubber plantations or dredging river bottoms for alluvial gold or gravel (Wayakone 2013). By the mid-2000s, the Sekong water was muddy, sometimes laced with fertilizer runoff from rubber plantations or traces of mercury used in mining. As early as 2003, a study by the MRC's Laos country office found that the microbiological composition of Sekong water had degraded to levels significantly lower than the Mekong, indicating that the Sekong was no longer providing the once-abundant food supply to support migrating fish during the rainy season (MRC 2011). In 2008, as part of the EIA conducted for the construction of a hydropower plant on the Xekamen River, a Sekong tributary, it was found that water quality was acceptable for aquatic life and agriculture, but for human consumption, it fell between "impacted" and "seriously impacted" (MRC 2011). That warning was reiterated by the MRC in 2010, when it released its 2008 biomonitoring survey of Mekong tributaries (MRC 2010). The only sampling station on the Sekong River in Attapeu Province, at Ban Xou Touat in Sanamxay District, was given a C rating for its water quality, the next-to-the-lowest rating. According to the report, the low rating was due to "many changes" in the basin, including increased bank erosion, accumulated sand and clay and changing water flow, all contributing to a deteriorating

ecosystem on the lower Sekong (MRC 2010).

While there has been some discussion about deteriorating river water quality in Laos (Baird and Shoemaker 2008), the topic is a sensitive one for government authorities in the country because it is related to the larger issues of the public water supply and government control of commercial development, which are degrading river quality. In a data-poor country like Laos, the monitoring of river water quality can be sporadic, influenced by a lack of both resources and technical know-how (Visvanathan 2010). In January 2014, unusually turbid water—the muddy condition that blocks daylight needed for the growth of algae and other aquatic plants that feed wild fish—was found to have grown to unprecedented dry-season levels in measurements taken by MRC at the mouth of the Sekong River. Although this was attributed by MRC to unusually heavy rainfall in December 2013 rather than to riverbed erosion, the turbidity was cited as the reason for skin rashes in Laos and water that was unusable for cooking and drinking in Cambodia (MRC News 2014). Apart from turbidity caused by erosion, river water can also be contaminated by cadmium and mercury used in the mining process.

Thorny topics like deteriorating water quality or the absence of the voices of marginalized people are avoided in the Lao fishery co-management guidelines, giving clues to why FCZs may be unsustainable as ways to protect the fish population. Records of the ethnicity of villagers who participated in the creation of the village fishery committees are not available. Though six ethnic groups are known to live in the two districts of Attapeu Province where the 2013 study was conducted, only one village, Ban Sokkham, the village closest to the Houay Ho reservoir, identified members from an ethnic group—the Nya Heun—as participants in the village management committee. Because the participatory process that established the FCZs was controlled by officials from provincial, district and village governments, there remained a broad range of issues of concern to village fishers that were not addressed or incorporated into decisions about village fishery management.

The ARL Final Technical Report illustrates some of the top-down dynamics between the authorities and villagers during the project (WWF 2009). Project evaluators identified a resistance to change on the part of the villagers as a challenge. According to the report, villagers were reluctant to believe that the historical abundance of aquatic life and easy access to resources in the Sekong might cease to exist or that new ways of ensuring the productivity of the river were needed. In focus groups conducted in 2013, older women fishers repeated this belief, acknowledging that, although fish catches were now much lower, they maintained tradition by fishing in the same spots that they had fished in for almost 50 years. When a villager asked the ARL team how long they would need to police the new FCZs to prevent outsider use, the district governor replied, “When the people in your village want to stop eating fish, you can stop managing your fishery” (WWF 2009:5). When it was estimated that an annual yield of 14,120 tons of aquatic resources would result from community fishery management, a Department of Livestock and Fisheries official stated, “You could never dig enough fish ponds to grow that much fish and, if you could, it would require a huge financial investment. By managing the river you can benefit from all that fish basically for free” (WWF 2009:5).

As a key to effective community participation in co-managed fisheries, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in fishery management has been well documented (Berkes et al. 2000; Johannes et al. 2000; Haggan 2007; Baird 2007). In Laos, a country rich in ethnic diversity, traditional culture often lies at the heart of communal values and if these values are not acknowledged, adaptive management will likely be less sustainable. Rivers and fish have played historically significant roles in the traditional cultures of landlocked Laos. For instance, in the 'spirit system' of ecosystem management used by the Khmu ethnic group in northern Laos to protect the Mekong giant catfish on the Mekong River, particular importance was given to the destructive force of 'disturbed water' and to the belief that boats and fishing gear are living things possessed of individual powers and having a life of their own (Hartmann 2007). Given the historic role of TEK in managing fisheries, it is not surprising that among the six villages in the 2013 study, the only FCZ that was still operating was located in an area on the Sekong River where water spirits were believed to live, frightening people away from fishing there (Moser 2013). Integrating such knowledge into government policies modeled on Western templates can be challenging. For instance, Baird (2010) has written that government intervention in fishery management might be justified if fisheries are characterized as 'open access.' However, he argues, fisheries in southern Laos are functionally not 'open access,' but are based on a more complicated common property management system derived from first claims to fishing sites and labor inputs.

The linkages between women and traditional culture in Sekong River fishery management deserve full ethnographic attention, particularly in southern Laos where *People, Livelihoods, and Development in the Xekong River Basin, Laos* (Baird and Shoemaker 2008) provides one of the few extensive socioeconomic overviews of the region. Fifteen major ethnic groups live in Attapeu Province, six of which live within the two districts where the 2013 study of women fishers took place. As Chamberlain (2006) points out, some aspects of gender equity can be more prevalent in animism than in Western culture. For instance, shamans can be either male or female, but spirit mediums are largely women. Women can also retain significant cultural and economic power within traditional culture. This revolves primarily around the domestic sphere as reflected in the duties assigned to LWU representatives to preserve social cohesion by organizing village cultural activities. Since ethnic Lao culture is matrilineal, with property passed down through mothers, Lao women theoretically own all property, including fish traps, though their husbands and male relatives operate and govern the traps (Baird 2008). But Lao ethnic women also possess knowledge about natural forces that have sustained traditional culture over time. Some biocultural research suggests that traditional women possess greater knowledge about plants and thus are the chief practitioners of traditional medicine (Maffi 2001). In Lao fishing villages, women are equally attuned to the natural patterns of weather and water, assisting their husbands in river fishing and using more traditional hand gear to gather wetland foods. To this extent, women serve as important possessors of the socio-ecological memory upon which a renewed, more resilient ecosystem could be built (Folke 2007).

As Laos undergoes economic expansion, with accompanying regulatory efforts, and as men adapt to new pressures, the traditional knowledge possessed by women may be even more important. Chamberlain quotes the groundbreaking work in

northern Thailand by anthropologist Otome Klein-Hutheesing to explain how new economic conditions may be both diminishing the importance of traditional knowledge and disempowering women in traditional cultures.

The breaking point of sexual equality is when female and male prestige systems undergo a mutation of meaning. It is when males have access to consumer goods, markets, and class associated symbols, that male honor becomes a more pervasive symbol of power than female honor. The power of possession may make men more powerful than females who become seemingly more illiterate as they fail to acquire the language and symbols of industrialized modernity. (Klein-Hutheesing 1997: 92)

Rural women make up the largest percentage of the world's poor because, as a group, they are the ones who are most frequently denied access to reproductive health, education and property rights (Chen et al. 2005). It has also been shown that when environmental change brings economic crisis, women whose livelihoods depend on natural resources bear a disproportionate part of the burden (Neumaye and Plumper 2007). Without 'safety nets' such as mobility, education or skills to help them adapt to change, rural women bear a greater burden of economic hardship caused by environmental change because they have access to fewer resources to regain a solid economic footing (Nelson 2009). To escape social traps, Cinner (2008) has identified several broad avenues applicable to women fishers, including education, the intervention of superordinate authority (legal systems, government, religions) and incentives that might convert traps to opportunities for growth. Social assumptions that exclude women from village fishery co-management committees, for instance, not only disregard their input, but also deny them ways to develop decision-making skills that might help keep them and their children out of poverty. Access to formal education for rural Lao women and children has generally improved in the last decade, although women are much less likely than men to finish secondary school (Ireson-Doolittle 2004). Sons and daughters who formerly helped with fishing and other domestic duties are now more often in school, although the poorer the family, the more likely children—and especially girls—are to leave school to help make ends meet. In focus groups, women from better-off families expressed hope that their daughters would leave the fishing village and find a good government job in the city. Others appeared unable to envision lives for their children outside the villages. As one woman stated,

We need to learn about more technical things, how to raise chickens, how to train for another job, how to learn handicrafts so that we can sell them. Only women sell fish but only those who can ride motorbikes can get to the village market. Some women can't even drive a motorbike. (Moser 2013:9)

In looking for solutions to poverty for rural women, Kusakabe (2002) has pointed out that economic planners should provide more livelihood options for women, accounting for differences in age, ethnicity and social class, and based on their knowledge, experience and interest. In the Lao fishery sector, training in rice-fishing and aquaculture management has been offered to women, a transfer of fishery knowledge

that could be considered an economic ‘trade-off’ from daily, sometimes unproductive fishing in wetlands. However, Kusakabe (2002) has argued that preconceptions about the simplicity of aquaculture and women’s suitability to conduct it around their other domestic duties limit women’s access to more demanding technologies. Similarly, with what she calls the growing ‘feminization’ of fisheries in what was previously an all-male activity, she challenges the emphasis on women for post-harvest fish processing, another occupation often earmarked for women based on their traditional domestic roles.

Using women fishers to monitor river water quality may be one way to add new technical skills to women’s traditional knowledge and to give them a way to make an important contribution to river water management. Based on its successful water-monitoring program in Mongolia, the Asia Foundation-Laos has supported a community-based biologic water-monitoring program on the Nam Song River in the tourist area of Vien Vang in Vientiane Province since 2009 (The Asia Foundation 2012). Local citizens work with students from the National University of Laos Faculty of Science to collect samples of benthic macroinvertebrates, an effective bio-indicator technique that has been used to monitor river health in such areas as the White River Watershed in Vermont. Like the Aymara women in Bolivia, women fishers on the Sekong could be similarly trained in bio-indicator monitoring, bringing new forms of know-how to fishery management that could support traditional livelihoods in fishing villages.

Conclusions

Laos is a rapidly changing country. Its accelerated economic development, combined with the onset of extreme climate variables in Southeast Asia (ADB 2013), has put its majority population of rural poor on course to experience massive transformations in traditional daily life. Nowhere will these transformations be more dramatically felt than in the subsistence fisheries on the country’s rivers, the heart of livelihoods, food and cultural tradition in landlocked Laos. This paper has discussed how practices can be developed in Laos to promote social and economic coherency in the face of rapid external change that will enhance the resiliency of the country’s fisheries and serve the people whose lives depend on them. Among these practices are increasing the diversity of stakeholders needed to strengthen the country’s socio-ecological system based on fisheries, enhancing the quality of adaptive learning to help citizens absorb and learn from changing conditions impacting changes in fisheries and improving the flow of communication between local and regional governance to strengthen fishery management.

Though they make up more than one-half of Laos’s total population and almost one-half of the country’s daily fishers (Lao PDR 2010), women have been largely excluded as stakeholders who could plan and implement sustainable practices in village fishery management. Based on a 2013 field study in Attapeu Province in southern Laos, this paper has argued that excluding women from village fishery management committees has not only rendered Fish Conservation Zones established on the Sekong River 2009 ineffective, but has also led to flaws in the co-management model promoted by the government’s Department of Livestock and Fisheries in its Fishery Law, adopted

in 2009. Cultural attitudes toward women are complex, nuanced and entrenched on many levels in Laos. Allowed to evolve at their own pace, some of these attitudes might shift over time toward greater empowerment of women. However, actively strengthening the capacity of women fishers now and enabling them to prepare for changes in the fishery sector will build resiliency and protect against growing food insecurity, poverty and decreased life chances throughout Laos.

National, regional and international organizations, such as the MRC, FAO and the Asian Fisheries Society have long recognized the importance of addressing the needs of women in fisheries in developing countries, although the actual practices of various projects promoted by these organizations are much more problematic than the stated policies might lead one to expect. Yet research conducted by these and other organizations has shown what steps can be taken to expand stakeholder dialogue by including Lao women in village fishery governance. Among these steps are including language in the national Fisheries Law that requires participation by women in village fishery management committees, creating incentives to allow women to develop new skills, ensuring more places in governance structures for women and providing opportunities for adaptive learning tailored to the experiences and interests of women in fishing villages.

None of these steps are quick fixes. But if women fishers receive the assistance they need to keep themselves, their families and their communities intact, the positive changes that would ensue might outpace the external changes that are certain to impact Laos.

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Doing a Dam Better? Understanding the World Bank's Eco-Governmentality in Lao Hydropower Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to make explicit the governmentality of the World Bank in the cases of Pak Mun Dam in Thailand and Nam Theun 2 Dam in Laos. Much of the literature on Nam Theun 2 Dam focuses on the incorporation of conservation practices and the creation of state apparatuses that account for natural resources and local populations through a discourse of environmentalism. Using World Bank planning and evaluation documents, I argue that although these practices represent an escalation of the role of environmentalism in the justificatory logic for new hydropower projects, they do not represent a change in the World Bank's major justificatory mechanism, the presence or absence of institutional structures necessary for present and future project implementation. That is, project justifications continue to rest either on an already established relationship with the borrower that allows for the transmission of the World Bank's technical and managerial expertise, or on the presumed likelihood that such a relationship can be established. In either case, the emphasis is on the creation of what I call a seasoned borrower and its inclusion in the production of knowledge that is legible to development discourse.

Introduction

That hydropower projects continually produce harmful unintended consequences is no longer an acceptable end to scholarship on this type of development work. That hydropower development has disastrous social and environmental effects, not to mention dubious efficiency, as an energy-production method, has been repeatedly demonstrated; a study focused on confirming the unintended consequences of yet another project would thus be redundant (Rich 1994; WCD 2000; McCully 2001). Despite the consistent effects of hydropower development, however, international development institutions have continued to build such projects and to do so with no more than partial acceptance of the social and environmental consequences. In order to understand the nature of the disconnect between reliably negative project outcomes and the development institutions behind them, it is therefore necessary for studies critical of hydropower to conduct other lines of research. One such line of research is the Foucauldian-influenced investigations into how development has continued to be a productive source of discourse despite its obvious shortcomings (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007). It is my goal in this paper to use such a line of analysis to demonstrate at least

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one way in which the ‘out-of-handness’ of hydropower development can be understood. Scholars such as Whittington (2012) have documented the contested nature of hydropower development at an institutional level, specifically in Laos, between international organizations both for and against dams. I attempt here, instead, to illustrate the structure of World Bank (or Bank) discourse as something generated through contestation but also instructing the way in which projects are planned and justified. As I hope to make plausible, this discursive structure is not reducible to a mapping of the motivations of all concerned individuals.

As will be shown below, this mode of analysis helps to understand the structures surrounding development projects by focusing on how their failures can actually strengthen the institutions’ place of power in this particular field of knowledge production. The analysis leaves out consideration of the problem of broken promises by institutions such as the World Bank. The question guiding this research is, therefore, not *why* do these projects continue or are they ultimately helpful or harmful, after all costs and benefits are weighed, but *how* is it that hydropower projects continue to be planned and built in Southeast Asia *despite* project failures and opposition to such projects at multiple scales?

Following Goldman’s (2005) analysis of the World Bank’s so-called eco-governmentality, I compare the rationale used to justify the Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project (NT2) in Laos to an earlier project of at least equal controversy in northeastern Thailand, the Pak Mun Dam. Although much of my research serves to support Goldman’s (2005) thesis and the work of many others suggesting that NT2 represented a shift in the outward expression of the World Bank’s development practices, I also discovered a marked consistency between the two projects. Namely, that the surface manifestations of World Bank governmentality, while differing for each case, nonetheless spring from a discursive structure whose main driver is the assurance that the project in question leads to further projects.

This consistency appears in the discourse of the World Bank’s project-related documents in the form of a justificatory mechanism, which I have labeled the *seasoned borrower*. Following the work of other development scholars, such as Ferguson (1994) and Li (2007), I would like to move away from the implication by some scholars that the justifications and reflections published by development experts are some type of ruse, as Friedrichs and Friedrichs (2002) argue in the case of the Pak Mun Dam. Rather, although the images created by the World Bank of the object to be developed are always quite different from what is considered ‘true’ by academic standards, they are different in a very specific way that carries with it a degree of consistency. It is this consistency that should be of interest to studies of development projects that intend to make use of Foucault’s (2004) concept of governmentality.

Analytical Technique in Foucault’s Governmentality

To begin, I would make only a few remarks on what Foucault meant by governmentality and how it might be used in an analysis of hydropower development. Although the seeds of Foucault’s line of reasoning regarding governmentality can be found in his earlier writing, the concept was never explored in his published work. As such, the following review is drawn from his lectures on the subject. Foucault defined

governmentality as the “conduct of conduct.” In his 1977–1978 lecture series, entitled *Security, Territory, Population*, he stated that governmentality was the “ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power” (Foucault 2004: 108). That is, of government. To study governmentality is to study the techniques of government as a field of power. Such a study involves, according to Foucault, three shifts in analysis. First, one must shift analysis to outside the institution. Rather than analyzing the problematic of the institution as an institution, the study of governmentality entails understanding the type of power organized within it while also external to it (Balke 2010). For example, the structures internal to the World Bank, and their necessity as structures internal to the Bank, cannot be understood outside the broader context of a global commitment to betterment through modernization and to the use of government to achieve the goals that commitment entails.

The second shift is to outside the institution. There are multiple ways of listing and accounting for the failures of World Bank projects. Scholars can and have published volumes on the stated goals of World Bank projects compared with their seemingly inevitable damaging effects (Rich 1994; McCully 2001; Fredrichs and Fredrichs 2002; Bakker 2010). Such a focus assumes, without analysis, that the institution persists despite these functional defects. Indeed, in the realm of hydropower development, a project’s functional defects may be grounds for further projects for both international financial institutions and the state. On this point, Foucault (2004: 118) uses the example of the prison, saying, “The real history of the prison is undoubtedly not governed by the successes and failures of its functionality, but is in fact inserted within strategies and tactics that find support even in these functional defects themselves.” The second shift is a move away from function toward an analysis of strategies, tactics and techniques. Or, as Ferguson (1994: 20) would have it, development projects may produce unintended consequences that, despite their ‘unplannedness,’ are nonetheless “incorporated into anonymous constellations of control.”

The third, and final, shift is to outside the object. When applied to the World Bank, this shift means a refusal to use the concept of development as traditionally defined through notions of betterment. The World Bank’s actions and knowledge production cannot be measured by the standards of the object of development in this sense. Rather, they must be understood as establishing a field of truth containing objects of knowledge through the technologies of power. In other words, the governmentality of the World Bank involves the creation of specific knowledges in the constitution of a domain called ‘development.’

The third shift moves the power relations away from meeting objective development standards and toward the production of the concept of development—the production of a development discourse. It is a shift to outside the object of government. Power and discourse cannot be separated, because the production of the latter involves the use of the former. Describing Foucault’s conception of this relationship, Howarth (2009: 315) writes, “Power is important...in terms of locating those moments of exclusion, in which certain statements are condemned to...‘a wild exteriority,’ and in highlighting a positive set of rules, procedures and mechanisms that makes possible the production of discourse.” Located as it is in the field of power known as government, the World Bank avails itself of the inequality between the Bank and those it intends to

govern in determining what development is (Ferguson 1994; Goldman 2005; Li 2007).

The combination of these three shifts is a framework in which questions of *how* can be answered. The focus can be placed not on the World Bank as an institution but on its technologies of power. That is, on the material and discursive structures that enable the World Bank to maintain its contested position of power in hydropower development. The continuation of the role of the World Bank in development projects despite its well-documented history of failures (McCully 2001) can be reframed to focus on how tactics are arrived at that are supported by the functional failures themselves. Finally, a focus on whether or not the World Bank is actually capable of moving a population toward development can be replaced with a focus on the Bank's participation in the definition of development itself, based on its location in unequal power relations. Now that the question of *how* is possible, it is necessary to determine the point at which to begin an examination specific to the World Bank and the hydropower projects considered here.

Development Discourse and the Role of Experts

If the art of governing requires the appropriate arrangement of humans to each other and to resources through myriad techniques such that the multiple, specific goals of those governing can be met, then it must also require some method with which to plan and assess the performance of specific techniques. As Li (2007: 6) points out, "Calculation is central." In order for those governing to plan and implement interventions, the complex realities of society must be standardized and legible (Scott 1998: 11). This is done through an expert discourse that is distinct from other forms of knowledge about an area, its people, and its resources (Ferguson 1994: 29). Although the experts who plan development projects must always do so with reference to the socio-historical and geographic context in which they hope to intervene, there are nonetheless recognizable patterns in the planning of interventions based on the structured position of experts within a specific governmentality.

Li (2007: 7) observes two key practices in the translation of the order of betterment in planned interventions. The first is problematization, or "identifying deficiencies that need to be rectified." The second is "rendering technical," which has to do with the set of practices employed to represent that which is to be governed as a legible field with identifiable characteristics (Li 2007: 7). Key to rendering social reality technical is the location of certain forces that can be used to solve the deficiencies identified through problematization. These practices are not separate. What is important in this process is the creation of a reality in which the target for intervention experiences exactly the kind of problems in exactly the type of situation that a development institution can resolve or improve. As Ferguson (1994: 69) puts it, if an expert analysis is to comply with the needs of development institutions it must make the target for intervention "out to be an enormously promising candidate for the only sort of intervention a 'development' agency is capable of launching: the apolitical, technical 'development' intervention." Power is expressed through the exclusion of certain knowledges from a given discourse, but the need to exclude knowledges necessarily means that an opposing group with forms of knowledge to exclude exists, and that this group poses a challenge to those governing (Howarth 2009). In

considering the rendering of social and environmental problems technical, one must consider both a) the production of knowledge in development discourse and b) the methods by which other forms of knowledge are excluded in an expression of governmentality.

Ferguson (1994) introduces another layer to the practice of rendering technical. That is, as problems are identified and rendered appropriately technical, they are also made apolitical. As he shows through his analysis of development projects in Lesotho, poverty is addressed by both state and international agencies as a problem of bad policies and mismanaged resources rather than the product of politically maintained wealth inequalities. Experts working in the development industry ignore the political economic relationships between social groups and focus on the capacities of the poor to improve their position. This is not an oversight or product of poor research. It is the product of research conducted under a completely different standard than is imposed on those who criticize it (Ferguson 1994: 30). The removal of politics from the condition of poverty is an essential aspect of training for development experts, and rendering political problems technical is taken as a sign of good research, according to development industry standards.

In describing this removal of political economic problems by experts, Mitchell (2002) emphasizes the importance of making the target of intervention a product of some natural process. He writes, "Objects of analysis do not occur as natural phenomena, but are partly formed by the discourse that describes them. The more natural the object appears, the less obvious the discursive manufacture will be" (Mitchell 2002: 210). To take an example from hydropower development, if poverty can be linked to either a need for irrigation, problems of seasonal flooding, or a technical inability on the part of the borrowing country to seize its abundant water-resource potential, then the application of an apolitical development discourse appears all the more appropriate, especially for the experts involved. Although project failures may occasionally lead to raising the political economic issues faced by those being governed (as in the case of the Pak Mun Dam), experts have been repeatedly able to reframe failures in terms of the poor implementation of their prescriptions. As Mitchell (2002) and Ferguson (1994) have both shown, such reframing is a common practice among development experts, who are constantly confronted with contradictions between project goals and outcomes.

Questions that cannot be addressed through technical rendering are, therefore, absent from the analyses and reports of development experts (Li 2007). Keeping political economic questions from being raised, however, involves a closing off of discourse that is problematic to resolving issues related to poverty, but it does serve two purposes. First, the specific way in which experts make social reality legible and apolitical reaffirms their status as experts. That is, attempts to solve the problems identified by experts with solutions outside the established technical and managerial range are basically nonsensical to development agencies and confirm the capacity of experts to diagnose problems in the first place.

The logic of this confirmation is essentially thus: (1) a technical/managerial problem is identified; (2) an appropriate regime of policies and actions is established to resolve the problem; (3) the unrecognized aspects of social reality impede the project's ability to meet its stated goals, yet remain unrecognized by development agencies; (4)

project failures are blamed on the inability or unwillingness of the population to adhere to the technical/managerial solutions; (5) the capacity of experts and the distance between their knowledge and other knowledges increases through the negative confirmation of the expert performance. To restate this final point, if not following the program laid out by experts meant project failure, strict adherence to the program must have meant project success. Development discourse is affirmed. It should be noted, however, that this is an abstract outline of a discourse and reflects only the broad strokes of the contestations between project-affected people, anti-dam organizations, and state and international development institutions (Whittington 2012).

Second, the closing off of development discourse is itself a reaction to resistance in some form from those being governed. Bounding a discourse and being unaffected by those outside the bounds are not equivalent. As Goldman (2005) shows, groups that present obstacles for development agencies are not overlooked. Both are involved in working out the limits of government in what he calls the “Terrain of the Conjunctural” (Goldman 2005: 24). As new challenges arise, new methods of rendering social reality technical must be established. New calculations must be made and the practices of government expanded for an institution to maintain its position in the power relationship.

There is a final important point to be raised about experts and the development discourse by which they are limited and which at the same time they constitute. Referring particularly to political economic approaches to the study of development projects and to the identification of interests, there may be a tendency to dismiss the work of development experts as wholly or partially misrepresenting the intent of development institutions. Following Ferguson (1994: 18), however, “that is no excuse for dismissing it.” The actions and thoughts of development experts reflect a complex nexus of interests, but they are also the product of an ongoing pattern of development discourse. Their work, therefore, provides a suitable place from which to analyze development discourse and the rise of specific governmentalities. Here I am referring specifically to the texts produced by these experts, which I use and which have been used similarly in other studies of development (Ferguson 1994; Goldman 2005; Li 2007).

The Seasoned Borrower Mechanism

These explanations of governmentality, development discourse, and the methodological position associated with their analysis provide a context for considering Goldman’s (2005) emphasis on the various institutional apparatuses associated with the conservation and sustainability efforts related to NT2. While these efforts do in themselves represent a change in how hydropower projects are planned and implemented, they do not strike exactly at Foucault’s (2004) meaning, and so do not provide us with an explanation of how the success or failure of a given hydropower project has become so clearly immaterial to the power position of the private and state institutions that built the project. What is needed is to distinguish between the surface manifestations of a discursive structure and that structure’s deeper logic. I argue that a more powerful explanation, one that is also in keeping with the concepts of governmentality and development discourse, can be found in the concrete

manifestations of the justificatory mechanism I have called the seasoned borrower. I will now provide a description of what is meant by this term and provide an example by comparing World Bank discourse in the cases of the Pak Mun Dam in Thailand and the NT2 in Laos.

The seasoned borrower is a borrowing institution for which the structures necessary for lending, planning and evaluation have already been established through prior projects. It is part of a mechanism that labels the borrowing institutions as already existing in the realm of expert knowledge such that, from the World Bank's perspective, the borrower is itself already able to competently produce the knowledge and techniques necessary for positive change through a particular project. Once a borrower is a seasoned borrower, project failures can be accounted for and defended though the construction of project-affected people as malcontents resistant to beneficial change. The seasoned borrower, at least in the discourse around the project, enjoys the benefits associated with expert knowledge even as its capacity to plan and implement are negatively confirmed through the supposed unwillingness of project-affected people to go along with its technical solutions to political-economic problems; that is, problems that manifest as severe inequalities of wealth.

As a justificatory mechanism, the seasoned borrower is a highly flexible construction. By the time of the Pak Mun Dam's Staff Appraisal Report (WB 1991), the World Bank had a history with the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), which it was able to build upon to make the case that EGAT was a technically competent, reliable borrower concerned with the modernization and therefore the betterment of the people of Thailand. This was not possible, however, with the Government of Laos (GoL) by the time of the NT2 Project Appraisal Document (WB 2005). (Both documents are key because they contain the initial assessment of each project, laid out in full, and the approval for granting the respective loans.) The absence of this history with the GoL, however, does not equate to the absence of the seasoned borrower as a justificatory mechanism. Rather, it was precisely because the GoL did not have a sufficient track record that the seasoned borrower mechanism took hold. In the case of NT2, the promise of a seasoned borrower-to-be emerged. This resulted from the GoL's reported willingness to implement dam-related conservation initiatives such as supporting the Nakai-Nam Theun National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NNT-NBCA), a series of livelihood projects inside the NNT-NBCA, downstream compensation and mitigation measures along the Xe Bang Fai River, and the Public Expenditure Management Strengthening Program. If the seasoned borrower is a necessary condition for World Bank involvement in a given project, one of two scenarios, described below, can unfold.

EGAT and the Pak Mun Dam

The first scenario can be seen in the case of EGAT and the Pak Mun Dam. Pak Mun was originally conceived as a relatively (not actually) small, run-of-river project located in Ubon Ratchathani Province on the Mun River, 5.5 km above its confluence with the Mekong River (WB 1991; WCD 2000). In 1967, the National Energy Authority of Thailand (NEA) began conducting studies on the hydropower potential of the Mun River as part of a larger effort on the part of the Thai state, the Mekong Committee, and,

through the 1970s, the Interim Mekong Committee. As such, the earliest origins of the Pak Mun project are tangled with the Cold War politics that spurred the Ubol Ratana (Nam Pong) and Nam Ngum dams in Thailand and Laos, respectively. (For an analysis of Cold War hydropower politics, see Sneddon [2012].) These studies were conducted at the site of the Kaeng Tana Rapids by French consulting firm SOFRELEC. The proposed project would have had a drainage area of 185 square kilometers and its normal water level, the average height of the reservoir created by the dam, would have been 112 meters above sea level (WCD 2000: 16). This plan was abandoned three years later, however, when the same firm determined that hydroelectric projects on the Mun River were not economically or geographically viable (WCD 2000: 15). The plan would not be revisited for another decade.

In 1978, a study was conducted with the goal of addressing seasonal fluctuations in the availability of water resources in the Chi-Mun River Basin. Farmers in the basin experienced problems developing year-round cultivation that were attributed by EGAT and Bank experts to inadequate irrigation infrastructure. The resulting report, entitled “Water for the Northeast: A Strategy for the Development of Small-Scale Water Resources,” was presented to the National Economic and Social Development Board’s Water Resources Planning Subcommittee, and a new water policy for the Northeast was incorporated into the National Master Plan (WCD 2000: 2). The new policy had two key aims. First, it called for an emphasis on the use of existing distribution resources, which meant the development of a new irrigation infrastructure from already existing reservoirs as well as extraction from rivers. Second, it called for meeting basic requirements through the rapid development of small-scale irrigation projects that would be designed to meet subsistence needs and offer minimal irrigation during the dry season (WCD 2000: 2). In the same year, EGAT began its own feasibility studies for a run-of-river dam on the Mun River (WCD 2000: 16). EGAT’s *Summary Report: Pak Mun Multipurpose Development Project* was released in 1988, following dubious engineering and environmental studies conducted by SOGREAH (WCD 2000: 17). The Pak Mun Dam was seen by the Thai state as a small project and did not rank highly enough on either the World Bank or EGAT register to warrant its own loan document. It was packaged in with a loan for a lignite mine (the Mae Moh Mine in Lampang Province) in the Third Power System Development Project (WB 1991).

Construction of the Pak Mun Dam was completed quickly, with loan approval coming in 1991 and power generation beginning in 1993 (WB 1991, Foran and Manorom 2009). Despite this initial conception, however, the Pak Mun Dam has become, in both the NGO and academic worlds, a model of how not to conduct hydropower development, especially with regard to fisheries, and it was eventually declared economically unjustifiable by the World Commission on Dams (WCD 2000). Indeed, the negative impacts of this project, which included a severe loss of livelihood for those living around the project and countless battles for resettlement and livelihood compensation, were such that Rich (1994: 10) described the resettlement policies as “little more than a public relations hoax,” and Friedrichs and Friedrichs (2002: 26) found the World Bank’s “mode of operation [to be]...intrinsicly criminogenic.”

Although the World Bank’s Staff Appraisal Report states that only 150 species of fish were affected by the Pak Mun Dam, the Bank’s figure rose in 1996 to 202 fish species, only four of which were considered rare (WB 1996: 5). Independent studies

conducted by ichthyologists in 1994, however, found 265 affected fish species. Of these, 77 were migratory and 35 depended on rapids habitat for survival. After completion of the dam that same year, only 96 species were found in the upstream region of the Mun River (WCD 2000). Other reports cite only 45 indigenous species left after project completion (Jenkins et al. 2008). Directly upstream of the dam, fish catches experienced a decline of 60–80 percent. Total losses of communities above and below the dam range from 50–100 percent (WCD 2000).

Public protests began well before World Bank loan approval and increased after operation began in June 1994. Organizations such as the Mun River Villagers' Committee and the Assembly of the Poor gained enough support to organize protests that lasted well over 100 days, and a protest village was established close to the dam that lasted from 1999 to 2002 (Friedrichs and Friedrichs 2002; Foran and Manorum 2009). Although these protests were somewhat successful in winning agreements from the Thai central government to negotiations and large benefits for those affected by the fishery declines, many of the gains were lost with the change in the Thai government administration after the 1997–1998 financial crisis. Despite the release of the World Commission on Dams study in 2000, EGAT maintained that Pak Mun's negative effect on fisheries had been exaggerated and that other causes should have been considered. EGAT further argued that the actual energy production of Pak Mun Dam was in keeping with predicted figures, that it had paid compensation to more than 6,200 families for the loss of fisheries, and that Thai and foreign NGOs were encouraging local people to demand ever-increasing levels of compensation far in excess of what was lost as a result of the dam (Foran and Manorum 2009: 67).

In 2001, based on the findings of the Committee to Resolve Problems of the Assembly of the Poor, which did not include any members of the Assembly of the Poor organization, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra ordered EGAT to open all of the sluice gates at Pak Mun for four months a year, from May to August. This original period was later extended to an entire year, during which studies were to be conducted by Ubon Ratchathani University on the return of migratory fish populations (Foran and Manorum 2009). During this time, independent studies found 129 fish species had returned to the upstream side of the river, and 94.9 percent of affected households had returned to fishing, for a total number of 6,915 households (Jenkins et al. 2008; Foran and Manorum 2009). Before an official assessment could be completed, however, EGAT announced it was willing to leave the gates open annually only between the wet season months of July and October (Foran and Manorum 2009). As of 2008, the gates of the Pak Mun Dam are open between May and August. Most migratory fish in the Mun River move upstream between the months of February and September (Jenkins et al. 2008).

Although the history of the Pak Mun Dam is one of contestation, a history of who won which concessions and when can miss the discursive structures at work, at least within the World Bank. An analysis of the World Bank's published reports reveals that it was able to construct a particular version of EGAT using the seasoned borrower mechanism in its Staff Appraisal Report (WB 1991). This version continually emphasized that EGAT was a trusted lender that was trying to help more than just industrial interests. Its goal was to supply power to a growing number of Thai people poised and ready for increased modernization. "Growth in power demand has consistently exceeded that of commercial energy consumption. This has resulted in a

per capita electricity consumption in Thailand...higher than the average for countries at an income level similar to Thailand” (WB 1991: 1). In this context, Pak Mun Dam was considered the most economically viable answer to the technical problem of energy generation, as it had “economic viability compared to the next best option of peaking internal combustion turbine generation” (WB 1991: 3).

This image framed all other justifications for the project, which continuously imagined it as a small, unobtrusive, and most viable solution to EGAT’s problem—energy sector diversification (WB 1991). In addition, EGAT’s seasoned borrower status meant that its planning procedures could be trusted. Being able to plan projects capable, in development discourse, of achieving the goal of betterment is an integral part of being a seasoned borrower. Here, betterment is defined not only as improved standards of living (more electricity, higher incomes, greater number of color televisions, etc.), but also as the planning of projects such that they lead to the planning of still further projects. For the Pak Mun Dam, this meant including programs to improve environmental quality, energy conservation, and further privatization of the energy sector. This guarantee of further projects for the World Bank through assisting a capable borrower is the paradox on which the seasoned borrower mechanism depends. On the one hand, the Bank’s expressed level of trust in EGAT’s capabilities is very high: “There are no major risks associated with the program. Although EGAT’s Power Development Plan is ambitious, the utility’s demonstrated experience with system expansion and its state of preparedness assure the Plan’s successful implementation” (WB 1991: i). On the other hand, there is still work to be done in maintaining EGAT’s path to development: “Through the proposed loan, the Bank would continue its ongoing work with the power subsector and expects to provide a continuous review of EGAT’s PDP [Power Development Plan] to ensure that optimum investment programs are evolved which can be supported by various lenders” (WB 1991: 13).

The World Bank’s trust in EGAT’s ability to plan was not a desire for a hands-off approach but an assurance that the project would lead to further projects without undue complication. A major aspect of World Bank governmentality during Pak Mun Dam, therefore, was the arrangement of various Thai state apparatuses such that the institutional structures between EGAT and the World Bank were strengthened. This strengthening manifests itself, for example, in the post-implementation documents in which the World Bank notes that EGAT went beyond what was required to “meet the demands of affected persons, often expressed through confrontation” (WB 1996: 4). The problem with resettlement and compensation for lost livelihoods occurred because “relaxation of eligibility criteria and the increasing compensation and resettlement entitlements caused discontent among households which were either not or just peripherally affected” (WB 1996: 4).

Once construction of the Pak Mun Dam was completed and protests over compensation for fisheries had begun, the institutional realities borne out of the seasoned borrower construction were used to compel EGAT to address project-affected people’s grievances along technical and managerial lines (Foran and Manorom 2009). The success of this project was in maintaining the position of EGAT (and so the World Bank) as the organization most capable of solving livelihood problems. In its own reports, the World Bank found that “relocation was extraordinarily easy,” citing that “some households literally moved across the street” (WB 1998: 3). EGAT itself “actually

committed to exceed the World Bank resettlement policy, to improve the living standards of affected households, to provide a range of options, and to implement resettlement with the participation of affected people” (WB 1998: 4). The problems in compensating for the devastating loss of fisheries along the river and inadequate resettlement policies, according to the World Bank “was not one of EGAT’s commitments, *which is not subject to doubt*, but how to establish fair compensation” (WB 1998:4; emphasis added). One can see here a clear example of the rendering technical of political-economic problems.

The World Commission on Dams reported total project costs for Pak Mun Dam associated with resettlement and compensation had increased 68 percent, from US\$155.2 million in 1989 to US\$260 million in 1999 (WCD 2000). These costs included US\$15.8 million in compensation for loss of fisheries and resettlement compensation for 1,700 households, almost seven times the World Bank estimate (WCD 2000). The large increases in compensation payments that protesters were able to secure from EGAT and the World Bank serve as evidence that the Bank does not simply plan and implement projects exactly as it intends. Rather, opposition to the Pak Mun Dam was able to create enough problems for the Bank that an attempt was made to bring protester demands into development discourse as issues of bad policy. Once the dam’s impact on fisheries was rendered a policy failure, EGAT and the World Bank established a succession of committees to determine who was eligible for what level of compensation (WB 1996; WCD 2000; Foran and Manorom 2009). The committees, such as the Subcommittee of the Impacts of Fishing Occupations and the Committee for Assistance and Occupational Development of Fish Farmers, were a disaster. Yet again, however, project failure had little to do with the ability of EGAT or the Bank to govern, as all possible solutions continually led back to World Bank-funded compensation or World Bank-led livelihood programs (WCD 2000).

The World Bank’s ability to maintain its position of power was not in spite of project opposition but through the unintended mitigation policies it worked out in response to local people who were “protesting, including disruptive behavior at the project site, to demand *even more favorable* compensation and resettlement packages” (WB 1998: 5–6; emphasis added). That is not to say that if a positive outcome had resulted from the Pak Mun project, the World Bank would have been removed from its position of power either. Rather, an implication of EGAT’s seasoned borrower status is the assurance of future projects. Had the Pak Mun Dam achieved its stated goals, the Bank would likely still have been heavily involved in loaning EGAT money for the implementation and monitoring of development programs (WB 1991). To the extent that the Bank and EGAT were not able to account for project opposition through technical solutions, individual protestors were considered irrationally afraid of modernization and NGOs were dismissed as unwilling to work with the Bank due to equally irrational ideological opposition to all hydropower projects:

Despite the generous compensation for houses and land and many other social infrastructure and service benefits, many people claim they are not satisfied, that they are worse off. There is such a culture of complaint, of trying to win sympathy for even greater compensation claims and assistance, that it is difficult

to get affected people to be balanced about their resettlement experience. (WB 1998: 17)

In this way, the Bank validated the EGAT's actions in response to the opposition by comparing its proposed solutions to those of groups outside, and therefore illegible to, development discourse. For example, project-affected people were described as apprehensive about "being integrated into the modern economy, with its competitive, wage-based forms of income" and as having problems with the project that were "profoundly psychological and emotional, not economic" (WB 1998: 17–18). Although the EGAT and World Bank answers to protests and complaints are a result of contestations with local people and the Thai state's own agenda, the mechanism of the seasoned borrower is ever present in the World Bank's account of project outcomes and answers to local and national levels of contestation.

The Government of Laos and Nam Theun 2 Dam

The role of the seasoned borrower justification in the Nam Theun 2 Dam project differs from its role in the case of EGAT in that the GoL presented no history of prior successful projects. As I hope to show in this section, the justificatory role of the seasoned borrower for the GoL is the promise of what the government could become. The absence of the conditions necessary for a seasoned borrower justification is the justificatory ground for the project. This can be seen in the concern expressed by members of the Social and Environmental Panel of Experts (PoE) that without the involvement of the World Bank, the unsuccessful history of the GoL would repeat itself and result in the devastation of important environmental and livelihood resources. It can likewise be seen in the establishment of the Public Expenditure Management Strengthening Program, a Bank initiative in which experts are hired by the GoL to oversee the application and distribution of project revenue to further development projects.

Although World Bank loan approval came in 2005, heavy Bank involvement in planning can be traced back at least to the first PoE report in 1997. Unlike the Pak Mun Dam, NT2 is a particularly large project, and was closely watched on all sides by development institutions and their critics. The project itself includes a 39-meter-high dam on the Theun River and the diversion of water from the project's large reservoir into a channel running into the Xe Bang Fai River. It became fully operational in December 2010 in violation of its Concession Agreement, which stipulated that all resettlement activities had to be completed prior to full operation (IRN 2010; WB 2010; McDowell et al. 2010). Supporting some of Goldman's eco-governmentality thesis, the most significant differences between the planning for NT2 and the Pak Mun Dam were the World Bank's emphasis on environmentalism and the incorporation of experts from INGOs focused on conservation in the case of NT2.

The authors of the PoE reports went beyond using conservation as a justification for the project, eventually expressing great frustration over delays in World Bank loan approval, fearing the project would be implemented by other international financial institutions with whom they had no relationship and who would not bring with them the social and environmental requirements of the World Bank (Scudder et al. 1997a;

Scudder and Talbot 2004). This was largely because, according to the PoE, “With or without World Bank assistance, the Government believes it has no option but to continue developing its hydropower resources. Unfortunately, its record with such development during the 1990s in regard to environmental and resettlement issues has been very unsatisfactory” (Scudder et al. 1997b: 6). This concern is repeated more directly in the PoE’s sixth and seventh reports, which state: “The main constraint to livelihood improvement on the Nakai Plateau is the further delay in the implementation of the NT2 Project or project implementation without a World Bank financial guarantee” (Scudder and Talbot 2004 27; Scudder and Talbot 2004: 29).

It is clear from the PoE and World Bank documents that the range of specific finalities intended for NT2 differ from those for the Pak Mun Dam, in particular the creation of the large Nakai Nam Theun-National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NNT-NBCA) adjacent to the project. The conservation aspect of the NT2 project remained, at the end of the construction phase, the most important outcome to the PoE and the “primary reason for the involvement and support by the World Bank and other international financial institutions and key environmental organizations” (McDowell et al. 2009: 35). Despite its involvement in livelihood restoration on the Nakai plateau and Nam Theun River, the PoE maintained that the NNT-NBCA was the reason NT2 was a possible global model for hydropower development. The protected area is the largest in Laos and extends from the upper edge of the NT2 reservoir to the border with Vietnam. The PoE touted the area’s value for global biodiversity by emphasizing in its reports the five species of mammals, previously unknown to science, that had been discovered since planning for NT2 began. The reports also noted the cultural diversity of the 6,500 human inhabitants and their ten ethnic groups, “three of which have only been described since 1966” (McDowell et al. 2009: 35).

The programs recommended by the PoE and implemented by the GoL contain within them a bizarre mix of modernization and the drive to turn the NNT-NBCA, its wildlife, and its people into a sort of living museum. Long, one-sided debates span the reports, which continue over more than a decade, about the appropriate width of roads in the area such that only two-wheeled tractors may enter or leave, or how much of what kinds of animals are suitable for hunting. One of the livelihoods that was considered a viable option for those living within the NNT-NBCA was to work for the newly formed Watershed Management Protection Authority (WMPA), which was tasked with patrolling the area for poachers and monitoring fishing, among other things. This, however, was somewhat problematic as WMPA employees were sometimes shot at in the course of trying to control human actions in the NNT-NBCA and many did not “believe that the area’s wildlife is severely degraded” (McDowell et al. 2009: 38; 2010: 28).

Nonetheless, the PoE consistently rated the GoL’s performance in conservation matters very highly and frequently blamed shortcomings on the international institutions that were either not pressing hard enough for conservation, delaying funding, or putting more focus on construction (McDowell et al. 2010). The estimation of the GoL’s performance and the particular accounting for its shortcomings was likely a tactic of the PoE to continue the conservation projects despite setbacks. The high estimation of the GoL emphasis on conservation ultimately mixed with the precarious nature of its ability to realize its conservation goals in a way that legitimized Bank

involvement before and after loan approval in 2005. In fact, the high degree of potential risks identified by the PoE had an impact on the project justifications in the loan approval document, the Project Appraisal Document (PAD) (WB 2005). Chief among these risks were the GoL's poor record with hydropower projects and concern that the revenue generated by NT2 might not be used on future public programs (WB 2005).

The PAD begins in much the same way as the Pak Mun Dam's Staff Appraisal Report (WB 1991), with the construction of a borrower facing exactly the types of challenges the Bank is able to help it meet. However, whereas EGAT needed only a small boost toward energy-sector diversification, Laos required much more involvement from the World Bank due to its low stage of development and poor record with similar projects. Nonetheless, the World Bank saw hope for Laos in the abundance of underutilized natural resources.

According to the PAD, Laos's economy went through strong growth performance between 1991 and 2003, due to its steadily increasing market orientation. In the same time period, the GoL was reported to have made great strides in reducing poverty rates from 46 to 33 percent (WB 2005: 3). Despite such progress, the World Bank found severe poverty in many districts and especially among ethnic minority communities. In addition to poor policy structures for poverty reduction, Laos also suffered from "limited capacity in the central and provincial governments, a fledgling private sector, lack of infrastructure, and the absence of a strong civil society" (WB 2005: 3). In 2003, the GoL began its National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy, a program designed to bring rapid growth through sustainable development. Although the World Bank supported the overall strategy "through a program of analytical and advisory activities, and ongoing and new operations," it noted that meeting the GoL's goals would require an annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 7 percent (WB 2005: 3). Such a sustained growth rate was seen as possible, but only with certain important caveats. The PAD states:

[W]ith its significant natural resources and central position in the rapidly growing Greater Mekong Subregion...Lao PDR is well placed to achieve quality growth and reduce poverty, provided that the Government manages to increase the contribution of natural resources (especially sustainable hydropower and mining) to development; fosters a more enabling environment to promote private sector investment; and undertakes reforms to improve the quality of governance, management of public finances, and service delivery. (WB 2005: 3)

The introduction to the PAD points to two key national priorities that the development of hydropower infrastructure is particularly well suited to address. Both involve the connection between environmentalism and development established by the PoE. According to the report, hydropower expansion benefits the GoL by "first, promoting economic and social advancement by providing a reliable, affordable, and sustainable domestic source of electricity; and second, mobilizing foreign exchange and budgetary revenues to finance poverty reduction and environmental and social programs" (WB 2005: 4). Laos's geographic location between Thailand and Vietnam, two countries with reportedly high demands for energy imports, further strengthens

the case for hydropower expansion. The already signed memorandum of understanding between the GoL and EGAT for the latter's purchase of 95 percent of NT2's output, along with two preexisting dams serving the Thai market, served as further evidence for the World Bank that dam development was the best answer to Laos's problems, a line of reasoning that dated back to the justifications of the early Mekong Committee projects.

As reflected in the concerns of the PoE over delays in loan approval, the World Bank was not the only international financial institution capable of planning and funding a new dam in Laos, which meant it had competition from other international financial institutions during the planning of NT2 that were not present during the Pak Mun Dam years. The construction of the need for hydropower expansion was, therefore, not sufficient to justify taking on the risk of such a large loan to such an indebted country given the international attention focused on hydropower projects at the time. The World Bank's eco-governmentality, worked out through confrontation and international opposition, required a further step in terms of project justification. In the PAD, it was not enough that the World Bank was able to fund NT2. It was harmful for project-affected people if it did not. The report established a concern that the problems of previous dam projects would be repeated if the World Bank was not able to enforce its own technical and managerial expertise. For example, although World Bank planning so far had helped create "transparent financial management," "further progress will be essential if NT2 revenues are to be applied transparently and efficiently to the financing of priority expenditure programs for poverty reduction and environmental conservation/management" (WB 2005: 6). Indeed, despite the possibility of funding from other institutions, "the Bank is one of the few institutions with the broad range of skills needed to assist the GoL in the sustainable development of a large, private sector-financed hydropower project with multiple social and environmental impacts" (WB 2005: 6).

The PAD makes repeated reference to the GoL's "relatively weak country capacity and...weak track record on governance" (WB 2005: 7). Due to previous environmental and social failures in Laos, the "risks of the project [are] considered to be Modest to Substantial" (WB 2005: 36). In keeping with the technical rendering of political economic problems in development discourse (Mitchell 2002; Li 2007), the solution offered by the World Bank was a complex arrangement of management and evaluation strategies designed to ensure that NT2 revenues were used to fund poverty reduction and conservation programs, "ensuring early detection of problems and the timely implementation of appropriate compensating measures" (WB 2005: 36).

In exchange for loan approval, the GoL agreed to create an "effective, transparent and accountable" system for the expenditure of all revenue related to NT2 (WB 2005: 16). To do this, the World Bank and the GoL developed the Public Expenditure Management Strengthening Program (PEMSP), which covered: "fiscal planning and budget preparation, treasury, accounting and reporting, the development of information systems and the legislative framework for public expenditure management" (WB 2005: 17). The PAD mentions a series of smaller scheduled loans from the Bank from 2005 to 2007 for the implementation of the PEMSP. In addition to these loans, the GoL agreed to hire two long-term consultants of the World Bank's choosing. Once operational, the PEMSP would also integrate assistance from present

and future World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) projects in Laos. The PAD mentions health, education and roads projects that have already been approved by the Bank and that include financial management systems, “particularly systems designed to channel resources close to the field level, as well as the formulation of sector level expenditure policies” (WB 2005: 17). After project completion, the GoL would work with World Bank consultants to adjust the use of NT2 revenues toward some projects and away from others on an as-needed basis. The PEMSP was enacted by the GoL in November 2005, and in 2008 the World Bank reported that its Financial Management Capacity Building Project had worked with the GoL to “improve budget preparation, execution, reporting, and auditing, all of which are essential for better management of funds generated from Nam Theun 2” (WB 2008: 1).

The PAD’s description of the PEMSP calls for some translation. According to the World Bank, it is a program created to render the GoL’s spending practices legible to the World Bank’s monitoring agencies, the justification for which is the historical likelihood that NT2 revenues will not be used for environmental and social development as planned (i.e., the high risk involved in conducting such a large project in Laos). At its inception, however, the program was linked directly to myriad other World Bank-funded projects. The GoL was required to hire World Bank-approved consultants for an undetermined, yet lengthy, amount of time, maintaining the power relationship between development experts and those being developed. These expert consultants would then assist the GoL in creating new development projects requiring World Bank funding.

The absence of the institutional structures necessary for successful project implementation is as central a justification for World Bank involvement in NT2 as the *presence* of such structures was in the case of Pak Mun Dam. Yet, the absence of these structures did not go unaddressed by the World Bank. This is partly due to the differences between the prospect of building a dam in economically stable Thailand in the early 1990s and economically fragile Laos in the 2000s. The emphasis on environmental programs with NT2 is a particular product of the global opposition to hydropower projects that came to a head in the late 1990s with the World Commission on Dams. The common line, that NT2 symbolizes the Bank’s reentry into hydropower, is questionable, however, because the Bank was conducting feasibility studies and social and environmental reports at the same time that it was assessing the outcomes of Pak Mun Dam. This chronology suggests that there was little or no break in its role as a knowledge producer in the region. The creation of the PEMSP, in fact, allowed for the establishment of the specific type of Bank/borrower relationship used in the seasoned borrower construction. By hiring World Bank consultants into long-term positions at a GoL agency with the task of identifying new problems and creating technical solutions, the World Bank was bringing the GoL into its own realm of knowledge production and governmentality.

Although NT2 remains a high-risk project, mechanisms like the PEMSP were included in order to facilitate involvement in future low-risk projects. Since a major justification for World Bank involvement in NT2 is the need to govern GoL practices to ensure that the project’s revenue is directed toward public programs, and since the World Bank has already connected future public programs to its own lending, it can be said that the justifications for the current project are the projects yet to come. That is,

NT2 will not only bring betterment through direct project-related programs (livelihood, conservation, etc.), it paves the way for other projects that bring the World Bank, the GoL, and the people of Laos into ever closer contact with one another. The PEMSP establishes a power relationship between all three that is totally irrelevant to the realization of NT2's stated goals. Whether development experts are to be believed as somewhat earnest in their stated agendas (Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002; Goldman 2005; Li 2007) or not (Rich 1994; McCully 2001), programs such as the PEMSP maintain the World Bank and the borrower as the legitimate authorities for identifying problems and creating solutions, even in the face of project failure or public opposition.

Ultimately, the World Bank was unable to construct the GoL as a seasoned borrower. The high international profile of the project and the addition of the PoE, the major arm of the 'eco' aspect of the World Bank's eco-governmentality, created a scenario in which it was not possible for the World Bank to justify NT2 based on the construction of already proven successes of the GoL with similar projects. Rather, the project's justificatory logic springs from the absence of a seasoned borrower and the need to create one to ensure betterment through monitoring of livelihood programs, and the establishment of government agencies designed to continually organize revenue expenditure around future World Bank projects. For both NT2 and the Pak Mun Dam, the borrower must either already have the sort of relationship with the Bank that will guarantee the connection of the current project to future projects, or there must be the possibility that such a relationship can be developed.

Conclusions

The construction of the seasoned borrower means more for the borrower than the requirement that it agree to several projects or to none at all. As with EGAT, it also means acceptance into the development discourse as a legitimate producer of knowledge at an international level. Countless accolades from both the World Bank and the PoE in the planning and implementation phases of NT2 construct an image of the GoL as eager to provide livelihood improvements to the people it governs but lacking the technical expertise and funding to do so. One report late in the implementation phases states, "While capacity has been stretched, the Government has in general done an admirable job in evolving institutions and helping people develop the skills to meet the new challenges of NT2" (WB 2010: 18). The PoE and the World Bank use such language in key moments throughout the process. For the former, the GoL becomes a more and more capable and willing borrower as delays in loan approval threaten the success of conservation projects. For the latter, the GoL's poor history of hydropower development is mentioned in the Project Appraisal Document but disappears after the establishment of the Public Expenditure Management Strengthening Program (WB 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2008; 2010).

Although, at the time of my research, not as much information was available about the impacts of NT2 compared with what was available for Pak Mun Dam, the PoE reports prior to commercial operation indicated that the inclusion of conservation experts in the planning process had mainly resulted in the failure of a set of public programs that were different than the programs that might have been implemented if not for the conservation experts' input (McDowell et al. 2009; 2010). For example,

failures in the newly created programs connecting livelihood to conservation were attributed to this input. Much like the Pak Mun Dam, however, NT2 seems to have been a success in terms of maintaining the Bank's governing power, although bilateral projects like the Xayaburi Dam still represent a serious challenge for the Bank. The opposition raised by INGOs that pointed to the Bank's history of ecologically devastating hydropower projects was incorporated into NT2's planning process but was revised so that the general opposition to dams was presented as a process of working out the best possible policies and state apparatus for connecting conservation and development. Yet, this was done in such a way that it allowed for a host of committees and departments to be put into place to create new projects as solutions when livelihood and conservation projects encountered problems.

Li (2007: 269) clarifies her analysis of World Bank governmentality by saying that illustrating the limitations of its programs is "not suggesting that there was a hidden agenda for which the program's rationale was merely a mask." I would like to echo this sentiment in regard to this research. I do not find, for example, that the PoE hired for NT2 entered the project with the intention of strengthening the Bank's power in Laos or burdening an already poor population with the task of conservation at the expense of livelihood resources. Nor do I contend that Bank experts portrayed EGAT's resettlement and compensation plans for Pak Mun Dam as commendable so as to avoid further study and increased costs. Rather, the production of knowledge in development discourse inherently excludes the causes of social and environmental problems that cannot be addressed by technical and managerial solutions. Further, built into the construction of the seasoned borrower is a long-term commitment to solving problems through Bank-funded projects, which has negative consequences that limit the possible approaches to addressing even the most devastating project impacts.

Finally, I contend that World Bank governmentality cannot be understood solely at the level of the type of policy and institution it creates. Such an analysis misses what it is that governmentality tries to capture. It may be useful to think of this paper as emphasizing certain null findings. The change in emphasis from fisheries production during and after construction of the Pak Mun Dam to conservation with NT2 should not be understood as a new type of governmentality. Rather, these differences are surface manifestations of a deeper discursive structure—the need for a hydropower project to produce still further projects. The justificatory mechanism of the seasoned borrower, through focusing on the way in which project outcomes lead to more projects through the inclusion of the borrower in the development discourse is a step toward making fuller use of Foucault's original concept.

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