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Book Reviews

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Smyth, H. Warrington. Notes of a Journey on the Upper Mekong, Siam. London: Published for the Royal Geographical Society by J. Murray, 1895. pp. 75.

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.

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Water Resources Development, Wetlands-Based Livelihoods and Notions of Wellbeing: Perspectives from Northeast Thailand[1*]

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the concept of societal "wellbeing" (*yuu dee mee suk*) has increasingly appeared in policy discourse in Thailand, often embedded in narratives proposing "people-centered" or "participatory" development approaches, and has frequently been associated with the "Sufficiency Economy" philosophy. Over the past decade or so, a limited number of studies have been conducted examining locally situated understandings of wellbeing in communities in Northeast Thailand which have found that a generalized rubric of "water" ranks highly in people's perceptions of social wellbeing linked to livelihood concerns. However, this broad categorization of "water" does not account for the multiple uses and functions in society in which water and wellbeing play a part, including various economic, ecological, spiritual and cultural values. Moreover, few studies have explored in any detail how people frame perceptions of development around particular water use sectors, especially competitive demands for irrigated agriculture and wetlands ecosystems.

This paper briefly reviews some of the national development literature concerning water resources, wellbeing and livelihoods, and its relevance to the context of Northeast Thailand. Specifically, it refers to a case study of the lower Nam Songkhram Basin (LNSB), an important and extensive wetlands area, to highlight how state water resources policy, planning and development narratives and practice are generally poorly cognizant of the local socio-ecological context, overlook past development outcomes, and tends to promote interventions that often degrade wetlands ecosystem services, thus potentially undermining social wellbeing by making communities and the environment less resilient and more vulnerable to external shocks. The study utilizes both secondary sources and direct research findings, including a survey examining the perceptions of the public regarding regional development issues and framings of water resources management priorities. It raises fundamental questions about social constructions around water resources and the need to better understand and integrate social wellbeing and ecosystems approaches into Northeastern water resources

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development and management policies, planning and practices. The findings could have some relevance to other Lao-speaking societies within the wider lower Mekong Basin.

Keywords: wellbeing, ecosystem services, water resources, wetlands, sustainable development, Northeast Thailand, development discourse

INTRODUCTION

Northeast Thailand, in common with other lowland regions of the lower Mekong Basin (LMB), including much of the river floodplains of Lao PDR, contains significant tracts of wetlands. These wetlands may be either seasonal or permanent, artificial or natural, and covering a wide array of different habitat types, from small swamps and ponds, lakes and reservoirs, and numerous water courses of varying sizes up to the Mekong River itself. They are considered highly productive ecosystems in terms of biodiversity and biomass, both aquatic and terrestrial, supporting numerous human communities that rely on them for part of their livelihoods in terms of household subsistence and income (MRC, 2010; Constanza et al., 2011). The best documented wetlands dependent socio-economic sector are freshwater capture fisheries, which are estimated to yield about 1.9 million tons per annum in 2008, which together with aquaculture production had a first sale value of $3.9 – 7 billion (MRC, 2010). The Mekong fishery has been described as the "world's largest freshwater fishery", with the average per capita fish consumption across the 60 million inhabitants of the LMB estimated at 33.7 kg/person/year (ICEM, 2010: 95). Over 75 % of households have been estimated to be involved in capture fisheries, both for household consumption and sale to markets (MRC, 2003).

Humans benefit from a vast range of resources and processes provided by ecosystems, which collectively are known as "ecosystem services". Besides capture fisheries, wetlands in the LMB provide numerous other benefits to society, both in terms of livelihood provision and other ecosystem services. Direct uses or "provisioning services" (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005) include water and land for agriculture (particularly rice cultivation), grazing land for animals, a source of wood and fibrous material for energy, building and handicrafts, a wide variety of wild foodstuffs harvested for consumption and sale, medicinal plants and water for domestic consumption. Additionally, there are numerous other valuable, indirect use services of wetlands, such as their role as carbon sinks, flow regulation, flood mitigation, groundwater recharge, wastewater treatment and climate regulation, which are more difficult qualities to quantify but are understood to provide massive benefits to human communities nevertheless. A Mekong River Commission (MRC) study on the impacts of flow modification of the Mekong mainstream under different development scenarios, found that the baseline value of wetlands (excluding capture fisheries) in the Mekong Basin was estimated at US $1,802 million, with Thailand having the highest value at US $1,249 million (King et al., 2005). By comparison, the same study estimated that irrigated agriculture was worth just US $479 million within the LMB across the four countries involved (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam). At a more localized level, a study of a single peri-urban wetland system on the fringes of Vientiane found that the

combined direct and indirect use value of the That Luang marshes was US $2,450/ ha/ year (Gerrard, 2004).

Increasingly, regional and global development reports are drawing connections between ecosystem services and human wellbeing as the links are becoming better understood as a bi-directional pattern. McMichael and Scholes (2005) have stressed that there are serious issues of equity involved, such as considering who experiences the gains and losses of ecosystem services under conditions of socio-environmental change. Crucially these authors raised a related question, "if the connection between ecosystem services and human well-being is so strong, why do people behave in an apparently irrational manner by undermining factors necessary for their own good?" (McMichael and Scholes, 2005: 45). This paper partially attempts to address this question in the context of Northeast Thailand, with reference to a case study of a relatively well studied, floodplain wetlands ecosystem. While the ecological health of this and other LMB wetlands have been linked to the social wellbeing of local populations dependent upon this ecosystem and a relatively detailed picture of the interdependencies between the two have been built up, rarely have studies been conducted that explicitly address the question of why development policy makers and planners at various scales invariably seem to prioritize the allocation of available water and wetlands habitats for use in irrigation and agricultural intensification, over conserving the vast array of existing natural ecosystem services for present and future generations sake; and how this conundrum may be related to dominant national interpretations of wellbeing and development.

Starting with a brief examination of the contested concept of "wellbeing" from a theoretical perspective, this paper proceeds to consider how wellbeing has been interpreted in the case of Thailand, where the state has progressively incorporated it into a mainstream national development discourse. Specifically, it considers the role that wellbeing notions have played in recent National Economic and Social Development Plans and how they intersect with water resources development as a key narrative component. The paper then briefly considers the holistic and multi-purpose nature of water resources in local livelihoods and culture linked to the environment, by focusing on a situated case study of the lower Nam Songkhram Basin (LNSB) wetlands. It highlights contradictory framings of a so-called "Isan[4] problematic" in the local context where the region's primary development problem has long been defined in terms of water scarcity and linked poverty, (which in turn has circumscribed universally prescriptive solutions). It shows how this phenomenon is partly manifested in dominant public perceptions of water resources management "problems", by examining the results of a 2010 questionnaire survey. Lastly the paper draws attention to the consistent societal fascination with large-scale water resource schemes proposed for Northeast Thailand, both as an outcome of state-led planning and as part of wider Mekong regional development processes, and what these may imply for future regional water security and general concerns for social wellbeing.

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[4] While recognizing there are several different spellings commonly used, this paper adopts "Isan" to refer to the 17 provinces comprising the Northeast, which forms a geographically, linguistically and culturally distinctive region.

This paper draws from a range of data sources, including grey literature, more formal academic sources and the authors' own field data, in particular a large body of livelihood and wetlands ecosystem data and project reports accumulated during the IUCN-implemented Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP)[5] in which both authors were closely involved between 2004-07, and in addition a shorter period of field data collection (involving direct observation, stakeholder interviews and a questionnaire survey) conducted by the first author in 2009-10 for his PhD thesis, focusing on building an understanding of irrigation development drivers and societal power relations (Blake, 2012). The article adopts a critical realist approach (Sayer, 2000) that regards social systems as "open" and indeterminate, and allows for use of discourse analysis to illustrate how commonly-held environmental narratives about a region are often social constructions, produced and reproduced by certain groups in society to create or maintain a given social order and provide material benefits to these groups through privileging particular development solutions, often at the expense of the interests of weaker social groups. At the same time, it allows for an objective material world that is knowable, and suggests that false or partially correct ideas conceived as "development myths" or "orthodoxies" (Leach and Mearns, 1996) are the product of an inevitable "socialness" of the actors or group that created them and reflect underlying power relations.

Wellbeing, Livelihoods and Ecosystems

The term "wellbeing" has crept steadily into the development lexicon during recent decades to become a widely used notion, but is often poorly defined or fuzzy in meaning. As with "sustainable", "participatory" and a few other popular development terms, wellbeing can be highly subjective as to what is implied by its use. McGregor (2009: 5) notes that there is a tendency for wellbeing conceptions "to become overcomplicated, over-philosophized and ultimately they cannot be operationalized." Wellbeing terminology emerged from origins in social psychology and welfare economics (e.g., the "economics of happiness" perspective), but later wellbeing terminology became closely associated with the "capabilities" approach and the "sustainable livelihoods approach" (SLA) by development actors and institutions. A prominent proponent of the wellbeing concept in development literature, Amartya Sen (1999) believes wellbeing is made up of "functioning" (various things a person may value doing or being) and "capability" (the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for him/her to achieve), while poverty is conversely understood as capability-deprivation. Although Sen's formulation of wellbeing has been widely acknowledged, it has also been criticized for lacking methodological rigor (e.g., Alkire and Black, 1997). Far from being a generally accepted or universally understood term, "wellbeing" appears to be a contested notion that defies easy definition (Gadrey and Florence, 2006). At a simple level, wellbeing has been identified as a state of health, happiness and comfort (MacKian, 2009), but these are clearly highly subjective indicators. In an attempt to move beyond Sen's somewhat problematic notion of

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[5] Most of the written outputs of MWBP and background information on the LNSB can be accessed at the following website, including English and Thai language reports: http://www.mekongwetlands.org/

wellbeing, McGregor (2009) has proposed the following definition as a practical and social compromise: "wellbeing is a state of being with others, where one's needs are met, where one is able to meaningfully pursue one's goals, and where one is able to experience a satisfactory quality of life."

In one sense, the various conceptualizations of wellbeing can be conceived as an attempt to achieve an improved general theory of development, in which both "subjective" as well as "objective" aspects of society are recognized. As development thinking has increasingly become congruent with environmental concerns, precipitated partly by the publication of "Limits to Growth" in 1972 and later seminal Brundtland Report (1987), notions of wellbeing have infiltrated debates around development and sustainability. More recently, the widely quoted United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) (2005) key synthesis report, "Ecosystems and Human Well-being", proposes that there are four basic constituents to wellbeing, ordered under the generic headings: security, basic material for a good life, health, and good social relations. Together these factors contribute to an overall apparent yardstick of wellbeing – freedom of choice and action i.e., "opportunity to be able to achieve what an individual values being and doing". A linking theme between the environment and human wellbeing is that ecosystems provide "services" that are necessary for the viability of human welfare, whereas the actions of humans will conversely affect, and in many cases degrade, ecosystems both directly and indirectly. In other words, the health of ecosystems and the health and wellbeing of humans are interlinked and interdependent. For example, the MEA report underlines how a continuation of twin trends of increased exploitation of ecosystems and degradation of those ecosystems is unsustainable and likely to lead to irreversible changes that have a disproportional impact on the most vulnerable members of a society (Corvalan et al., 2005). It has been noted how a core component considered necessary by survey respondents for wellbeing derived from ecosystem services is "access to resources for a viable livelihood (including food or building materials) or the income to purchase them" (McMichael and Scholes, 2005: 49).

Water resources, in theory, should provide rich subject matter for wellbeing researchers, imbued as it is with multiple meanings to society, which according to Bakker (2010: 3) includes, "an economic input, an aesthetic reference, a religious symbol, a public service, a private good, a cornerstone of public health, and a bio-physical necessity for humans and ecosystems alike." Despite this intuitive link between the essential nature of water resources and notions of wellbeing, it was interesting that in one multi-case study book titled, *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research*, water resources were mentioned just once in the context of water access barriers in the Andes (Gough and MacGregor, 2007: 194), suggesting it has not always been a high priority issue for social wellbeing-focused researchers in the past. Wellbeing in the context of fisheries governance appears to have been better studied in some respects than water and wellbeing per se. Taking up the challenge in a policy paper examining the fisheries sector in South Asia, MacGregor (2009: 2) speculates that "an understanding of the motivations for the way and the extent to which people exploit a fishery, as part of their pursuit of wellbeing, provides a basis for formulating effective systems of governance and policy." However, MacGregor concedes that while the concept of wellbeing has been widely adopted at the rhetorical level, it has so far not

been translated effectively into policy and practice. As acknowledged in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report 2006, water pervades all aspects of human development, but this should not imply that water scarcity should be the starting point for understanding its management (Watkins, 2006). The UNDP report explicitly recognizes that "the scarcity at the heart of the global water crisis is rooted in power, poverty and inequality, not in physical availability" (Watkins, 2006: 10). This critical observation is offset by an apparent gap in research of water resources development and wellbeing linkages in developing country contexts that looks beyond physical scarcity narratives to examine the power and politics aspects involved. Mehta's research in Gujarat state of India would be one notable exception (see Mehta 2001; 2005).

Wellbeing notions in Thailand and development planning and policy

Thailand is widely recognized as being one of the few countries in Asia that has explicitly placed "wellbeing" (in Thai the term often used is "*yuu dee mee suk*" – literally, "live well, have happiness") concerns within its development agenda over the past few decades (McGregor et al, 2007). Intriguingly, these authors note how, "at the level of casual observation, the pursuit of wellbeing could be regarded as a national pastime. At a more formal level, notions of wellbeing have now found themselves a place in national policy discourses and documents" (McGregor et al, 2007: 2). The roots of this ideological project can be traced back in part to the early 1960s, when plans and policies were being forged by an emerging new national leadership structure. Thailand's national development ethos and direction was to a significant extent guided by the National Economic Development Plans,[6] first implemented with World Bank input under the dictatorial government of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1961, which stressed economic growth within a context of national security as the top priority (Chaloemtiarana, 2007). This period saw a bureaucratic and military elite assert its instrumental visions and dominant statist ideology based on the triple pillars of "nation-religion-king" (*chart-satsana-phra mahakasat*), to mould a potent discourse of developmentalism that could be applied to counter the spread of communism across Indochina. Sarit's paternalistic governance inclinations and mistrust of parliamentary democracy were tempered by Western concerns for a stable bulwark state in Southeast Asia which encouraged militarization alongside limited democratization. The communist threat was perceived by conservative elements in society as fundamentally "un-Thai" and a latent danger to the nation's security and monarchy (Baker and Pongpaichit, 2005). Elites regarded it as "a negation of the livelihood, history and civilization of the Thai race", argues Samudavanija (2002: 61).

Significantly, a key constitutive facet of Sarit's newly popularized term "development" (*kan phattana*) closely equated an elite-centric view of ordinary citizens' wellbeing needs with a strong emphasis on "having money" as a yardstick. This is attested to by a propaganda slogan played by government radio programs broadcasting throughout Thailand during the 1960s: "*ngan kue ngeun, ngeun kue ngan, bandarn suk*"

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[6] These later evolved to become known as National Economic and Social Development Plans.

– "work is money and money is work;, such is happiness". Over subsequent decades the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), responsible for formulating the five yearly national development plans, placed strong emphasis on modernization, economic progress and reform of society through the incorporation of Sarit's visions. A similar widely disseminated catchy slogan stressing wellbeing he was said to have coined for a government publicity campaign to promote his development mission was "*nam lai, fai sawang, thang di, mi ngan tham, bandarn suk*" (flowing water, bright lights, good roads, work for the people; such is happiness) (Chaloemtiarana, 2007: xiv).

Since the paternalistic and militaristic regime of Sarit, successive development plans, policies and strategies prioritized the goal of maximizing economic growth, juxtaposed with vague references to the importance of ensuring citizen's "happiness". But by the Eighth National Development Plan (1997-2001), rhetorical recognition was made by policy makers that the previous national development plans had placed too much emphasis on material aspects and a changed of tack occurred through a specific focus on the idea of "people centered development" and desire to achieve a society marked by "greater happiness and better quality of life" (NESDB, 2007: 1). The start of this plan coincided with the Asian Economic Crash and many of the original goals had to be temporarily laid aside in favor of short-term economic pragmatism. The Ninth Plan (2002-2006) was the first to officially "adopt" the concept of "Sufficiency Economy" [7] (*settakit por piang*) (Isager and Ivarsson, 2011). It was said to seek to build "an economy with strong internal foundations and resilient to external changes, while aiming for balanced development with respect to people, society, economy and environment in order to achieve sustainable development and the wellbeing of the Thai people" (NESDB, 2007: 1). In terms of water resources management, and reflecting a commonly held instrumental view of management, the Ninth Plan proposed "to solve the problems of shortage, flooding and contamination in a holistic manner" (NESDB, 2002: 5). The same document also planned to increase water storage capacity by building "small reservoirs and developing a fair and sufficient water distribution system". This period saw steady economic growth of over five per cent annually and a supposed decline in absolute poverty, as improvements in health care and economic diversification became apparent. It was also a period marked by continuing high state investments in hydraulic infrastructure construction nationwide, especially in irrigation schemes, even as the agrarian shift intensified (Rigg, 2005) and rural labor became considerably scarcer (Floch et al., 2007; Floch and Molle, 2009a).

While Sufficiency Economy and related ideas (e.g., the king's "Moderation Society" and "New Theory of Agriculture") were primarily monarchical, military and state agency promoted concepts, they mesh closely with a broad-based civil society interest in alternative development models that seek to promote greater economic sovereignty and endogenous development ideas (e.g., van t'Hooft, 2006), alongside a new agricultural paradigm that tends to reject high external input, industrial farming

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[7] According to the NESDB (2007), "Sufficiency Economy lies at the heart of Thailand's development thinking, and indeed it can serve as guidance for the country's economic and social developments". It is invariably credited as being derived from a philosophy espoused by King Bhumibol, as is the related "Moderation Society" (usually abbreviated to *MoSo*) concept.

models as socially inequitable, environmentally damaging and wasteful of natural resources. There is some congruence in these Thai models with that of the "economics of happiness" approaches to wellbeing, which focus on subjective measures such as happiness and life satisfaction (Weeratunge et al., 2013) and the "Gross National Happiness" concept of Bhutan, with similar philosophical references to Buddhist ideas (Isarangkun and Pootrakool, n.d; Jongudomkarn and Camfield, 2005). There is reported to be a "Sufficiency Economy Unit" housed within the National Economic and Social Development Board's offices (Curry and Sura, 2007), as testimony to the apparent seriousness the government has attached to this concept. The Tenth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2007-11) inherently recognized that Thailand would face growing uncertainty due to transformations in the global and regional context, and recommended that Thailand should "reorient its development program to have greater self-reliance and resilience by following the Sufficiency Economy philosophy in conjunction with a holistic approach to people-centered development" (NESDB, 2007: 7). Further, the United Nations Development Programme's 2007 Thailand Human Development Report (titled "Sufficiency Economy and Human Development"), was devoted to promoting the Sufficiency Economy, "in recognition of the 60th anniversary of King Bhumipol Aduladej's reign" (Baker, 2007). The report expounds upon the King's theory, drawing on numerous examples from Royal projects to illustrate the application of the principles in actual practice at locations around the country.

Advocates perceive Sufficiency Economy as a visionary concept in response to depleting worldwide natural resources, climate change, global financial instability and new understandings of the limits to economic growth (Mongsawad, 2010), while others have roundly criticized the theory on a number of grounds. For example, some have equated it with "localism" (see Hewison, 1999) and dismissed it as unrealistic, utopian, antithetical to the successful capitalist economic model and contradictory to Thailand's existing development paradigm (Rigg and Ritchie, 2002). It can be traced back to nationalistic myths constructed around happy, egalitarian peasants living subsistence lifestyles under a benevolent monarch (see Bowie, 1992). Others have criticized the concept for its ringing endorsement by the military regime that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a coup in September 2006, following the submission of the Tenth NESDP to the King for approval and the announcement by General Surayud Chulanond[8] that 10 billion baht would be made available for projects to promote wellbeing in-line with the Sufficiency Economy principle (The Bangkok Post 2007). Some have questioned whether Sufficiency Economy could be correlated with proxy indicators of poverty (Walker, 2007). Such skeptics have derided the concept as being little more than a discursive hobby of the powerful elite, but without practical application for the poor who have more basic daily concerns to attend to than merely "sufficiency" (Walker, 2008). Further, Sufficiency Economy is viewed as an ideological tool of state-linked elites to deflect pressure from the government to introduce redistribution of wealth or resources.

Having considered the rhetorical importance placed on wellbeing notions in state planning and policy narratives, we now move on to briefly consider the

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[8] General Surayud Chulanond, as acting Prime Minister following the coup of September 2006, contributed the foreword to the UNDP Thailand Human Development Report.

significance of water resources as a complex socio-natural object to notions of societal wellbeing in the Northeast.

The multiple dimensions of water resources in the daily lives of Isan people

As elsewhere, water clearly fulfills a number of important functions in Isan people's daily livelihoods and wellbeing, which incorporate socio-economic, bio-physical, spiritual and cultural dimensions. Stott (1992) has argued that water, not land, is a central element in Southeast Asia cultures and it is human-water, and not human-land relationships that are determining. Water resources, in the broadest material and discursive sense, have historically provided a strong link between people, cultures and environment, which is readily apparent in the village names of Northeast Thailand which are frequently based on water and wetlands themes. For example, it is common for compound village names to begin with a specific wetland habitat or feature (e.g., lake - *nong, swamp - beung,* oxbow lake - *kud,* stream - *huay,* spring - *kham,* pond – *bor,* rapids – *gaeng,* river pool - *wang*) or an aquatic animal or plant (e.g., crocodile - *khae,* fish - *pla,* lotus - *bua,* turtle - *tao*, duck - *bet*), prior to a more localized name. Water-related themes are intimately infused throughout many of the region's spiritual and cultural festivals, such as the Buddhist new year celebration (*boon pee mai* (Lao) or *Songkran* (Thai); local rice field spirit propitiation rites; the rocket festivals calling to the sky god Phaya Thaen to deliver rain (*boon bangfai*), elements of the Ghost Mask Festival in Loei Province (*phi ta khon* or *boon luang*); the annual river boat races (*boon suang heua*) and Mekong River *naga* fireballs phenomenon (*bangfai payanak*)[9] at the end of Buddhist lent.

More pragmatically, in a material sense, water is the central element in the cultivation of Thailand's staple food crop, rice – and thus forms a pivotal role in the lives of millions of farmers still reliant on rice farming for at least some of their livelihood mix and indirectly, on the daily nutrition of millions of other consumers, both domestically and abroad. Thailand prides itself on being the number one rice exporter in the world, as well as a nation with strong historical links between water, rice, culture and monarchical traditions, idealized through the contested Ramkhamhaeng inscription (Falvey, 2000; Ritchie and Rigg, 2002). As well as direct consumptive links locally, there are myriad indirect linkages between water security and food security as well. For example, many Isan farmers still share a portion of their rice crop with relatives (especially children) living in other parts of the country or even abroad, who are thus intimately connected culturally and materially with the paddy fields of their native village. Rice yields fluctuate from year to year as a result of many factors, but climatic events leading to water scarcity or flooding, are a prime limiting factor of production. However, it does not necessarily follow in a diverse economy with plentiful off-farm work opportunities that climatic factors are determinants of poverty, as has often been implied in state-centric narratives.

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[9] The *"bangfai payanak"* festival takes place every year at the end of the Buddhist lent in late October at several locations along the Mekong River downstream of Vientiane. This timing usually coincides with the conclusion of the rainy season and start of falling water levels.

Most general studies of water resources and wellbeing, cite "access to clean water" as a *sine qua non* of basic human wellbeing in developing nations (e.g., Murphy, 2006), but often do not explore beyond this category as what makes water a fundamentally unique and indispensible natural resource that presents "wicked problems" in its management, especially in regimes where *de facto* or *de jure* rights over resources are weak. It has become apparent from the authors' empirical observations in Northeast Thailand that collective societal understandings of the changing nature of the rural population's water resources needs and expectations are relatively poor, across sectors and scales. This point is especially salient as Thai society continues to witness fundamental transformations in the rural sector, with increasing dependence on off-farm income sources and multi-activity livelihoods in a new mixed socio-economic landscape (Rigg, 2001; 2003; 2005). These agrarian transitions raise fundamental questions about changing needs, demands and priorities with regards to water resources provision and wellbeing, now and projections into the future, that so far have not not been seriously addressed. For example, a study carried out by the Wellbeing in Developing Countries Project (WeDCP) found that "having water" (with water lumped as a generic category) was ranked fourth in perceived necessity of particular categories importance for "quality of life", resulting from a survey of villagers in Southern and Northeastern Thailand (McGregor et al, 2007; Jongudomkarn and Camfield, 2005). The results indicated that "water" was considered a more important need than "health", but less important than electricity, family relations and food for subjective wellbeing. Further analysis suggested that "access to clean water" for domestic purposes was the main wellbeing concern of those surveyed in areas of highest deprivation (Camfield et al, 2012), suggesting that absolute scarcity was not an issue of major concern. Water availability and cleanliness turned out to be more of an issue in the Southern villages surveyed than those in the Northeast (Guillén Royo and Velazco, 2006). Interestingly, a "good living environment" (the only category relating to the environment), did not rank very highly in respondent's wellbeing aspirations. But in the absence of any disaggregation of "water" into its constituent sectoral uses and multiple functions, basic questions about the meaning of water and wellbeing to individual's, household's and community wellbeing needs and aspirations remains unanswered.

Since the widespread incursion of state-led development and modernization programs into Thai rural areas, most Northeast villages have been connected to a domestic water supply, replacing traditional labor-intensive gathering of water from wells and surface water sources. Drinking water is often harvested in tanks and jars from rainwater. However, it should be noted that the quantity, quality and reliability of the water supplied varies enormously by village and it is not uncommon to encounter non-functional or abandoned village tap water systems, with villagers reliant on a mix of public and privately-built infrastructure for domestic water needs. At the same time, irrigation projects built by state agencies over the past few decades may be similarly abandoned or inoperable, including both the water storage and delivery systems (Floch and Molle, 2009b; Blake, 2012). These systems often run short of water in the dry season and are not able to deliver sufficient water for farmers to grow a second crop of rice or meet growing demand from competing users, such as municipal authorities utilizing irrigation systems for urban domestic supplies. The shortage of water available for farmers and domestic consumers is often blamed on "drought" by state water

agencies, rather than examining more systemic management and structural failures for shortages or considering imbalances between local water demands and supplies (cf. Forsyth and Walker, 2008). Thus, there is often a tendency for state authorities to declare a "drought disaster" in many provinces of Isan during extended periods of low rainfall, as it did in the 2010 dry season, when numerous villages were reported in the press to be water scarce and relying on government assistance for domestic water[10] (Saelee, 2010). Despite the seemingly annual media proclamations of drought gripping Isan during the normal dry season period, "drought" is rarely defined by state agencies, neither is there an explanation given of the criteria employed to announce a "natural disaster" (Blake, 2012). Interviews conducted with senior bureaucrats and consultants working in the water resources sector confirmed that state definitions of drought are often confused or misunderstood by officials and the public (ibid.) Furthermore, while precise numbers of villages experiencing seasonal drought or flood are usually provided to the media after each event alongside a gross figure to the nearest baht for economic losses suffered, the derivation of these statistics is often obscure and it is hard to elicit a reasonable explanation from state officials.

As a way to open up new understandings of the importance of water in a holistic sense to Northeasterners, the paper now proceeds to discuss the complex interactions of humans, water and ecosystems and its relevance to wellbeing notions from a case study of an important wetlands area in upper Northeast Thailand.

Wetlands and human wellbeing in Northeast Thailand - Case Study of the lower Nam Songkhram Basin

As earlier intimated, the lower Mekong Basin harbors a complex series of wetlands ecosystems that are interconnected hydrologically and ecologically through a phenomenon known as a "flood pulse" (Lamberts, 2008; MRC, 2010), which underpins the rich productivity of the ecosystem services found in the floodplains of the LMB. Furthermore, it is recognized that these wetlands are coming under increasing threat to their integrity from a wide range of anthropogenic causes, especially upstream dam construction and changes in season flow patterns. Amongst the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) report's main conclusions is that the loss and degradation of wetlands ecosystem services, "harms the health and well-being of individuals and communities and diminishes the development prospects of all nations" (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005: 47). In particular, freshwater capture fisheries have been identified as particularly vulnerable to external changes to the ecosystem, such as changes in land use, alterations in water flow, sediment and nutrient transport. Thus, it would be helpful to comprehend in a bit more detail how wetlands loss and degradation might impact people's livelihoods and what this might imply to wellbeing.

To provide an empirical example of a wetlands ecosystem that has undergone rapid socio-ecological transformations in recent decades (Blake et al., 2009), we take the case of the 13,128 km sq. Nam Songkhram Basin, covering parts of Udon Thani,

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[10] The Bangkok Post article reported that in early June 2010, 53 provinces nationwide had been declared "disaster zones" and 1,750,100 households had been reported as affected by the "extreme dry season", according to the Interior Ministry's Disaster Mitigation and Prevention Department.

Sakhon Nakhon, Nong Khai and Nakon Phanom provinces. The Lower Nam Songkhram Basin (LNSB) forms a large floodplain wetland mosaic containing a diverse range of habitat types and possessing an eco-hydrology intimately linked to the mainstream Mekong (Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006a). Each year during the rainy season, on average 960 km sq. of land were inundated by flooding, partly caused by a blocking effect to within basin drainage and occasional backflows by the Mekong River. The LNSB covers an area in excess of 4,000 km sq., which includes a mosaic of paddy land, grasslands, field crops, degraded forest and a mix of temporary and permanent wetlands with poorly defined boundaries. The latter category includes numerous artificial reservoirs, as well as areas of river, backwater, marsh and swamp. Using GIS techniques, Hortle and Suntornratana (2008) have estimated that 88.7% of the LNSB can be classified as "wetlands". It has been recognized as a wetlands of international conservation significance (Office of Environmental Policy and Planning, 1999) due to its rich biodiversity and ecosystem services that supports a productive seasonal capture fishery (see Hortle and Suntornratana, 2007) utilized by local residents, who harvest an impressive range of wild wetlands products that have long underpinned local livelihoods[11] (Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006a; 2006b; Blake et al., 2009). A socio-economic survey of 404 households in the LNSB in 2007 found that the direct-use value of wetlands products collected was on average 26,521 Baht per household, equivalent to US $806/HH,[12] of which 71.8% of the total value was derived from fish and other aquatic animals (Office of Natural Resources and Environment Policy and Planning, 2007).

However, with multiple development pressures dating back to the 1960s, including gradual conversion of natural forest to agricultural and industrial forestry uses, extensive simplification and alteration of natural watercourses by state infrastructure projects (e.g., dredging, weirs, dams and irrigation schemes), industrialization (e.g., salt mining and sugar refining) and significant in-migration of people from other parts of Isan, the LNSB wetlands (especially the undervalued seasonally flooded forests), have been in a state of ecological degradation and socio-political conflict over many years (Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006a; Blake et al., 2009). Between 2005-2010, the last remnant stands of natural floodplain vegetation were cleared for agricultural intensification (principally dry season rice cultivation) and eucalyptus plantation expansion, leaving an ecologically simplified and degraded landscape with fewer natural resource-based livelihood opportunities open to local residents (Suwanwerakamtorn et al., 2007; Blake et al., 2009; Blake, 2012). A similar process of wetlands ecosystem services decline and functional loss occurred along the Mun and Chi river floodplains a decade or two prior to it happening in the LNSB, with similar socio-ecological transformations and societal conflicts precipitated as natural resources became scarcer (Khamkongsak and Law, 2001; Chusakul, 2001, no date; Sneddon, 2002).

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[11] The LNSB wetlands have been classified as a "Wetlands of International Significance" by the Thai government (Office of Environmental Policy and Planning, 1999). Despite this status, only a tiny fraction of the overall area is protected by state conservation areas or local *de facto* management practices.

[12] This figure assumes a prevailing exchange rate in June 2007 of 32.9 THB / US$.

Processes of water-landscape transformation, wetlands ecosystem degradation and biodiversity decline have been causally linked to diminished perceptions of wellbeing through livelihood loss by local wetlands users (Breukers, 1998), although such reports tend to be largely anecdotal and qualitative in scope. A more thorough and systematic approach to collection of local ecological knowledge and wetlands cultural and economic value was applied with the support of the MWBP Thailand "Demonstration Site"[13] in the LNSB, known as "Tai Baan Research" (conducted between 2004-2007), that involved the participation of several hundred households in eight villages (Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006b). Following a distinct methodological approach trialed at sites elsewhere in Northeast Thailand (Scurrah, 2013), this research allowed villagers themselves to decide on the issues they wanted to research, according to what they perceived as valuable to their culture, knowledge and livelihoods[14]. In practice, the Tai Baan Researchers conducted detailed field study in small groups into the following areas: fish species and fish ecology; fishing gear; flooded forest vegetation; floodplain agricultural systems; large livestock raising; and local wetlands habitats. The results of their research were published in two Thai language books (Tai Baan Research Network of Lower Nam Songkhram Basin, 2005a; 2005b), amongst various means of public dissemination (Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006b).

It emerged from these findings that the key wetland habitat that linked together provision of ecosystem services with local natural resources-based livelihoods and had most significance to household and community wellbeing in the perceptions of researchers was the seasonally-flooded forest, known locally as *paa boong paa thaam* . And ironically this was also the most threatened wetland habitat due to wholesale clearance and over-exploitation (Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006a), so in some respects, Tai Baan Research was recording a nostalgic yearning by some villagers for a rapidly degrading environment and disappearing source of livelihood benefits. Further research under MWBP found that both external factors, including government development policies, strategies and projects, alongside more local factors such as increased competition for scarce wetlands resources (including land and water) were leading to ecosystem degradation and loss (Blake, 2008). This was precipitating increased conflicts over resources and different development visions that were observed both amongst and between sectoral water users (i.e., agriculture, industry, domestic and cultural/spiritual) at different geographical scales (i.e., individual, household, community, sub-district, district, province, regional, national) and locations (see Sneddon, 2002; and Lebel et al., 2005 for further discussion about the importance of scale in Mekong Basin natural resources conflicts).

The clearest line of tension and conflict locally was related to state agency plans to regulate the Nam Songkhram river, both with a large dam planned near its confluence with the Mekong for a dual-purpose flood control and irrigation scheme, and also a series of smaller hydraulic engineering structures at different locations within the LNSB. These were part of a long-running regional paradigm of water resources

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[13] The "Demonstration Site" office was located in Sri Songkhram District, Nakhon Phanom and the project mostly worked in villages within five nearby districts.

[14] A summary of the methodological steps in the Tai Baan Research process can be found in Blake and Pitakthepsombut (2006b).

development policies and plans that have socially constructed the Northeast as a water scarce region that conversely also has occasional problems with flooding, both of which are treated as "natural disasters" that need solving by external expertise and institutions (Molle et al., 2009). In the LNSB the top-down infrastructural "solutions" applied are particularly inappropriately sited and poorly designed for the prevailing hydrological and ecological conditions (Breukers, 1998; Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006a). This mismatch leads to significant environmental and social externalities that contributes to local (and regional) conflicts over development visions and values alluded to above, which tend to pit traditional capture fishing and wetlands product harvesting derived livelihoods (loosely represented by the Tai Baan Research narrative) against a more functional, modernist, statist vision of hydrological control, land-waterscape transformation and agricultural intensification, based on irrigation technology. It would appear that the latter vision has prevailed over the former, judging by socio-ecological outcomes observed in the LSNB (Blake et al., 2009; Blake, 2012), although the implications to perceptions and experiences of social wellbeing can only be a matter of speculation without dedicated research. Within the present research, we have attempted to measure individual perceptions regarding local and regional development problems and proposed solutions, providing an interesting perspective on the predominance of one contrasting development vision against another.

Regional perceptions of Isan and the "Isan problematic"

As has previously been touched upon, the Northeast region has been closely associated in development narratives with notions of interlinked drought, natural resource scarcity and poverty. Such narratives are pervasive and ubiquitous in the dominant development discourse of the modern Thai nation-state (Molle et al., 2009). Poverty has frequently been causally linked with water scarcity and it is often implied that the region's relative poverty status to the rest of Thailand is a result of particular bio-geographical factors, suggesting environmental determinism (e.g., NESDB and the World Bank, 2005). This is by no means a modern phenomenon, with precedents stretching back for at least a century to interactions between the court of King Rama V and Western advisors contracted to document the hinterlands and report back to Bangkok on suitable means to develop it (see Brummelhuis, 2007; Blake, 2012). The region was most frequently described in terms of the people as impoverished, backward, unhealthy and uneducated, living in a hot, arid, resource-poor and unforgiving environment. Interestingly, the same popular image of a drought stricken region beleaguered by poverty and lack of development persists today expressed through a wide cross-section of societal actors and mainstream media (Blake, 2010), despite significant socio-economic improvements, livelihood diversification beyond subsistence agriculture and overall major strides in poverty reduction occurring (Rigg, 2005; NESDB and the World Bank, 2005).

To illustrate how modern regional narrative accounts invariably incorporate climatic factors and environmental degradation as causal mechanisms for poverty, often encapsulated in an opening problem framing statement, we provide a few

examples. The following quote from a Thammasat University economist is emblematic: "[B]ecause of its unfavourable climate conditions and depleted environmental conditions, the Northeast has become the poorest and most backward region of Thailand over time" (Hirunruk 1999: 249). Others have invoked nationalistic economic and food security concerns related to conditions of the Northeast's assumed chronic water scarcity, rarely justifying such crisis narratives with empirical evidence. For example, a group of Khon Kaen University academics, maintained: "[I]n Northeast Thailand, drought has the most profound effect on the way of living and regional economy. It is also a major menace to regional food supplies. By its severity and duration these events can be disastrous not only locally, but for the whole economic structure" (Mongkolsawat et al., 2001: 33). Another rather typical news media account invokes simultaneous visions of endemic poverty and environmental crisis, whilst marveling that any life can survive in such an inhospitable environment at all: "The first thing that strikes visitors to Thailand's far Northeast -- a vast plain of stunted trees, spindly tussocks and grazing water buffalo -- is its dryness. It seems impossible that a landscape whose main features are salt pans, brackish ponds and devastated forests could support any form of animal or vegetable life, let alone human communities" (Mansfield, 2000).

These dominant development and environmental crisis narratives (see Leach and Mearns, 1996; Forsyth, 2003), it is argued, have been produced and reproduced by state elites for many decades, perhaps even strengthening in recent years as mass media and state-centric development propaganda have proliferated and colonized public perceptions of a distinctive "Isan problematic" to take on a commonsense-like veracity. While Isan has been routinely stereotyped as "*yak jon lae haeng laeng*" (i.e., "poor and dry") by government officials, the popular media and mainstream development institutions, there seem to be few published studies of how the general Thai public perceive the region in terms of development challenges and their visions, particularly in terms of water resources development. Thus, interested to see how perceptions held by various groups of people within Thai society differ from the dominant narratives, a survey was conducted to partially address this research lacuna.[15] Randomly selected members of the public were interviewed using a questionnaire survey at three locations (urban Khon Kaen (n = 121), a park in central Bangkok (n = 107), and a LNSB village (n = 109)) and asked a number of questions pertaining to their general perceptions of the region and more specific water resources development related issues. The results revealed both similarities and differences in perception between people at each location and a number of interesting observations (refer to **tables 1 and 2** in the **appendix**).

There is not the space here to discuss all the findings revealed by the tables, so we shall limit ourselves to highlighting just a few key points regarding each table of relevance to the overall argument. The first point to mention is that when respondents were asked what they thought the primary development problems of the region were (**table 1**) there was relatively close agreement by location, with people in Bangkok

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[15] This survey was one sub-component of the fieldwork for Blake's (2012) PhD thesis, the full findings of which can be accessed by request from the first author. There were twelve questions in total put to respondents and only the results from the first two are shown here.

(46%) and the LNSB village (54%) ranking "water scarcity and drought" issues as the top problem, while in Khon Kaen (31%) it was ranked second from top. Overall across the samples, however, drought and water scarcity were perceived to be the top ranked problem, with 43% of respondents listing it. This result could be interpreted in a realist sense that this is actually the main problem that people experience, or that their perceptions are guided by the dominant development narrative, which fits in with the dominant state developmental ideology (Blake, 2012). This interpretation is supported by the finding that a higher percentage of respondents in the LNSB village identified "drought and water scarcity" as the prime development problem than the other two samples, despite the observation that this village is located in one of the wettest parts of the region both in terms of precipitation and the surrounding wetlands landscape, and most of the answers they provided tended to correlate with a rather parochial view of problems, rather than a wider regional view as tended to be the case in the other two locations. In Khon Kaen, the most frequently cited development problem affecting the region, raised by 53% of respondents, compared to only 13% of respondents in the Nam Songkhram village and 37% in Bangkok, were "education" issues, which may partially be explained by the presence in Khon Kaen of many tertiary education institutes and a high value put on education by residents and visitors to the city for study purposes. Apart from "education", other high-ranking problem categories cited often across all three locations were "poverty and low income" (34.2%) and "livelihoods and employment" (33.9%) issues. Significantly, perhaps, people did not generally perceive the category "water resources management" to be a major regional problem, with it being raised by just 2.7% of the overall sample, putting it in eleventh place in terms of importance. While these results tell us little about people's subjective or material wellbeing, they do hint at a generally close correlation between official narratives of the Isan development problematic and the perceptions of ordinary people, whether inhabitants or external citizens looking from the outside in. We hypothesize that these development narratives reinforced over decades in the media, in official speeches, documents, popular culture, music, literature and every day encounters with state (including village heads) or business actors would tend to make it easier for powerful groups to prescribe development solutions and strategies that primarily serve their own interests, while ignoring more fundamental questions such as resource access, sustainability and equity.

When respondents were asked what they thought the most important development problems specifically related to water resources management in the Northeast (**table 2**), the most frequently cited response repeated the result in Question 2, namely that "water scarcity" was the main perceived problem at all three locations, which was found on further probing to include both agricultural and domestic supply issues. In the LNSB village (61%), it surpassed other response categories by a large margin, with "poor irrigation and water distribution systems" (42%) coming second. The third ranked response for Khon Kaen (22%) and the LNSB village (24%) was "insufficient or poor water storage sources (e.g., dams, weirs, etc.)" which mostly related to agricultural water supply problems. This was a clear example of respondents in the LNSB village citing parochial problems, as the survey coincided with a pump breakdown with their own irrigation system and declining water levels for dry season rice cultivation, rather than addressing a wider regional perspective in their answers.

The second most cited category across the locations was "poor water management practice/knowledge at the local level" (27%), although this was perceived as being more important in Khon Kaen (ranked 2nd) and Bangkok (ranked 3rd), compared to the LNSB village (ranked 4th). It is suggested that this category, too, is consistent with the dominant narrative, which has consistently tended to blame the end user for management problems (e.g., ignorant or uneducated farmers lack knowledge), rather than consider more structural problems, such as policy failure, lack of water rights or unequal power relations. In addressing Question 3, there was less agreement between locations than with Question 2, with the exception of the top ranked response of "water scarcity". Significantly, relatively few people perceived problems related to "environmental decline and degradation" or "demand-side issues and conflicts" as being problematic issues for water resources management, as these two categories were ranked 11th and 12th, respectively, suggesting such proximate causes of water resources management conflicts are poorly recognized (cf. Forsyth and Walker, 2008).

This paper argues that contrary to the Northeast's dominant and popular image as constituting a "dryland" region with a water crisis, as might be suggested by the responses to the survey above which closely mirror the developmental orthodoxy of water scarcity and drought-related narratives constituting the "Isan problematic", in reality, large parts of the Northeast's land surface can actually be classified as a "wetland", most especially in the lowland areas along river floodplains and terraces. More accurately, it would be preferable to conceive of the Northeast being comprised of a complex, seasonal "wetland-dryland" landscape mosaic. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands definition of wetlands[16] indicates that wet rice paddies should be considered seasonal wetlands (REF), thus supporting the assertion that much of Isan qualifies as a wetland environment. Floch et al (2007) report that 44% of the region's land area is devoted to paddy fields, with grasslands, floodplains and rivers and reservoirs combined making up a further 3.8% of the total. In certain river basins of Northeast Thailand, including the Nam Songkhram Basin, the proportion of land classified as wetlands is well over half the total land area. Surprisingly perhaps, the Northeast is recognized by the Office of Environmental Policy and Planning (1999) to contain 14,750 individual wetland sites,[17] greater than any other region in Thailand.

Taking into account the dominant development narratives identified and given the assumed importance of Northeast Thailand's wetlands ecosystems to the social, cultural, historical and ecological land-waterscape (see Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006b; Blake et al., 2009), set within the context of the wider LMB development paradigm (Constanza et al., 2010; MRC, 2010), what does this imply for understanding actual water resources development outcomes and practices? Taking the case of the LNSB once more, it is observed that the development solutions proposed and materialized, are primarily hardware and infrastructural-based, not that different from the *kan phattana* solutions proposed by Sarit Thanarat back in the early 1960s (i.e., roads, dams, irrigation systems, etc). In the case of water resources development, such

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[16] Wetlands are defined as, "areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed 6 metres" (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005).

[17] This figure excludes paddies (i.e., wet rice fields) that spatially constitute the largest agricultural landuse category in the Northeast (Floch and Molle, 2009).

hydraulic engineering-based solutions were being applied by state agencies at each level of the bureaucratic hierarchy, irrespective of scale, from sub-districts up to the largest national hydraulic bureaucracies, such as the Royal Irrigation Department (RID) and the Department of Water Resources (DWR) (Blake, 2012). Indeed, these two agencies were seen to compete for national budget funding to build many medium and large-scale irrigation and flood control projects within the Nam Songkhram Basin, which in practice paid mere lip service to participation principles (see Floch and Blake, 2011) and proved textbook cases in poor planning and execution, and tended to increase the incidents of environmental conflict locally (Blake, 2012). Superficially, however, it appeared that agricultural output was increasing due to a boom in cultivation of dry season rice (*naa prang*),[18] facilitated by central policies (e.g., rice mortgage scheme and loans offered from Bank for Agriculture and Cooperatives) and local practices of wetlands conversion to rice fields and small irrigation pump projects. In Sri Songkhram District alone, the planted dry season rice area increased from 15,902 *rai* in 2008/09 to 44,510 *rai* in the 2009/10 season, a 180% rise, coupled with a 123% rise in the number of households involved, reported Blake (2012).

Encouraged by guaranteed rice prices above market prices, villagers throughout the LNSB wetlands rapidly cleared remaining stands of seasonally flooded forest to expand their agricultural land holding for *naa prang*. Despite the government subsidy, however, many farmers interviewed made economic losses on the rice crop due to a range of factors leading to low yields (e.g., disease and pest problems, unsuitable soil, on-farm water management problems), raising questions about economic and ecological sustainability. Many farmers interviewed expected state authorities to provide them with subsidised or free irrigation water both as a corollary of the switch to dry season rice cultivation and precedents set elsewhere by the RID and other agencies, with numerous projects being planned to satisfy the demand. Hence, a policy-induced element from locally increased demand for irrigation infrastructure resulting in water scarcity was evident, which was perhaps of greater relevance to experiences of drought and water scarcity seen in the LNSB villages than any natural meteorological or hydrological drought explanation, that is most frequently cited as the cause of scarcity in the dominant and popular narrative.

CONCLUSION

At the global level, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) has projected that, "the continued loss and degradation of wetlands will reduce the capacity of wetlands to mitigate impacts and result in further reduction in human well-being" on top of impacts related to diminishment of direct ecosystem services provided by wetlands, especially where rivers, lakes and marshes are appropriated for irrigated agriculture. It is predicted that the resulting impacts of wetlands degradation disproportionately hurt the poor in developing countries, as they tend to be the people most reliant on the ecosystem services provided by wetlands and are least resilient to

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[18] "*Naa prang*" was the favored name locally for contemporary dry season rice cultivation. It is to be distinguished from a less intensive and more traditional form of dry season rice grown in the LNSB wetlands, referred to by the Lao term as "*naa saeng*".

changes and shocks to the system. At the Mekong Basin level also, increasing numbers of reports have expressed concerns about present development policies, especially around water resources development that promote increasing hydropower, irrigation expansion and flood control schemes, leading to loss and degradation of wetlands ecosystem services, compromising the interests of the poorest segments of society in the process (e.g., MRC, 2010; Constanza et al., 2011). Indeed, it was noted in the LNSB, that poorer households were those least able to take advantage of opportunities arising from conversion of (semi-) natural wetlands to irrigated agriculture, as they had least natural and social capital to draw upon and were often the ones most likely to accrue debt from dry season rice cultivation attempts.

The prevalence of a development narrative depicting Northeast Thailand as a poverty-stricken, water resource-scarce "dryland", suggests that the region has consistently been misrepresented through over-simplification of a complex and diverse socio-ecologically reality. An alternative, locally situated and culturally contextualized set of narratives has been provided by civil society and grassroots village groups attempts to document local knowledge and management of wetlands habitats, such as the Tai Baan Research initiative conducted in the LNSB (see Blake and Pitakthepsombut, 2006b) and similar approaches at other locations (Chusakul, no date; Scurrah, 2013). Such initiatives, also replete with their own narrative simplifications and essentializations, can be conceived as a counter-hegemonic strategy employed to resist state-led, top-down natural resources management and development policies and schemes (Scurrah, 2013). From a critical realist perspective, the present research would tend to support the arguments of Mehta (2001; 2005) that there would appear to be identifiable "real" and "manufactured" aspects to the water scarcity discourse, where narratives of drought have been socially constructed to serve the interests of certain powerful groups in society (although space has not permitted a full characterization of these groups or the narrative distinctions in this paper). However, observations in the LNSB and elsewhere in the Northeast, tend to suggest that the alternative narratives have only had limited agency in altering outcomes on the ground (as opposed to direct protest actions used elsewhere, for instance), precisely because the dominant development narratives are so powerful. This conclusion was supported by the findings of the questionnaire survey which showed the public perceptions matched closely those of the dominant narrative (**tables 1 and 2** in the **appendix**). In practice, narratives of water resources crisis, perennial scarcity and concomitant demands for further (and larger scale) hydraulic infrastructure appear to be undiminished over time, often rising notably prior to general elections, suggesting a pork-barreling aspect to the development paradigm (Molle et al., 2009; Blake, 2012).

Wellbeing concepts, while mainstreamed into the Thai national development plans through an ostensibly top-down approach that has prioritized the king's "sufficiency economy" philosophy (which interestingly has enjoyed robust support from a mix of civil society groups and grassroots level organizations), have thus far apparently failed to successfully integrate the complex logics of water resources management within an overall "wellbeing" rubric. This may partly be attributable to an ideological attachment to the notion of "Thai-ness" being commensurate with rice farming and irrigated agriculture based livelihoods as a core component of a national identity, thus allowing state-led irrigation development projects to proceed relatively

unopposed (see Blake, 2012). As Winichakul (1995) has maintained, Bangkok elite conceptions of Thainess have long trumped local identities in the state's peripheries, including Lao and other ethnicities found in Isan. Thus, most debates in Thai society over water resources management pathways are mostly waged over dichotomous questions of scale and irrigation technology best suited to the needs of farmers (with both sides idealizing rice cultivators as the "backbone" of the nation) – i.e., small, low cost, participatory and decentralized (primarily civil society narratives) or large-scale, large-budget, centrally planned schemes that entail utopian promises to voters/users (primarily elite group narratives).[19] However, this polarized debate excludes other more fundamental questions such as the relationship between water supply and demand, the changing needs of farmers in the agrarian shift *vis à vis* other wetlands-based livelihood occupations, to be disregarded by development planners. At the same time, the past generic approach to "water" and a failure within the wellbeing research community to conceptualize water resources more subtly as a series of inter-linked sub-sectors that each require attention, is another area that requires closer critical scrutiny in future.

As a potential next step in challenging the dominant narratives or development myths outlined, critical researchers might consider questioning some of the deeply-held assumptions surrounding water resources management, irrigation and rice cultivation in the Northeast, conducted within the context of the historical hydraulic development paradigm. Such research could also critically examine the underlying logics of Sufficiency Economy and wellbeing notions, juxtaposed against present water resources development policies, plans and practices, in particular the periodically revived plans of state elites to transform Isan by "greening" it via Edenic "mega-project" irrigation expansion plans reliant on exploiting trans-boundary water sources (Molle et al., 2009; Floch and Blake, 2011). Without such critical research and given the importance of wetlands ecosystems to the region, a case could be made that Thailand's development paradigm supports the arguments of Scott (1998: 7), "that certain kinds of states, driven by utopian plans and an authoritarian disregard for the values, desires, and objections of their subjects, are indeed a mortal threat to human well-being."

Acknowledgements

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[19] These elites may contain a complex alliance of actors and groups from bureaucratic, business military, politician and royal strategic interests, as outlined in Blake (2012).

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APPENDIX: Tables derived from responses given in a questionnaire survey conducted at three locations in Thailand (Khon Kaen city, central Bangkok, a village in the lower Nam Songkhram Basin) during February 2010. The total number of respondents interviewed was 327 individuals.

TABLE 1: Responses to Question 2: "What do you think are the primary development problems that affect the Isan region?" (respondents may list up to three answers).

Response categories	Interview Location						TOTAL		
	Khon Kaen		Bangkok		Nam Song				
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	Rank
2.1 Education	63 (1)	53.4	40 (2)	37.4	14	13.3	117	35.5	2
2.2 Drought; water scarcity	37 (2)	31.4	49 (1)	45.8	56 (1)	53.8	142	43.0	1
2.3 Poverty; low income	36 (3)	30.5	31	29.0	46 (2)	43.8	113	34.2	3
2.4 Politics; governance	10	8.5	22	20.6	20	19.0	52	15.8	7
2.5 Climate & weather events	4	3.4	13	12.1	9	8.6	26	7.9	8
2.6 Environment related	12	10.2	13	12.1	8	7.6	33	10.0	9
2.7 Livelihoods and employment	30	25.4	37 (3)	34.6	45 (3)	42.9	112	33.9	4
2.8 Migration	1	0.8	10	9.3	10	9.5	21	6.4	10
2.9 Culture; religion; morality; family	4	3.4	2	1.9	0	0	6	1.8	12
2.10 Water resources management	0	0	5	4.7	4	1.2	9	2.7	11
2.11 Transport; communications	15	12.7	21	19.6	17	16.2	53	16.1	6
2.12 Others	3	2.5	38	35.5	38	36.2	79	23.9	5

TABLE 2. Responses given to Question 3: "What do you think are the primary development problems related to water resources management in Isaan?" (respondents may list up to three answers).

Response categories	Interview Location						TOTAL		
	Khon Kaen		Bangkok		Nam Song				
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	Rank
3.1 Water scarcity problems (agricultural and domestic)	51 (1)	44.3	43 (1)	40.6	66 (1)	61.1	160	48.6	1
3.2 Insufficient or poor water storage sources (e.g., dams, weirs, etc)	25 (3)	21.7	28	26.4	26 (3)	24.1	79	24.0	4
3.3 Climate-related drought, unpredictable rainfall & unusual weather events	22	19.1	24	22.6	14	13.0	60	18.2	6
3.4 Water quality or pollution problems	22	19.1	38 (2)	35.8	1	0.9	61	18.5	5
3.5 Floods	10	8.7	7	6.6	16	14.8	33	10.0	9
3.6 Poor water management practice/knowledge at the local level	34 (2)	29.6	34 (3)	32.1	21	19.4	89	27.1	2
3.7 Poor irrigation & water delivery systems	20	17.4	21	19.8	45 (2)	41.7	86	26.1	3
3.8 Demand-side problems and conflict	4	3.5	1	0.9	5	4.6	10	3.0	12
3.9 Environmental decline e.g., biodiversity loss, watershed destruction or deforestation	6	5.2	12	11.3	11	10.2	29	8.8	11
3.10 Problems with tap water provision	16	13.9	10	9.4	6	5.6	32	9.7	10
3.11 State policy or project planning & implementation problems	20	17.4	10	9.4	10	9.3	40	12.2	8
3.12 Others	14	12.2	22	20.8	15	13.9	51	15.5	7

Commodifying Sovereignty: Special Economic Zone and the Neoliberalization of the Lao Frontier[1]

Pinkaew Laungaramsri[2]

ABSTRACT

Laos has followed its Chinese neighbor in creating the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as part of the new economic engine that allows distinctive economic policies and flexible governmental measures conducive to doing business in certain areas of the country. SEZs in Laos operate as one form of "self-imposed extraterritoriality" tailored to foreign investors especially the Chinese. Vast areas of local land have been turned into entertainment and tourist complex. This paper uses the case of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone to examine the paradox between the desire to civilize and the will to survive played out in the border zone of northern Lao PDR. It investigates the means and mechanism that facilitate the process of the civilizing mission by the Chinese investor. Commodifying sovereignty has contributed to the creation of the space of exception necessary for the new economic possibilities to reshape the "wild zone" and its people into a productive resource. Negotiation and reluctance by the Lao villagers to participate in the new economic enterprise has kept them in the state of "abeyance". The paper also analyzes the role of the Burmese migrant workers as the key actor -- the neo-liberal subjects that help make the Chinese civilizing mission possible.

Keywords: Special Economic Zone, commodifying sovereignty, Neoliberalism, abeyance, neoliberal subjects

INTRODUCTION

The condition of exception is thus a political liminality, and extraordinary decision to depart from a generalized political normativity, to intervene in the logics of ruling and of being ruled (Aihwa Ong, 2006: 5).

In *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State*, a best-seller book that topped the 2011 Shanghai Bookfair's list of the most influential new books in China, Zhang Weiwei, a professor of international relations at Fudan University and former interpreter of the late Communist leader Deng Xiaoping, demonstrates how the Chinese economic model is poised to surpass its Western counterparts. According to Zhang, China wave is not the rise of an ordinary country, but the rise of a different type of country, a country sui generis, a civilizational state, a new model of

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development and a new political discourse that poses questions to many Western assumptions about democracy, good governance and human rights. *The China Wave* argues that two of the primary virtues of the Chinese model – both rooted in Confucianism – are "meritocracy" and "performance legitimacy". A meritocratic system, the implementation of advancement based upon intellectual talent, ensures that only the most able people are propelled to the top positions in government. Performance legitimacy, on the other hand, is secured through the state's ability to improve the living standards of hundreds of millions of people. It is no doubt that civilization as an ideology represents the most significant marker of China as a nation and of Chinese identity distinctive from other societies. In the course of Chinese expansion of its economic power, the discourse of civilization represents one of the most powerful tools used to legitimize its appropriation of foreign resources across the globe. Indeed, as Pal Nyiri (2006) points out, the construction of the concept of civilization and the improvement of the quality of the population are among the significant discourses necessary not only for domestic modernization but more importantly for the collaborative effort among various Chinese actors in their global modernizing mission and in the understanding of their position in the world.

This paper examines the paradox between the desire to civilize and the will to survive, which has played out in the border zone of northern Lao PDR. It investigates the means and mechanism that facilitate the process of the civilizing mission by the Chinese and its Lao state counterpart to turn the rural landscape of Lao's north into a neo-liberal space of tourist economy. Following its Chinese neighbor, the Lao state has used Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as part of the new economic engine that allows exceptional economic policies and flexible governmental measures conducive to doing business that does not exist in the rest of the country. But unlike its Chinese counterpart, which uses SEZs as dual roles of "windows" in developing the foreign-oriented economy, generating foreign exchanges through exporting products and importing advanced technologies in accelerating inland economic development, SEZs in Laos have been created to hasten the "turning resources into capital" process by renting out various border areas at cheap prices for large scale foreign investment with unlimited access to natural resources and long term and renewable concession. Fertile agricultural land has thus been turned into a large gambling complex and tourist facilities.

This process has been called by Chris Lyttleton and Pal Nyiri (2011) "soft extraterritoriality", the colonial form of control over resources and people while being exempt from the jurisdiction of local law. This term has been used to refer to the expansion of Chinese economic power into the region through large-scale development schemes. Dams, casinos, entertainment complexes, agri-business by Chinese companies have come to replace local settlement and farmland. Massive flow of Chinese capital into this region and other places has been made possible by land concession policy in many countries designed as the key engine for fast-track economic change. Control of vast areas of land from the national territory, the influx of Chinese workers and entrepreneurs, privilege of Chinese currency, language, and other facilities over local and national provisions, and unclear enforcement of legal jurisdiction, all have been carried out in the name of modernization or "the will to improve" the marginal population of the country (Li, 2007) – to pull Laos out of underdevelopment through the helping hand of the big power of China. In fact, what is happening in the case of Laos is rather a form of "self-imposed extraterritoriality",

a state-capital collaborative project in which the weak state such as Lao PDR has chosen to sacrifice its own sovereign right in exchange of national prosperity.

The use of the concept extraterritoriality to explain economic advancement by contemporary Chinese investments in weaker economic areas raises two important issues. First, it points to an interesting characteristic of the expansion of Chinese investment in the region which involves not only the penetration of market economy but also the alteration of political and judicial practices of its economic counterpart. Second, it demonstrates the post-war collaboration between states and capitalists towards experimentations with flexible sovereignty where different modes of territorialization, authority, and legitimacy are revised and redefined to meet the requirements of economic modernization. The implementation of Special Economic Zones in Laos PDR represents not only the process of self-imposed extraterritoriality but also a form of "commodifying sovereignty" where sovereign rights are commercialized and turned into capital to attract foreign investment. Such practice represents not only the struggle of a weak nation-state to make fast cash and to become economically civilized in the global economy, but also a convenient way to transform the many remote hinterlands into a trans boundary economic gateway. However, the change brought by special economic zone enterprise is drastic and abrupt as it operates through various forms of manipulation and exploitation. While the zone has been turned into a new frontier of the Chinese tycoon who have full rights and power to administrate his territory, influx of Chinese immigrants, massive deprivation of land and livelihood, and narcotic and gambling abuse scandals have come to characterize the new economic border towns of Lao PDR.

This paper also analyzes the different impacts the process of commodifying sovereignty has brought upon various groups of people residing in the zone. While Special Economic Zone has been used by the Lao state as a shortcut to transfer its responsibility of rural modernization to the Chinese patron, the dream of "civilizing the rural subject" has never come to fruition. Being deprived of their land and unable to get access to new resources of livelihood, the Lao people have kept in an "abeyance" -- a state of suspension in between the two worlds of traditional and modern reality in which they neither fully take part. On the other hand, the group of people who have fully engaged in the neo-liberal enterprise of the Chinese are Burmese migrant workers. Despite being exploited, they have arduously managed to seek an opportunity to participate in the labor process fundamental to the building of the new casino empire. These are the agent of neo-liberal subjects that help make the collaborative effort of the Chinese-Lao civilizing mission possible.

Situating Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism as a concept has been an exhortation in political and academic debates. While the term itself is impossible to be defined purely theoretically (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005), it is thought of by some scholars as a new paradigm for economic theory and policy-making and a revival of the economic theories of Adam Smith and his intellectual successors in the nineteen century (Clark, 2005; Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie, http://folk.uio.no/daget/What%20is%20Neo-Liberalism%20FINAL.pdf). Emerged as an ideological response to the crisis of the "Keynesian welfare state", economists have characterized this form of economy based on the core assumption of self-regulating market, efficient allocation of

resource, reassertion of the fundamental beliefs of the liberal political economy, and the retreat of state intervention from national economy (Friedman, 1962; Munck, 2005; Saad-Fiho and Johnston, 2005). It should be noted that the meaning of neoliberalism has changed over time and there is no agreement among authoritative theorists of neoliberalism such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, David Harvey and Noam Chomsky. As Dencik, Redden, Connor and Lekakis (2012) succinctly remark, scholars have come to define neoliberalism from diverse angles -- as political economic program (Hay, 2004; Harvey, 2007 and 2010), as an ideology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001; Giroux, 2008), and as a rationality influencing schemas of thought and processes of analysis (Brown, 2005; Foucault, 2008; Couldry, 2010).

For economists, neo-liberalism is describe as a form of decentralized system of economy where there is minimal state interference and information travels freely and is freely determined at each localized point as demonstrated in the form of free market (Hayek, 1944). The rationale for the self-regulating market and the restriction of the role of the state to certain non-economic spheres such as property right and information asymmetry, according to Friedman is for beneficial consequences (1962). While proponents of neo-liberalism are inclined towards economic utopia produced by the pure and perfect market, which is made possible by financial deregulation, a number of scholars point out the costs of such economic transformation. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, defines neo-liberalism as "a program for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic" (1998). These structures include the nation, work groups, unions, association, cooperatives, or even the family (ibid.). For Bourdieu, powerful laws of the market and de-regulated capital flows come with the dismantling of social structures. As Gilles Châtelet points out, the idea of the social has been replaced by a fixation with the establishment of a fluid, exhilarated and supposedly enlightened capitalism which deploys administrative, institutional, scientific and rational discourses to justify the social cost of economic reforms, the removal of social protection and the acceptance that the price of individual success is the marginalization of large groups of people (Châtelet, 1998 cited in Jutel, 2007: 29).

Similarly, David Harvey sees neoliberalism not as a utopian project "to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism" but a practical political project -- the reconstitution of class power by the global economic elite (Harvey, 2005: 19). The idea of class power underlying the separation between theoretical ideology and practical aspects of neoliberalism is salient in Harvey's analysis. Thus, whereas free market and minimal state interference constitute the core theoretical idea of neoliberal economics, in practice, state interventions are selectively called upon in various economic crises to protect the benefits of economic elites. Another major argument by Harvey relates to the premise of increasing wealth brought by neoliberalism. Despite the assumption by neoliberal theory that underscores the efficiency of market mechanisms in generating wealth compare to forms of state intervention, Harvey maintains that what is at work is not so much about greater wealth but about economic elite's upward redistribution of wealth through 'accumulation by dispossession'. Significant features of accumulation of dispossession include mechanisms such as privatization and commodification, financialization, the management and manipulation of crises, and state redistributions. In essence, what marks neoliberalism as a distinct form of economy is its power to dis-embed the liberal economies from the regulatory framework of

the state. A neoliberal state, according to Harvey, demonstrates an "institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2002: http://user.chol.com/~moras/DH-neoliberalism.doc).

Both proponent and antagonist of neoliberalism, despite their distinctive ideology, share a standard model of economic system that can be applied across the global space. The problem with such uniform framework lies in its inability to capture the complex engagement of neoliberalism in a variety of political economic contexts and the diverse outcomes it entails. The critique of such rigid view on a macro-scale or state level is raised by Aihwa Ong who suggests to define neoliberalism differently. According to Ong, neoliberalism should not be viewed as a fixed set of characteristics with expectable outcomes but "as a logic of governing that migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts" (Ong, 2006: 3). Previous formulations of neoliberalism tend to emphasize the aspect of economic management at the level of the state while neglecting other institutions and diverse actors. Ong calls this formulation, Neoliberalism with a big 'N' which has with it the shortcoming of collapsing multiple socio-political values into a single measure of structure (ibid.: 4). In taking neoliberalism as a migratory set of practices or mobile technology, neoliberalism with a small 'n' is defined by Ong as "a technology of governing 'free subjects' that co-exists with other political rationalities" (ibid.). Thus nation-states with different political economic designs might opt to use different strategies of governing and management of populations, which might not necessarily be analogous to the model operated in the West. As Ong points out, neoliberalism in Asia is less interested in taking on norms of efficiency, transparency, accountability, and individual freedom and more about encouraging self-actualizing or self-enterprising subjects in order to create an enterprising subjectivity in elite subjects (ibid.). In socialist states, such as China and elsewhere, while neoliberal logic often works through a new economic mechanism and market reform, it is done so by certain control of the state.

Neoliberalism is therefore not a universal structural condition but a 'global assemblage' in which the spread of neoliberalism is articulated in specific situations, or territorialized in new material, collective, and discursive relationship (Ong and Collier, 2005). Therefore, pro-market policies in many authoritarian societies often coexist with repressive laws and the promotion of private entrepreneurial benefits over communal rights and livelihood of local people. In various Asian contexts, neoliberal technologies also invoke forms and space of exception to normal political systems and practices. Special zones and high tech zones in China and Malaysia respectively are examples of the way in which neoliberalism and its differential articulation with certain political configurations have carved out space of exception distinct from general national terrain for selectively educated population targets. While laws and regulations have been made situational to attract educated and enterprising citizens, the subjugation and subjectivization of the individual is no longer located within the confines of the institution and disciplined within its spatial imaginary but is now operated by markets as the new instrument of control (Thierry, 2007). In the case of Laos, neoliberalism as exception has been practiced and made possible through an amalgamation of external and transnational force of the Chinese neoliberal value of self-actualizing and self-enterprising, repressive regime towards political and economic freedom, and the demand towards accelerated-pace of modernity. Over the past decade, the national policy of special

economic zones to attract foreign investors has been developed in many areas throughout the country. Similar to other developing countries in the region, certain laws and regulations have been amended in response to the need of massive investment. The interplay between transnational neoliberal logic and national forces has created a state of exception where "the free co-exist with the unfree, unbridled knowledge flows and yet there are limits on knowledge" (Ong, 2006: 6), which has fragmented national space and its population. Such interaction, as will be demonstrated in this paper, has produced a complex form of governing and subjectification where both abjection and recalibration constitute the new experiences among the marginal people who engage in the Chinese-style neoliberalism.

Dreamland and the Desire to Civilize

In an interview with Zhao Wei by CCTV in 2012 (http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjY3MjY2MTI4.html accessed 20/12/2012), Zhao Wei, the Chinese tycoon of Kings Roman company reflects on how past experiences, personal nostalgia, and the will to civilize have culminated in the initiation of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone at the northern Lao border:

Previously, this area was lowland, filled with reed grass. Since last year the level of the land has gradually increased. We have developed this land, adjusting its level and deepening the water level. Now the water is deep enough, underground water has also been found. We have built a[n] island similar to China's Suzhou garden with Chinese civilization. Our goal is to turn the Golden Triangle into a developed economic zone, to become a peaceful development zone. The history will recognize my effort. Human capability will be represented in the prosperity of economy. If this goal is reached, I'll be more than happy[…] The biggest obstacle is that villagers here do not understand us. We have rented all the land and forest. [The Lao government] told us to preserve [the forest], take good care of it. But when we planted forest, they would come to cut it down, burn it down. After having burning it in May, they would go and dig the soil to plant things, without paying any attention to its effect. We can't go around, arrest, beat up, and fine these villagers who burn the forest. If we do so, it will cause ethnic issues here. To deal with this situation, we have to be open-minded. What we have done nowadays are based on two principles, first it must bring good benefit to the Lao people. It should not upset friends around me. Second, it might improve my employees, making the Lao people, the Lao government better. If we can do so, this area is successfully developed[…]The Lao government gives us the sky. In return we will build a beautiful city as a gratitude to the Lao people. When pretty Lao children came to our company, what make us happy and delighted is their smiles. Their smiling faces show happiness. This makes me feel happy, really happy.

Zhao Wei's expression is by no means new. Indeed, it reflects the 'Imperialist Nostalgia' (Rosaldo, 1989) and the desire to create cultural imitation. For the colonizer, as many scholars have pointed out, to civilize is to mold and subjugate its subjects in the image of the ruler (Rosaldo, 1987; Bhabha, 1994; Ferguson, 2002). The Lao frontier thus represents a nostalgic space of the prosperous China, an

allegory where imitation is made to express the yearning of imperial homesickness. But as Rosaldo argues, imperialist nostalgia develops alongside a certain sense of mission, "the white man's burden," where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones (Rosaldo, ibid.). As mood of emotion, imperialist nostalgia also has with it, the power to disguise that makes racial domination appear innocent and pure, an idealized fantasy that conceals violence and exploitation. The desire to civilize and to re-invent cultural progress thus constitutes ideological stances that justify colonial and imperial domination.

What the nostalgic rhetoric of the Chinese tycoon fails to reveal is the fact that such civilizing enterprise involves massive transformation/destruction of landscape and livelihood. Established in 2007, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone is located at the triangle between Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar in Bo Keo Province across Chiang Saen District of Chiang Rai Province. Owned by Chinese Kings Romans company, it claims to bring the world of glamour to northern border of Laos by making this Special Economic Zone one of the top international entertainment places in the globe.[3] A large area of 3,000 hectares of land on a 75-year lease has been granted to the company in exchange of a total investment of US$2 billion. If completed, the development of the Zone will result in resettlements of 9 villages along the Mekong River, while all the farmland, garden, and pasture will be expropriated to pave way for the entertainment complex. Kings Roman claims that on completion of this gigantic project, the whole complex would employ 5,000 workers and an estimated 300 domestic and foreign companies would be operating in this zone. Presently, it has 20 new start-ups, seven hotels and a total casino entertainment center. By 2020, the Zone would have a trade center, a five star hotel, an entertainment center, casino, bank, golf course, school, hospital, airport, harbor and a service center.

Golden Triangle SEZ, as claimed by Zhao Wei, is the hub that would connect the three countries of Laos, Thailand, and China together and to facilitate the flow of investment and tourism in this region. It is also expected that through this project, it will increase the number of Chinese tourists into Laos and Thailand. With the new policy of border crossing, border pass will be used to replace visa application. Of all the SEZs in Lao PDR, the Golden Triangle SEZ represents one of the most favorable enterprises in the eyes of the Lao government. Despite the constant rumor of drug and gambling abuse within the casino, the Lao government continues to praise this SEZ as the most successful model of economic development in the border area. In the Evaluation Report of Socio-Economic Development and management of Special Economic Zone in 2000-2011, Boonpen Munphosai, the Minister of Government Office and Vice Chair of National Committee of Special Economic Zone states, SEZ development has been well-taken off by developers, especially the infra-structure development in the far remote area. The construction of roads and buildings in Golden Triangle and Boten-dankham SEZs have been successful beyond expectation of what has been planned. It has brought a new feature to the rural area. The transportation is now convenient. The zone has created a number of new job

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[3] In the website of Kings Romans, various foreign business sectors were listed as joint ventures in the SEZ including the rice company from China, the Lao Development Bank, the Cambodian casino enterprise, the Chinese transportation company, the Chong Ching construction, Kings Romans, Bangkok Bank of Thailand, Dong Men agri-business group, the Yunnan agricultural company, and the horticultural company, etc. In reality, these enterprises have never physically existed in the zone.

opportunities for local people. The developers have delivered tax and other revenues to the government according to the contract. They have also turned the messy swamp area into a new modern city.[4]

The Local Emperor, the Casino Empire, and the Making of Neo-liberal Space

Chinese comprises the major investors in Lao SEZ who contribute the highest value of investment. For the Lao government, they are perceived as serious investors who "really have money" (*Mee Ngern Thae Thae*) and have an intension to invest. Although the SEZ in Laos started at Savan-seno with the Thai investment, the development has been unsuccessful. Compare to the Chinese, the Lao government see Thai businessmen as speculators, if not brokers who did not have a serious intention for investment. It is believed that the Chinese are the one who help make SEZ materialized. As a result, the Lao government has put its highest hope and faith in China to help bring progress into SEZ, making it the express way to turn Laos towards economic prosperity. Of all the ten approved Special and Specific Economic Zones, five have been operating by Chinese companies. The Golden Triangle Economic Zone has been branded by the Lao government as the model Special Economic Zone that has been made successful by the "committed" Chinese investor such as Zhao Wei. Over the course of five years since the initiation of the Golden Economic Zone in 2007, not only has Zhao Wei become the most trusted foreign investors in Laos, but his famous Zone has been the most popular sites of visit by high ranking Lao government officials.

Originally from Heilongjiang, in Harbin province of the cold north of Dong Bei, Zhao Wei built up his fame and economic success from illicit business of casino in Meng La, the border town between China and Myanmar. Since gambling is considered an illegal business in China, the Chinese government used every method to squeeze his luxurious casino enterprise, ranging from cutting off electricity and water supplies to prohibiting the Chinese to cross into his area.[5] Under such pressure, Zhao Wei and his family fled to Ton Phueng, and built up another casino empire where the land is cheap and the state is flexible. The business this time is no longer underground but is formalized. His casino complex has received a warm welcome and strong support from the Lao government. Zhao registered his new company under the name Jin Moo Mian or Kings Romans in Hong Kong (known as Dok Ngiw Kham in Lao). The plan to rebuild his casino complex is ambitious, Golden Triangle Casino is impressively larger than the Lan Tu casino in Meng La, and more fanciful in terms of entertainment facilities. Many high ranking official of Lao government are excited by this gigantic enterprise. They came for visits several times and returned with huge amount of pocket money. With his massive investment, Zhao promises to turn the "unused" hinterland of Ton Phueng into a new metropole that would link Thailand, Laos, and China together. In his own words, "I come to help the poor farmers of Laos out of poverty, and drug problem, by turning this area into a tourist city" (Asian Commerce Magazine, 2003: 13). It is

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[4] Boonpen Munphosai, Minister of Government Office, Vice Chair of NCSEZ, October 18, 2011. The idea "new modern city" *(nawa nakorn)* has become the state slogan that is used to describe thefuture of the Ton Phueng border district. It should be noted that the term "*nakorn*" or city is currently used only for Vientiane, the capital of the country.

[5] See also, Pal Nyiri, "The Enclave of Improvement".

announced by Zhao that in the year 2020, Ton Phueng will become a flower city (Mu Mian/Kapok Flower) with zero pollution and resided by 200,000 people.

Entering into the King Romans Empire was a remarkable experience. Although Ton Phueng is a Lao border area, it is no longer a Lao region. Zhao Wei has turned the 800 hectare of once fertile land of agriculture into a casino town with Chinese shops, restaurants, apartments, hotels, supermarkets massage parlors, and two large marketplaces. A plan to build an international airport is underway to link China's Shen Du and Ton Phueng together. The majority of the residents of the Zone are Chinese with a number of Burmese laborers and Lao residents. The language of communication is Chinese. People live in China time, which is one hour ahead of that of Lao. The SEZ has its own rules and regulations (taxation, rent, fee, punishment) with Zhao Wei as the head of the town. Indeed Zhao Wei is often referred to by the Chinese residents here as *Tŭ Huangdi* -- the local tyrant/emperor, and *Shān Gāo Huangdi Yuǎn* -- the powerful lord in the area unreachable by the emperor.[6]

In "The Chinese Axis: Zoning Technologies and Variegated Sovereignty" (2004), Aiwah Ong argues that zoning technologies represent an effective strategy of re-territorialization that create zones of political exceptions to normalized Chinese rules generating conditions of what she calls 'variegated sovereignty' that expand economic networks and promote political integration. In their endeavor to compete in the global economy, many states in East and Southeast Asia make "exceptions" to their usual practices of governing. Special Economic Zones (SEZ) represents an example of this strategy. The new economic geographies areas are largely separated from the rest of the society, free from government control, and within which the market is given more or less free reign. Such national geography has been re-territorialized and turned into a zone of exception, a neoliberal space governed by the logic of market. While neo-liberalism creates a space of exception exempt from sovereign control of the state, its flexible process of regulation has also allowed several types of neo-liberal subject to thrive. These are people who have been primarily driven by the neoliberal/market force, escape the power/control of the state by connecting themselves to multiple prospective places, and engage in multiple forms of citizenship that often time transcend and challenge the sovereignty of the state. Unlike diaspora, they did not develop their identity and community through the idea of homeland or desire to return to homeland, though such rhetoric is often used as a strategy of appropriation. The lives of these people are characterized by constant travelling and moving towards a more potential economic arena. The zone of exception allows them to make use of their multiple identities and networks to gain access to resources and maximize available benefits.

Zhao Wei represents the good example of the neo-liberal subject who attempts to negotiate his national identity in neo-liberal terms. For him, being Chinese means being a good patron whose good image is important for economic advancement. As he puts it, "Living in a foreign country, I have to be careful about what I speak and what I do. At the same time, I have taught my King Romans employees to be careful too. We have to pay attention to our personalities, showing

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[6] Despite the reputation of Zhao Wei as the powerful lord of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, it is known that the one behind this gigantic business is his wife. Zhao's wife is Taiwanese, who plays a major role in managing the Casino and its related business in Jin Moo Mien SEZ. It is said that the wife is the real investor in this zone and is the most powerful figure who controls the economic system in the SEZ. Zhao Wei, however, deals mostly with the Lao government. In addition, Zhao's daughter runs most of the computer and internet shops in the SEZ.

good personalities to people. That way we can save the image of the Chinese" (http://v.youku.com/v show/ id XMjY3MjY2MTI4.html/ accessed 20/12/2012). Other Chinese who entered into the Special Economic Zone came from a variety of places and with different backgrounds. Most of the time, these are not individuals but entered into the special economic zone through several kinds of networks. The majority of the Chinese who migrated into the Zone came through the so-called Dong Bei network, the home region of Zhao Wei. Some of these Chinese have close connection with the Zhao family. Other Dong Bei families established major business enterprises fundamental to the casino economy such as hotel, restaurant, and entertainment facilities. The Dong Bei people have more privileges than the other Chinese in this zone and are influential groups. Most of them learned about the new economic opportunity along the Lao border through the advertisements by the Kings Roman company in Chinese media.

The owner of the supermarket next to the hotel where I stayed during my field visit has opened her store for almost half a year. Her son used to work in the casino in Boten and moved here to work as an employee in the casino. She and her husband, former farmers from Harbin, Dong Bei, followed their son to seek economic prospect in this faraway land. It was their first time to travel across the country. Most of the products in her store are from Xishuanbanna where her husband transports them across the Boten-Mohan borders once every 2-3 months. Even though they have to pay customs duty on both sides of the Chinese-Lao border, they are not required to pay any income tax in this zone within the period of three years. The average income of 5,000-10,000 yuan is good enough compared with the economic life in Dong Bei. There are also people from other regions such as Sichuān Shěng, Yunnan, Kwang Dong, and Kwan Si. These people open restaurants, hotels, and entertainment businesses. Most Chinese in this area show trust and respect for Zhao Wei and his ability to make this area prosper. It should be noted that the movement of Chinese from Dong Bei, Sichuan, and Yunnan is made possible through networks. The family network represents the fundamental characteristic of this flow of the mainland Chinese towards search for new economic opportunity outside their hometown. These people did not intend to settle down permanently in Ton Phueng but planned to earn some income for a couple of years before returning to China. The second type of Chinese in this area is overland Chinese. Most of these people are second-generation Chinese from various places such as Chiang Rai's Doi Mae Salong, and Shan State's La Shio. Often times, these Chinese are the minority, living at the edge of the nation-state. Border development in the form of SEZ has offered these minorities an economic opportunity and space for trans-border experiences. Living in the interstices has made an acquisition of multiple identities, multilingual, and flexible citizenship necessary. Although this qualification is often deprecated by the state, it is found valuable at the SEZ. Several people working at Kings Roman are of this type of border minority.

The person who arranged transportation to cross the Mekong to the casino for my research assistants and me is one good example. When I asked about his name, he responded that it was Jirayut, a Thai name. He spoke Chinese to my assistants with a Yunnanese accent. When I asked him where he is from, he replied that he was from around here, which implies that he is Thai. But to my Chinese researchers, he said he is also Chinese. While waiting for someone to process our border crossing documents, he was reading Thairath, a Thai newspaper. Another border person we met was a hotel manager near the casino complex. This person is

a young woman who speaks fluently in both Thai and Chinese languages and who identifies herself as a Thai citizen from Doi Mae Salong. One of the hotel staff is also from the border area. Arriving at the Special Economic Zone from Tha Chi Lek, the border between Myanmar and Thailand, this woman speaks good Chinese and communicates well in Thai. Indeed, as a zone of exception, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone has attracted a number of the border people who found themselves fitting well in this "out of state" place. Flexible as it is, there is no need for these people to declare their national ID card, which some of them might not have, and there is no problem for them to cross the border back and forth between Laos, Myanmar, and China. The advent of Special Economic Zone has thus turned the border into a neo-liberal space where sovereignty has given way to the force of market. However, such a process is not without its costs. The paradox of this "zone of exception" lies in the fact that while the market force has claimed to redefine the idea of sovereignty and right in neoliberal term (economic freedom and flexible sovereignty), the process of such redefining is often coercive, politically repressive, and operated through state machinery.

Commodifying Sovereignty and Discourse Coalition: "We will Turn the Wild Frontier into a Modern City"

Some opinions posit that special economic zones will create unequal economic balance due to the implementation of different policies towards investors within and outside the zones. This kind of opinion might be right in the short term. But in the long run, if we have an appropriate mechanism and administration, special economic zone development will be the key engine to accelerate development, connecting [Laos] with regional and international economy, creating employments, and bring poverty eradication into a wider scope (Boonpen Munphosai, Minister of Government Office, Vice Chair of NCSEZ, October 18, 2011).

In making extraterritoriality possible in the postcolonial period, both Lao state and developers have joined hands to create their collaborative justification. Narratives about how poor and backward it is in the border area of Lao have been constructed, shared, and made legitimate to support the necessities of SEZ. For the Lao government, it is the area beyond their economic capacity to make any change. As Kheungkham Keonuchan, Director of Planning and Evaluation Division, the Secretariat to NCSEZ puts it, "The reasons we granted right[s] to develop the golden triangle into SEZ are twofold: it is a far remote area and it is precarious to drug problem[s]. When development gets in there, people will be better off, they will be protected".[7] The Chinese came as an economic savior who promised to help bring Laos out of underdevelopment, to rescue them from a state of lagging behind, and to fulfill the dream towards modernity initiated by the founder of the modern Lao country, Kaisone Phomvihane. Even though it is an unequal deal, it is the only solution as far as the Lao state sees it. It is believed that SEZ is the second best investment strategy suitable for this poor country that has very limited economic capacity for infrastructure development. As Kheungkham argues, "there are good results, but we can't deny that there will also be some impacts. But this is all with

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[7] Interview, December 15, 2011.

good intention. After all, everyone will mutually benefit from this kind of development [...][T]he government doesn't have sufficient capital. That's why we have lower bargaining power. But we have tried our best to protect the interest of people. At the same time, we need investment. This is the reason why we have to have a special policy".[8]

As a process of transformation by which goods, services, or other entities are assigned economic value, commodification has become the strategic tool in the Lao path towards modernization. Commodifying sovereignty is a process by which the right to rule is given an economic value and thus allows market to function to replace other social or political values. It is therefore not only a transformation of commodity, but a modification of relationship where state-citizen-territory relationship is now tainted by commercial value. In an unequal power relation between Laos and China, the Lao state has no choice but to turn their sovereignty into commodity by granting full rights of economic exploitation of resources to the Chinese investors while depriving the right of its own citizens. The differentiated treatment of citizens is defined by anthropologist Aiwah Ong as 'gradated sovereignty' (2008). Discursive practice about backwardness, the need for development, poverty are thus the significant mechanism that help make the process of commodifying sovereignty in the form of Special Economic Zone justifiable. For Chinese investors, it is their mission to turn the backward hinterland into a prosperous country, a civilizing mission the Lao themselves cannot pursue. It is a dream that Zhao Wei, the key developer of Golden Triangle SEZ, states in various interviews as, "Laos really lags behind. The country is poor. The people are conservative. They have seen [the] fruit[s] of development in China. They thought China has many SEZs and would like to follow suit. When I first arrived here, it was a poor region. There were *kapok* flowers blooming everywhere. Lao people are kind and welcoming [to] me. But they are poor. There was nothing here. You had to sleep on a mat. In [the] summer season, it was so dry. I came to work here, staying with villagers, thinking about how to develop this place. [...] I wanted to help them out of poverty. One day when I get old and look back here [sic]. It has become the famous SEZ well known throughout the world".

Zhao Wei's statement about Laos and its people are typical. It resonates the perception among the Chinese officials towards the underdeveloped Lao population. As the statement in the North Plan by the Yunnan Province Development and Reform Commission clearly states: "The mentalities of most people are still at the starting stage of agricultural economic development, which is unsuitable for development of market economy and economic globalization. Their awareness of development, competition, openness and self-reliance and hard working still need to be improved" (Northern Laos Industrial Economic Development and Cooperation Planning Preparation Group, 2008: 15). The idea that the GMS people possess backward mentalities while their homelands are poor and need to be transformed is central to the discourse of development in China. This type of attitude is also endorsed by the Lao government. The discourse coalition co-produced by both the developer and the one being developed reinforces the image of the Lao hinterland as a desolate and stagnant area disconnected from any type of market economy. For the Lao state, it is the sign of backwardness incompatible with- and obstructing the dream for a new modern Lao country. Yet, for the Chinese, it is a challenging

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[8] Interview, December 15, 2011.

civilizing mission, an exciting enterprise on how to turn the unknown wild frontier of Laos' north into a famous and profitable region. The mission itself is even thought of as sacred. As Zhao Wei puts it, "Doing business is like making merit. Business-society, they grow together". Although the drives towards civilization are different, both parties share the same dream of re-structuring the frontier towards modernity. In the words of Zhao Wei:

> *Golden Triangle is not far away from Cheng Du. I am quite interested in tourist resources in Cheng Du. We can develop this zone into a tourist center that both send[s] tourists to Cheng Du and attract[s] international tourists into this area. At the same time, I also hope that Cheng Du would be interested in tourism in northern Thailand. We can help link all the tourist industries together. Next year (2012), the main objectives of the zone are to build an international airport and two 18-hole golf courses, to develop an entertainment and recreation centers on the Moo Mien Island. These development schemes require collaborations from a number of investors. My dream and my goal are [sic] to develop this zone into a big city, the second largest to Vientiane. When I am old and it is inconvenient to travel, I would be able to envisage—every time people see the Kapok flowers, they will think about this zone.*

The Civilizing Mechanism: Deception, Coercion, and Abeyance

The dream constructed by the Chinese developer and the Lao state is, however, not necessarily shared by local people living at the golden triangle border who are defined as development target. Nor does the picture of poor borderland correspond with the actual reality of the community. On the contrary, what has been portrayed as the wild frontier, Ton Phueng, is one of the most fertile agricultural areas along the Mekong river. Prior to the approval of the government to turn this whole town into a Special Economic Zone, the Lao Ministry of Culture also wanted to join hand with Thailand to propose to the UNESCO a joint world heritage site of Suvannakhomkham and Chiang Saen -- the Trans-boundary Archaeological Urban Complex of Chiang Saen and Suvannakhomkham. It is known that both Chiang Saen and Suvannakhomkham share a 500-600 years of ancient history across the Mekong river. Also known as "Nakhone Chianglao" and "Nakhone Ngern Yang" the city is believed to originally be established during the first millennium CE, possibly by the Mon. The present remains are, however, vestiges of the 16th century city, which was established on the earlier site by King Sai Setthathirat (1550-1571) of Lan Xang. Most villages along the Mekong river have been long established and wealthy. They are lowland agricultural communities who have engaged in rice farming, cattle ranching, river trade, and various kinds of employment for more than two centuries. More importantly, they have never seen themselves as being poor or backward. In contrast to Zhao Wei's dream of wonderland, the civilizing mission at the Golden Triangle border was bitterly fought by local people. This is not because they did not want modernization, but simply because they did not see their livelihoods in any way lagging behind civilization as claimed by the Chinese developer. Similar to another project before this one, the struggle went all in vain. The change was imperative. Negotiation is not a term recognized by the state once the project has been approved.

Ban Kwan village, the first target of resettlement carried the name "Sridonsak" during the French colonization before changing to Ban Kwan after the end of the Indo-China war. The villagers were Yuan and Yong who migrated from Lampoon, northern Thailand due to land shortage and the oppression by the Burmese and Lanna states. After Laos gained independence in 1975, many people left the village, only ten households remained. Between 1982 and 1989, the second wave of migration of about twenty-five families of the Lue moved in from Sayyabouly Province. Apart from the Yuan, Yong and Lue, there are also other ethnic groups living in Ban Kwan including the Tai dam, Lao loum, and Khmu. The resettlement scheme was received by the villagers with shocking surprise. It was unexpected that a long, well-established lowland village would have to be relocated in order to pave way for the casino. The targeted area of resettlement covers 9 villages including Ban Phonhome, Ban Don Moon, Ban Viengsavang, Ban Phieng Ngam, Ban Mokkajok, Ban Longkhone, Ban Kwan, Ban Sibounhueang, and Ban Moungkham, within the total area of 3,000 hectares. Ban Kwan was the first that have lost its farmland. It should be noted that the Chinese civilizing mission is made possible through the help of the Lao state counterpart. There are at least two significant mechanisms that facilitate the process of land appropriation for the Chinese which help sail the project through without much difficulty: the Lao state coercive apparatus and the role of the village mediator/broker. Deception, coercion, and abeyance, are three devices that have transformed the first targeted village and its people, Ban Kwan, into the Chinese-designed dreamland.

Deception

On January 24th, 2007, representatives from the Ton Phueng district officials came to Ban Kwan declaring the new government project of Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Three hundred and twenty villagers who attended the meeting had no clue about what this project meant and how it would affect their lives. According to the district officer, villagers would only have to move a few hundred meters away from their settlement. Within this short distance, villagers would still be able to come back to their garden and farmland to collect their fruits, vegetables, and other products. Based on this claim which portrays no major impact, villagers agreed to comply with the government policy. A few months later, government officials from Vientiane capital and district officers along with representative from the King Romans company came to the village again. This time the information is different. It turns out that the area along the Mekong River and all the farmland belonging to eight villages in Ton Phueng districts have been leased out to the King Romans company. In order to build a tourist center, 827.65 hectares of land will be needed. In the first period, village land including settlement area and farmland in Ban Kwan and Ban Sribunhueng will be handed to the company. According to the government officials, the resettlement site is 10 kilometer away from the actual village and the company forbids any new house construction from the year 2007 onwards. The new information prompted villagers at Ban Kwan to petition to the Lao government. Money was collected and two representatives were sent to Vientiane capital to ask for a reconsideration of the resettlement scheme. The petition written by the villagers requests that the government reconsider the policy to establish the special economic zone in Ban Kwan area or otherwise delineate the village and farmlands of Ban Kwan out of development of tourist industry project.

Villagers also made a plea to the government for a fair compensation on the grazing land and garden already taken away by the company. Such petition is a rare incident in a socialist country such as Lao PDR where development-induced resettlement is an ordinary practice and protests are considered illegal. To no avail, the petition never reached the prime minister. When villagers arrived at the Prime Minister Office, the staff there informed them that there was nothing they could do since the project had already been approved by the government.

Coercion and Mediation

Chinese special economic zone at Ton Phueng is regarded as a government project legalized by the SEZ law. It is therefore imperative that Lao citizens must obey. For some people at Ban Kwan, resettlement is not something unfamiliar, as many of the residents have been moved by other projects prior to this one. As an ethnically mixed village, the views towards resettlement are divergent. Some were willing to move while others wished to protest. With no one leading a strong opposition against the project and with the coercive persuasion from provincial and district officials, most villagers ended up accepting compensation. The company built 116 houses for the villagers in the area far from the river and casino and named it "Ban Sam Liam Kham" or Golden Triangle Village . Between 2008-2012, villagers struggled bitterly for fair compensation on their houses, garden, fruit trees, barns, and grazing land. While the compensation rate for land and houses was extremely low, paddies and farmlands that are taken away for road construction are not compensated. On average, one household would receive approximately 60,000-80,000 baht ($US 2,000-2,500) for the house compensation. A family with a secure house, rice barn, garden, paddies, cattle, grazing land would receive a compensation in the approximate amount between 800,000-1,000,000 baht ($US 26,000-34,000). There were five households that refused to accept compensation due to its very low rate and inaccurate land measurement. They also complained that the village head took advantage of this unfair deal by siding with the company instead of negotiating for a better rate of compensation. As one villager puts it, "they don't help their own folk" (*khon kan eng bo chuay kan*).

It should be noted that throughout the process of land appropriation and compensation negotiation, Lao government officials and village brokers are the ones who took the active role in forcing people out of their land and negotiating for a low price of land and properties. This effective strategy helps reduce/shift the potential confrontation between the company and local villagers. In the process of negotiating for a fair compensation, some villagers protested by refusing to move out of their property:

> It's not that I wanted to go against the party or the government. When the committee informed me about the compensation, they said it was eight hundred thousand baht. But when I went to collect the money, it was only three hundred thousand baht. I asked them why it turns out this way. The people there said there was a miscalculation. When I looked at the list, it did not include the barn. My barn is the largest in the village. But it was not in there. They did not compensate for the well. The fence was reduced from 171 meters to 51 meters. They claimed that the company already provided a new housing. I was therefore thinking, if they give me this amount of compensation, I will not move

out. What will be wrong if a Lao person wants to live on the Lao soil? I pay tax for my land every year. I did not live on a state land or other people's land. I did not sell my house. It is still my house. It would be another story, had I already sold it to the Chinese. This is what I told them. They then said let's talk again. Later, they added more compensation (Nang Khwan, interview November 9th, 2012).

On January 28th, 2012, 114 households of Ban Kwan moved to a new village named by the company "Sam Liam Kham village" (Golden Triangle village). The negotiation between the five families and the company did not reach any new result. Eventually, they had to accept the company's unfair offer and moved to join their Lao counterparts in the new village. In his comment about the Ban Kwan situation, village head of Ban Sribunhueng, the next village designated to be resettled by the company notes, "Ban Kwan villagers are disunited". According to the Sribunhueng headman, this is due to the fact that the villagers there are from diverse origins and for this reason, it was difficult to develop solidarity and fight to keep their land from the Chinese company. Since the beginning of the SEZ dispute, villagers were divided into two groups, those who agreed with the project, and those who did not want to move. Although the first group was less in terms of number, they are the powerful elite in the village. The village head has been the strongest proponent of the project and acted as mediator between villagers, and the company and government agency. He was also in the village committee appointed by the district official to act as negotiator between villagers and the company. In return, the company paid him and others of the village committee 200 baht per day for helping the company communicate with villagers, and collaborating with relevant agencies to measure the farmland and house area. This group of village elites benefited the most from the resettlement scheme, receiving high compensation, and getting the nicest location of the new houses. They are also the first in the list to be hired to work with the Chinese company. The meditating role of local power of the village elite is thus significant in making the coercive process of land appropriation effective.

Abeyance

"Marginality can be defined as the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic)[...]"

In *Regulating Society: Marginality and Social Control in Historical Perspective*, Ephraim Mizruchi uses the term 'abeyance', which literally means suspension to describe the containment mechanism created to absorb and control the potentially dissident in the society (1983). As he contends:

Societies for the most part tend toward an orderly flow of people from one place to the next and from one social organization to another. When that flow becomes disorderly or is impeded—notably, when there is a surplus population that cannot be absorbed by the social structures operative at a given movement in a particular society—supplementary organizations must be created that can contain for shorter or longer periods of time, the marginal populations, keep it in 'Abeyance (Mizruchi cited in Harper 1994:44-45, emphasis original).

Examples of sites of abeyance are shelter, prison, and brothel, etc., where unemployed, homeless, demobilized workers, and other unwanted subjects are absorbed and kept in check. Resettlement site at the SEZ represents one form of abeyance where surplus Lao population is kept suspended. Since the SEZ law of Lao PDR stipulates a condition that people who have lived in the area must not be moved out of the zone but be incorporated into the SEZ development, the resettlement site, Ban Sam Liam Kam, is thus used by the Chinese investor as a handy way to handle the surplus Lao population. The newly built houses is a relatively cheap cost for the Chinese company, traded for the precious land gained from the Lao residents. From the external outlook, the houses seem modern and clean. In reality, all of the houses are made from low quality materials. The wall started to crack even before people moved in. Flood waters get inside the house when there is heavy rain. The house roofs also leak. Villagers have to spend their compensation received from the company to repair the houses even though they just moved in. One villager describes the poor quality of the house construction:

> *The houses are in bad shape. Even before we moved in, many things are broken, the bathrooms are cracked. At first, the committee hired the Thai to build six houses. But they heavily criticized the construction work. The Thai workers then ran away. They then hired the Chinese, who were even worse. They did not even lay the concrete beam, just built things on the ground. It was agreed that there would be an inspection by a committee. But this never happened. No one consulted with villagers. Some houses are too high. The others are too low. Those who live in the upper area got mudslide when there was heavy rain. Before the house moving, there was no meeting. No one checked whether the houses are in the good condition. Some houses did not have a bathroom yet. The villagers had to build the bathrooms themselves* (Nang Khai, interviewed Nov 9th 2012).

Prior to the resettlement, the company made a promise of employment. In reality, those who were accepted to work with the casino are some young people who are willing to work odd hours at the gambling complex. Therefore, there is less than one third of the village population who are allowed to join the company. Meanwhile, living in a house where there is no job but everything needs to be bought including food and drinking water makes it very difficult for poor households. Some of them try to make use of very limited space for planting. Others try to participate in the tourist industry, using the vehicle provided by the company, hoping to gain some money from transporting the tourists who visit the casino. But since the company also has its own transportation and did not share any tourists with the Lao drivers, this prospective job came to an end right when it started. And the vehicles are left unused at the houses. Several other projects ended with the same fate. This includes the organic farming enterprise that the company energetically promoted to the villagers. Seeds were distributed to various households to plant in their paddies. Initially, there were many households participating in the project. But after the vegetables were grown and ripe for collecting, there was no market and the company offered no assistance as to how to sell the products. As a result, most villagers decided to not waste any more time in any of the company's projects. Living in suspension, some villagers have managed to work harder hours in their limited rice paddies left by the company. Some continue to grow rice to earn meager income. Some who are still young are able to find their way into the new livelihood.

This includes Kiang Khai, a 26-year-old married Lao woman who chose to work at the casino to secure some money for her house construction:

> *I've worked in the casino for three years now. I'm the only person in the family who works there. The casino work is OK. But it is insecure. I might work there for another year or two and will quit. The smoking there is terrible. Chinese people smoke a lot. I'm really fed up with it. It is also a hard work. Working on a night shift, I have to be cautious all the time. If I made a mistake, my boss will severely reprimand me. Most the Lao who work there are card dealer. The Burmese do the cleaning job. The Chinese and Burmese get higher payment than the Lao. Some people explained that because they are not local. In the old village we used to earn more than 200,000 baht per year. We only had to pay for clothing and meat. The rest we can find from the forests. Approximately, the monthly expenses would cost us around 2,000 baht. But living here the cost of living is higher than 3,000 baht* (Nang Kiang Khai).

For those whose lives have been robbed by the economy they cannot be a part of, living in suspension is nothing but miserable. In the words of Nang Khai, the last person who moved out of the old village:

> *I did not say that the Chinese stole our occupation. I once thought that their occupation is one thing, ours is another. But the fact that they took our land, the land we used to grow corn, it means that they came to take away our job. This makes us upset. But now our properties are left idle. They didn't make use of them, just let them all covered with grass. If we continue to live this way, our country will fail. Look at the people now. Living at the new houses, we can't even raise chicken and ducks. In the old village, even though we didn't feed the chicken for ten days, they can survive on their own. If somebody comes for a visit, we can cook a chicken meal to welcome them. It's our rural way of life. We don't need to buy anything. If we have plenty of them (chicken), we can sell them, one hundred fifty baht per kilogram. Now we can't raise any* (Nang Khai).

Abeyance reflects an interesting paradox in the process of the Chinese neoliberalization of the Lao frontier. On the one hand, the zoning strategies of SEZ allows a new form of flexible and graduated sovereignty (Ong, 2000) that effectively encourages flow of capital and labor necessary for the establishment of the SEZ. On the other hand, such neoliberal space can be disruptive and uneven as resettlement inevitably produces a group of marginal population, a surplus with a potential of dissidence. Abeyance organization and its properties are thus invented to absorb, control and remove potentially dissident elements from circulation. It is a system of flow regulating to temporarily retain possible challengers to the existing status quo and thereby reducing threats to the larger social system (Mizruchi,1983:17). The resettlement site of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone can thus be seen as a strategy of abeyance -- a tactic of social control and a contradictory feature of the neo-liberal logic significant to the maintenance of social order and the management of the "unwanted population".

More Civilizing Mission

The completion of resettlement in Ban Kwan marks only the beginning of the Chinese civilizing project at the Lao border. To turn the so-called Lao hinterland into a new city, all the resources must be domesticated and transformed. This again, cannot be accomplished without an assistance from the Lao state counterpart. In March 2012, the head of the Provincial Land Department of Bo Keo province, along with Ton Phueng district officers came to Ban Si Boon Hueng village, the community adjacent to Ban Kwan. This visit carried an important message to the villagers that all the paddies must be handed over to the company to pave way for an international airport and a 36-hole golf course. The second phase of resettlement includes an even larger area, covering paddy fields of three villages: Ban Kwan, Si Boon Hueng, and Ban Muang Kham. The government officers suggested that villagers change their occupation as rice cultivation has no future and is considered underdeveloped. They also attempted to gather data relating to land and property ownership and to measure the land. However, such attempt was strongly opposed by villagers who refused to cooperate with the government officials. Several visits by government officials failed to achieve any agreement. The last visit was therefore accompanied by force. As the village head of Ban Si Boon Hueng recounts:

> *Villagers did not conform [to the government official demand for land demarcation]. They went to gather in the paddy fields and lined up in a row, blocking the officials to come in for land measuring. The district then brought police and soldiers in. Villagers then decided to sit on the paddy-field ridges. But the soldiers would not retreat but marched in. We then pushed them by the chests. Villagers who came to join us are mostly from Ban Si Boon Hueng and Ban Muang Kham. The Ban Kwan villagers didn't join but said they would support our decision. The government officials came so many times. Villagers propose the compensation price of no less than 1 million baht per rai (1.6 hectare). If they agree, we will allow them to measure the land. But if not, we will not allow them to come in. We have already learned the lesson from Ban Kwan* (Village headman of Ban Si Boon Hueng, interviewed 10 November 2012).

In response to the question about the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and its claim to improve people's livelihood, the village head of Ban Si Boon Hueng rebuts:

> *Local people have got more confusion since the establishment of the SEZ. There is a house break-in every day from Ban Mom to Ton Pheung. It never happens before. This is because people got addicted to gambling. So many strangers come to our villages. Life has become worse since the casino's arrived. They said they would create jobs for us. But this is not true. Four or five of our children went to work with them. But it was so hard that they could not do it. You have to work eight hours a day, any time [day and night]. No rest, no weekend. If you take a day off, the payment will be cut, 7 hundreds baht per day. If they feel that your leave is not reasonable, they will cut another 3 hundred baht. The Chinese get the highest salary. Then the Burmese. The Lao gets the lowest. The company explains that both the Chinese and the Burmese need to pay for visa entry and passport. They also claim that the Lao are local here and don't need to pay for rent. If the salary continues to be this low, I don't think anyone will be able to do it. In my opinion, this SEZ will not sustain in the long run. They said we will have*

new occupation. But in reality, they forced us out and replace us with the Burmese (Si Boon Hueng village head, interviewed November 10th, 2012).

Unlike the village head of Ban Kwan who acts as the mediator between the company and the villagers, the Ban Si Boon Hueng village head is clear about his position to protect the villagers' benefits. For him, the first response is resistance. But if this is not possible, he will try to bargain for the fairest rate of compensation. Like other villagers, the village head noticed the drastic change of the village atmosphere. Villagers used to have abundant cattle grazing land and corn fields. But many of these lands are now occupied by the Chinese who replace corns with other crops. Since corn does not provide much benefit, some villagers decided to rent their land to the Chinese for growing the export-oriented fruit such as bananas. He also felt that the compensation provided to the Ban Kwan people is unjust. But the villager's negotiation was weak and not successful due to the lack of unity among villagers. According to the Si Boon Hueng leader, this might have to do with the fact that members of the Ban Kwan village came from various backgrounds, e.g., the Lue from Ban Chieng Hon, Chieng Lom, and the Yuan. This is different from Ban Si Boon Hueng where villagers are of Yuan origin and village organization is quite strong. Villagers have learned a good lesson from the Ban Kwan tragedy and are in unison to refuse to cooperate with either the company or the Lao government officials who act as an agent of the Chinese investor.

The Neo-liberal Subjects

In producing the discourse of frontier civilization, both the Chinese tycoon and the Lao state promote a similar idea of turning the 'out of the way place' (Tsing, 1992) and its people into a profit-making agent. To achieve that end, the old, traditional space and way of life need to be refurbished into a new, modern entity. SEZ can thus be viewed as one form of neo-liberal project as it aims to reshape resources and people out of the hands of traditional bond and state regulation, and to produce 'passive workers' with enough skills to render them useful to the demands of capital. Throughout the years of 'civilizing mission', local Lao people have been told repeatedly by both the state agencies and the investor to change their 'backward' way of life and embrace a new lifestyle and occupation. But if neoliberalism demands a certain kind of subject who is able to tolerate precarity, evince flexibility, revise traditions on the fly and so on, the Lao people of Ton Phueng have proved to be the wrong target. Not only because these people refuse to leave traditional ideology without breaking down so much they can't work, but more importantly because they reject the new work ethics of efficiency and economic value of productivity necessary for the advancement of the capitalist world. The resistance by local villagers to move out of the traditional village and to be incorporated as full labor represents the failure of the Chinese civilizing attempt to bring the frontier population into the new order of neoliberalism. For the Lao villagers, the lack of self-motivation to produce and to regard themselves as a creative personal brand that generates economic value through the practices of everyday life as well as whatever wage they can secure have suspended them in between the two worlds of vanishing traditional livelihood and the neo-liberal sphere designed by the Chinese.

Interestingly, the key engine that drives the economic force of the SEZ is the Burmese. These are the true laborers who entirely submit themselves to the economic order of the Chinese world, the ideal neoliberal subjects needed by most capitalists. The Burmese population in the Golden Triangle SEZ are mostly from the lower part of Myanmar below Myeittla or Mandalay region, which they call Auh-Pyae (below the country). In 2008, the first group of Burmese arrived at the Lao border when there was a need for labor work on forest and land clearing and construction. Most of these people heard the news of recruitment through the Chinese network in Tachileik and in their hometowns. Travelling to the worksite was also not difficult. The easiest way to reach Tachileik is to get a taxi or a bus to the Luang-pong immigration office on the Burmese border, then cross the Mekong river and get a taxi to Ton Pheung. The total cost from Tachileik to Ton Pheung is around 400-500 baht. Currently, the population has expanded to approximately 700 households or 10,000 people living four separate areas. These are the Bamar-Ywar (or Burman village, once called Rakhine-Ywar),[9] the Taung-chyae-Ywar (or Mountain Foothills village), the old Lao village and the Casino A-saung (dormitory). Two thirds of the Burmese population live in the Bamar-Ywar, which constitutes the largest residential site. The Taung-chyae-Ywar is populated by approximately 100 hundred households of more skillful workers. This residential site has been set up by the Chinese Worker Administrative Department of the Kings Roman Company. Workers who live here work on higher skilled jobs such as cement making, machine controlling and repairing, etc. The third place is the old Lao village of Ban Kwan. These are workers whose work is paid on a contract basis (Poh-pyait). In the Casino Asaung, the company provides beds and food as well as other entertainment such as movie and playground inside the dormitory. Most workers who live there are of young age and have been trained to work at the casino. A small number of casino employees reside in the Casino A-saung. The migration pattern of the Burmese to the SEZ often starts by men travelling through agents to work or find jobs and later on these men would bring along their families to join them. Some of the wives might set up food stalls, VCD shops or groceries to earn extra incomes for the families. Others might take care of young kids while husbands are at work. Most Burmese hardly go back home in order to save money from travelling cost. With the availability of telephones, it is easy to contact their family members or relatives back in Myanmar.

Living the Life of Neo-liberal Subject

In *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006), Richard Sennett examines the ways that contemporary capitalism is reshaping workers' career and political choices. As he explains, contemporary capitalist organizations -- with their short-lived teams, and emphasis on change and flexibility -- demand a new type of worker. This ideal man or woman must be willing to work with temporary connections, unattached to the past, and focused on talent, not skill or achievement. Unlike the old corporate structures in which individuals knew their place and are able to plan their futures, modern corporations provide no long-term stability, benefits, social

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[9] The Chinese manager once put the Rakhine workers together in one place due to their protest against unfair payments in the early year of employment. This has then been known by the Burmese as the Rakhine village before other Burmese workers were allowed to also live there.

capital, or interpersonal trust. As a result, life of employee/worker has become more insecure and less free, while the knowledge and usefulness has been devalued. The new flexible institutions cause workers to lose any sense of agency, leading individuals to appear to themselves as passive victims of senseless or uncontestable forces. As a transnational and deterritorialized enterprise, the Chinese Kings Roman Company is one type of modern capitalism that shows no responsibility to any nation or citizen. It knows no fidelity to any nation-state and is willing to embrace any neo-liberal subject who is ready to work hard with no social protection or welfare to understand uncertainty and insecurity, and has talent to solve problems by him/herself. Burmese men are recruited into the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone with the hope to find work and earn more income which is not available inside Myanmar. Upon arrival, they are put into one of the three worksites: construction site, casino, or joker site. The construction site has the largest demand for labor that would be classified into skilled and unskilled labor. The first type works mainly with machines or other technical task, while the A-Kjian (hard work) is mainly labor intensive such as carrying stone and sand. The salary ranges from between 4,000-6,000 baht to 9,000-10,000 baht depending on the type of work. No official contract is made. A reasonable leave of absence is acceptable with prior notification but the wage for those absent work days will be deducted from the total salary. At this site, the Chinese hire a translator-cum-mediator called by the Burmese, the "in-charge". These are mostly Kokang Chinese who are responsible for each group of workers at the worksite. This position earns the highest salary among the Burmese workers. Relationship with the "in-charge" is significant as they are the ones who communicate with the Chinese supervisors in the worksite. Wrong translation can be disastrous especially in terms of work. Making mistakes in work can mean getting fired without pay. Without written contract and a language barrier, the Burmese workers have no negotiating power against their Chinese supervisors. Unfair payment and abusive treatment towards workers is considered normal situation, which can be found on a daily basis.

Countless stories are told by the workers. Such as, "People get fired not because they made mistake or they don't qualify for the job. Some time, if they [the Chinese supervisor] do not like one person, he can be fired without being given any explanation. They many say *khaing-ma-kaung-loh* [did not work as we said]. So we are like cattle. Some time, the "in charges" did not give wages to workers. They ran away" (Interview with Worker I, November 9th, 2012).

"At few days ago, I was at the port and one worker had to carry something from the ship. Maybe he made a mistake, or did it the wrong way. He got kicked out of his job and verbally abuse by the Chinese in front of many people. It's a public area. I can tell that how humiliate he must have felt. But this is pretty much normal here" (Interview with Worker II, November 9th, 2012).

The casino is the second worksite where a number of Burmese youths have been recruited. Of all the 2,000 employees, which include the Chinese, Burmese, and Lao, the Burmese comprise two-third of the population. Burmese workers are in all the various sections inside the casino: such as the *Mee-line*, which is the cleaning and kitchen work, *Soe-phat-won* or the card collecting team, card dealers, and waiters. Working conditions seem to be better than the construction site especially in terms of salary and security. But this has to be traded off with unusual working hours (8:00am - 4pm, 4:00pm - noon, and noon - 8:00am), and a smoky environment. Most of the staff receive training (a period during which they are called interns) before

they are allowed to work. The highest paid position is card dealer with a salary of 13,000 baht. The second level is monitoring staff, observing each table and keeping an eye on cards and chips and repair machines and so on. The salary for this position is between 7,000-8,000 baht. The lowest position is cleaner. Most of the Burmese employees in the casino have Chinese language competency. In the beginning they will be trained and provided with a card. With that card, although they have not yet received salary, they can have meals. After passing an internship examination, they will be assigned certain jobs that is most suited to their talents. For example, a card dealer needs to be fluent in passing cards and chips and are careful about money. A young boy who is the son of a family who runs a food shop from Myeittila and who has worked in the casino for more than a year explains the process of working at the casino as follows:

> *School education is not important at the casino, even useless. As long as someone is clever on cards, there is a certain chance to get a job, I mean salary. Talking about work category in Casino, as I mentioned, there are classified into many places such as card place, kitchen place, security, training, cleaning etc. At first, you submit the form which is written in Chinese, then, if you are sent to a certain desk. After 3-5 days; you are called as "king's man". This "king's man" is known as an intern and the internship takes 15 days. After that, they give you a kind of Identity Card (ID) which carries some of your information. With that card, you can eat food, watch movie, and get a place to stay in the dormitory. The advantage of having this ID card is you are more or less "in" this place. During the period of 3 months, you will get 1,500 Baht for your work. At the end of the third month, you are then registered as staff. You will get 7,000- 8,000 Baht for salary, but they will deduct some amount for su-kyae in order to save your money [in Burmese, a gift]. If you get fired before 1 year, you will not get back this sukyae. If you manage to work till the second year, you will get the exact amount you have saved. If you've worked for three years, you will get your su-kyae plus another extra half of your su-kyae* (Burmese worker, interviewed November 9th, 2012).

The last worksite is known to the Burmese as the "Joker site". People who work at this site have no specific job entitlement. Workers have to seek jobs by themselves and receive the very low salary of 3,500 baht, the lowest rate in the SEZ. It is also the most insecure and abusive working condition as workers can be cheated or fired without any protection. As the biggest site of employment where the majority of Burmese workers come to look for work, the oversupply of labor means that the workers must conform with whatever condition set by the Chinese supervisors in order to hold on tight to their jobs.

In *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (2006), Aihwa Ong argues that neo-liberalism should not simply be viewed as an economic doctrine that seeks to limit the scope of government, but should be considered as a form of predatory capitalism that take up malleable modes of governmentality. As she suggests, neoliberalism as exception articulates sovereign rule and regimes of citizenship, formulating a constellation of mutually constitutive relationships that are not reducible to one or the other. A variety of neoliberal strategies of governing re-engineers political spaces and populations, exercising different technologies of subjectivity and subjections in order to differentially regulate populations for optimal productivity. In this new regime of regulation, the

idea of citizenship and subjectivity is/must be redefined. In transforming the economic landscape of the northern Lao border, the Chinese SEZ enterprise, like other neo-liberal projects, demands an exception to the usual practices of governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territory. To be a neo-liberal subject in the dreamland of the Chinese tycoon, one must abandon the idea of citizenship and citizen's rights, which is bound to and protected by the nation-state. As a non-political, non-ideological free and naked subject, the only thing left for the neo-liberal worker under the Chinese regulatory regime is to totally submit him/herself as a profitable commodified subject for the advancement of Chinese enterprise. As a neo-liberal subject, who is unprotected by any state, the Burmese migrant workers do not have much choice. Although most of the workers feel that the working condition at the SEZ is destructively exploitative and unfair, it is better than living in their own country where no job can be secured. Some workers also have an expectation that the Chinese project at the Lao border will continue for another 20 years. In this scenario, it promises a dream of an income source for the marginal Burmese which is not available in their homeland. As a neo-slave in the Chinese world of neo-liberalism, betting with uncertainty and losing one's sense of agency has become a reality of workers' livelihoods.

Negotiating Neo-liberal Modernity and Modern Subjects

David Harvey once remarked that modernity brought by neoliberalism is a modernity in which dispossession plays a large part and where the capital class is gaining power at the expense of the labor class (2003). Yet, such critique does not seem to be sufficient to understand the selective reception of modernity among different groups of people in their encounter with the neoliberal logic. Differential engagement among different ethnic groups in Laos and elsewhere with Chinese-style modernity/modernization deserves a closer investigation. It has become clear that not only different forms and interventions of neoliberalism have produced differential effects among different groups of people, but the same class of people might respond to such economic engagement in diverse ways. In some areas of Laos especially in the northwestern border, the advent of the Chinese modernization project through cash crops such as rubber has been warmly embraced by the Akha and Hmong in various communities (Dianna 2007, Alton, Blum, and Somsouk 2005, Luangmany and Kanneko 2013). Strategies such as manipulation of cross-border social links and multi-ethnic social networks across the border have been mobilized by ethnic farmers in financial, trading, and expertise channels towards rubber development. In such border areas, ethnic minorities negotiate their own term of modernity and subvert the state's control of border by creatively building their economic network across the national territory. Similarly, in his study of the Hmong in Vietnam and China, Jean Michaud cautions the tendency to romanticize resistance by scholars to understand the complex relation between ethnic minorities and modernity. As Michaud suggests, while the impact of modernity should be analyzed from an agentive perspective, agency and power to act evolves in context. Thus, ethic interaction with modernity must be studied in relation to the specific circumstances that have formed the acting subjects (Michaud 2012). In response to the state-induced socio-economic change, the upland Hmong of northern Vietnam on the Chinese border are tactically selective about modernity. Instead of being passively turned modern, the Hmong have chosen to make themselves modern

subjects with a range of reactions from acceptance, reluctant compliance, to diverse forms of everyday resistance. Michaud calls this process the "indigenization of modernity", a term he borrows from Sahlins (ibid.).

In order to understand why particular rural populations have opted to adapt to Chinese-style modernity, while others refuse, I suggest that, following Michaud, the particular form of modernity, the specific contexts it is implemented in, and the degree of agency and risk should be critically investigated. In the northern border of Laos, modernity brought by the trans-border Chinese cash crop symbolizes a dual-track of political and economic opportunities that has enabled ethnic minorities to simultaneously escape the state's forceful opium eradication program as well as to move economically upward toward agrarian entrepreneurship. In other words, it represents alternative livelihood strategies that allows farmers to pursue a new possibility of agrarian enterprise. By contrast, Chinese-imposed modernity in the northwest border of Laos proceeds through the process of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003) in which wealth and power have been centralized in the hands of a few Chinese elites by dispossessing the rural Lao peasants of their land. Unlike the local collaborative modernity in the rubber enterprise outside state control in northern Laos, accumulation by dispossession in the form of special economic zones in Laos' northwest require the state's role of wealth redistribution to transfer the right to local resources to the ruling class of capitalists from rural peasants. As a result and without realizing it, rural villagers have been forced into the process of de-peasantization. At the same time and without consent, they have also inevitably been forced into waged labor—the situation to which many villagers have found it hard for recalibration and have thus refused to comply with.

Unlike their Lao counterpart, Burmese migrant workers have found their way into the "enclave of improvement" without much difficulty. While most studies of Chinese-led special economic zones point to the peculiar characteristic of Chinese-style modernization, its technology of governing, and the astounding impacts it has entailed, none pays attention to the differential mode of subjectification and the complex labor process (Nyiri 2012, Lyttleton and Nyri 2011, Tan 2012). Being mobile and de-territorialized, detached from permanent social fabric and safety net, this group of people is ready to take risk and to take any available opportunity. As Reid succinctly argues, the neoliberal subject is not a subject which "can conceive the possibility of securing itself from its dangers, but one which believes in the necessity of life as a permanently [sic] struggle of adaptation to dangers" (Reid 2012: 149). To be a neoliberal subject for the Burmese is to be able to embrace the Chinese-style modernity with precarity. Having had been exposed to danger and ambient insecurity in various locations prior to entering into the special economic zones, these ethnic workers have realized the necessity of living a resilient life in which risk, exploitation, self-discipline as intrinsic to the survival of a modern labor subject. While neoliberal modernity thrives on the very disruptions it curates, it has produced different modes of subjectification. For the Lao peasant, abrupt de-peasantization and sudden transformation has created a vacuum of livelihood and a state of abjection from the society they once lived in. In contrast to the abject, the Burmese migrant workers—the unintended target, whose lives have been characterized by constant transformation, have assumed an active position of risk-taking and disciplinarian deployment and management of labor intensities in their engagement with the Chinese neoliberal project. It is this paradox that subject

making and the civilizing mission have come to characterize the contemporary special economics in northwestern Lao PDR.

CONCLUSION

In "The Yellow Man's Burden: Chinese Migrants on a Civilizing Mission" (2006), Pal Nyiri analyzes the close connection between Chinese flows abroad and migration both domestically and internationally. Nyiri suggests that the idea of a civilizing mission is being exported across the borders concurrently and alongside the domestic project (p.103). Driven by the strive upwards in the hierarchies of global development, China believes that with its unique endowments of flexibility and efficiency supported by a strong modernizing state, it is up to the country to lead the world to a new, improved version of modernity and capitalism (p.105). The Chinese version of modernity links together the significance of the cultural idea of being "civilized" and a "good quality" population. I have shown in this paper the complex processes by which the civilizing mission of the Chinese enterprise has been carried out in the name of Special Economic Zone in the northern border of Laos. Interestingly, the Chinese plan to export abroad their version of civilization as culture writ large fits perfectly with the desire of the recipient state such as Lao PDR. Indeed, without the active role and collaborative act of the Lao state, the dream to civilize would not be possible to materialize. I have also demonstrated the clash between the Chinese civilizing mission and local experiences of such mission. Local refusal to be turned into 'a good quality population' designed by the Chinese and endorsed by the Lao state reflects the unsettling/contesting ideas about civilization between the powerful developer and the Lao villagers. Such reluctance to fully take part in the new world of capitalist enterprise led by the Chinese investor has left the majority of the Lao residents no choice but to be locked in abeyance. If the core idea of Chinese civilizing model (whether meritocracy or performance legitimacy) targets people and their improved quality, the neo-liberal project at the SEZ failed significantly. Not only are the Lao rural unwilling to leave behind the so-called traditional way of life, but also they do not necessarily share the idea that their 'traditional livelihood' are 'backward' and 'uncivilized'. The main engine of the Chinese mission to transform the frontier landscape of northern Laos however is the Burmese migrant workers. As a de-nationalized worker turned neoliberal subject participating in the de-territorialized zone of the transnational empire, they are forced to accept any vulnerable and insecure-employment conditions provided to them. Similar to the Lao 'surplus' other, these laborers have little negotiating power both in their workplace and their freedom to define their subjectivity.

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Leading Under Difficult Conditions: Local NGO Leaders' Perspectives on Leadership at the Local Level in Laos

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes findings from research conducted on a diverse group of current and emerging Laotian local leaders who pursue their work through nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) in and around the capital of Vientiane, Laos. Their organizations focus on local and community issues, and receive funding and other support from international sources, including parent organizations. The research explores their ideas about the meaning of leadership, what motivates them to do what they do, their role models, the challenges of leading, and their view of and advice for other local leaders. It was conducted outside of official channels with the help of Laotian colleagues. Our research made it clear that these current and likely future local leaders have the ability, experience and motivation to make a positive difference. It also is clear that there are few opportunities for the kinds of dialogue and training that would increase their impact. Instead, while continuing to work in their communities, they must be skillful in maintaining a space in which they seize the opportunities and avoid the dangers that come from any relationship with central authority. To our knowledge this is the first study of this kind done in Laos.

I. Introduction

In the West, leadership is a common, and perhaps excessive, focus of academic research, popular books and articles, and workshops. This is much less the case in other parts of the world. Laos is one of those places. Beginning with the advent of the socialist regime in 1975, virtually all official leaders were appointed by the party without pubic consideration of their qualifications or scholarly dialogue about issues relating to leadership. Laos changed to a more open system in 1986. Before the change it was challenging to even get into the country, and once there, difficult to go outside the capital of Vientiane. Today it is possible to move around with little concern about being confronted by authorities. This change and others that opened up the economy created a greater flow of tourists and investment capital, along with associated benefits and challenges.

Despite these changes, authority remains highly centralized and continues to assert a high degree of control over Lao society. There are, for example, no independent media and no independent political parties. All of its institutions, public and private, operate in this climate. Moreover this combination of carefully selected and controlled openness and strong internal control makes it both possible and challenging to

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independently explore issues important to the future of Laos. The work of leaders at the local level is one such issue.

This paper summarizes findings from research conducted on a diverse group of current and emerging local leaders who pursue their work through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in and around the capital of Vientiane. Their organizations focus on local and community issues, and most receive funding and support from international agencies. The research explores their ideas about the meaning of leadership, what motivates them to do what they do, their role models, the challenges of leading, and their view of and advice for other local leaders. It was conducted outside of official channels with the help of Laotian colleagues. The research combines information gathered from individuals working at the community level during two separate field trips. To our knowledge this is the first study of this kind done in Laos.

II. Setting

In December 1975 the Communist Pathet Lao seized control of the government, ending a six-century-old monarchy. They followed their thirty-year struggle against colonial rule by establishing a strict socialist regime and closely aligned the new Lao People's Democratic Republic (LDRP) with Vietnam. A Constitution was promulgated on August 14, 1991 and amended in 2003. Elections were held in April of 2002, 2006 and 2011.

Estimates put the population at 6,477,211 in 2011 (Mundi.index). About half are ethnic Laos and the rest ethnic minorities, such as the Hmong and the Yao. The gross domestic product per capita was estimated at 1900USD in 2005 (CIA). Laos is classified as a "least developed country" by the UNDP. Life expectancy at birth for the population overall, the median age of which was estimated to be 21, was estimated at 62.4 years in 2011 (Mundi.index). In 2005 around 73% over 15 years of age could read and write, with the rate among males about 20% higher than females. Sixty-seven percent of the population is Buddhist (Mundi Index).

In 1986, in response to a sagging economy, the regime adopted the "New Economic Mechanism." Although still described as one of only five remaining Marxist-Leninist states, after 1986 many orthodox policies were dropped. Industries were privatized, foreign investment was invited, land rights were restored to peasants, and development aid welcomed. Today Buddhism is accepted, even encouraged, making Laos one of five Theravada Buddhist countries along with its three neighbors Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. Laos became a member of ASEAN in 1997.

Despite these policy adjustments, authority remains highly centralized with power concentrated in the Laos People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Martin Stuart-Fox describes the exercise of that power in this way:

> *Most Lao pursue their daily lives as they have always done: the power of the party is felt mainly by those who would challenge it. No criticism, or even political debate, is permitted outside the confines of the highly secretive party, which recruits its membership from the elite and the educated. Without the support of the party, promotion in government and the bureaucracy, or success in business, is impossible. As everyone knows in Laos, a powerful political patron is the key to advancement* (Stuart-Fox Crossroads: 2).

He goes on to observe that all important positions -- village chiefs, district leaders, provincial governors, senior members of the public service and upper echelons of the judiciary -- are appointed, directly or indirectly, by the party. This in turn means that there is no possibility of checks and balances within the government (Stuart-Fox: 4). The LPRP exercises control through networks of patronage relationships (see "Single Party State", pg. 3 for a useful description). The relationships can be viewed as structured along two dimensions: a "vertical line", which is the party, and a "horizontal line", made up of the four mass organizations, each containing party cells ("Creating Space for Fieldwork").[3]

In recent years Laos has become a focus of foreign investment, targeting the country's natural resources. This has added to overall national wealth, but that wealth is created and distributed inside the frame created by the party and its networked patronage relationships.

The USSR's collapse in the late 1980s meant its loss as a principle provider of goods and services. To compensate Laos turned increasingly to multilateral NGOs for assistance ("Creating Space"). Since then Laos has become one of the region's chief recipients of foreign aid and assistance per capita" (Irrigation: 194). The international assistance also reflects the broader context of Laos' strategic relationships. The West, as well as Vietnam, worry that China will turn Laos into a client state, fears that recent Chinese investments have accelerated. This in turn makes it possible for Laos officials to accept aid in exchange for promises for reform that don't have to be acted on (Political Culture of Corruption: 72-73).

The government and the party face diverse challenges as they adapt their economy and their polity to changing conditions. These challenges include uneven economic growth and rural poverty, resource development and its internal and external impacts, environmental destruction, the production or transiting of illegal drugs, the low quality of health care and education, the rights of the large population of minorities, and corruption. In Stuart-Fox's view, "Educated and concerned Lao are well aware that the country is falling behind both Thailand [and] Vietnam where between human and economic development are concerned" (Stuart-Fox, Single Party: 170).

All of this forms the setting for anyone working in Laos. Corruption provides a window into the ways in which elements of that setting are interwoven. Transparency International defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain." This refers to abuses of power relating to bribery, kickbacks and embezzlement, as well as the strength of public sector anti-corruption efforts. Its Corruption Perceptions Index reports on pooled perceptions of corruption for public officials, civil servants or politicians. Laos ranked 154 of 182 on Transparency International's 2011 Index, and 160 of 174 on the 2012 Index. This indicates that in the view of informed observers corruption by public officials is deeply entrenched, and not abating (Transparency International, 2011, 2012). This has, for example, direct consequences for health and education, the tremendous underfunding of which is increased because donor money sent to help in these areas is "plundered" at a high rate (Stuart-Fox Single Party State:

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[3] These are the Lao Front for National Construction, Lao Women's Union, Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union, and the Federation of Lao Trade Unions.

169). Although there are extensive laws and regulations on the books, a range of corrupt practices operate through the patronage networks, networks that in modern Laos revolve around the LPRP. The most prevalent of these practices include:[4] accepting payments to disregard illegal trade; collusion with officials to reduce tariffs and duties; bribes to disregard environmental regulations; collusion to reduce taxes and rents; bribes demanded to issue documents; extortion of businesses for payments to the Party, or to influential individual Party members; kickbacks for awarding contracts; unrepaid loans from state lending banks or through state-owned enterprises (SOEs); use of government funds earmarked for projects, or even salaries, for individual gain; payments for political favors; a wide range of petty corruption by low-level civil servants, police, and so on (Stuart-Fox – Political Culture: 60).

Civil society is not well developed in Laos. A 2011 report by the Asian Development Bank concluded that, "The role of civil society in the development of the Lao PDR, while being supported at the broad policy level, is still being defined and collaboration and implementation mechanisms are only at a very early stage of development" (Asian Development Bank, 2011: 1). Until recently NGOs had no official status. A November 2009 Decree on Associations changed this by providing for their establishment and registration. Two or more Lao citizens may set up an association to promote economic and professional interests, creative endeavors, and social welfare. This process also has the effect of placing them under the official oversight of the Public Administration and Civil Service Authority and raises concerns about submitting their work to its political dynamics.[5]

Foreign NGOs are not subject to this requirement, but they must register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Between the creation of the Lao PDR and adoption of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986 only three international NGOs were allowed to operate inside the country. The numbers expanded with the change and in 2011 there were about 160 (Asian Development Bank, 2011: 1). An idea of the scope of their work is provided in the Internet Directory of Non-Government Organizations in the Lao PDR, a source partially funded by a World Bank grant (Internet). It summarizes self-descriptions of the work of 55 INGOs. Of these the most common focus is on health and children followed by education, social justice and human rights, and poverty. Stuart-Fox points out that while foreign NGOs are important in Laos "most are careful not to be too critical of the government" (Crossroads: n9).

III. Conditions for research

Doing social science research in contemporary Laos is challenging, as one would expect from the foregoing descriptions. The country is more receptive to economic initiatives, but political and social spheres are carefully monitored and controlled, and permission is required to do almost anything. Studies that seek to ask sensitive questions or might reach conclusions critical of the regime will not be approved. Social science work of any kind by foreigners is quite rare for these reasons.

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[4] Not surprisingly, Stuart-Fox notes that "much of the information was provided by Lao informants who must remain anonymous" (n4).
[5] This concern was raised several times in our interviews.

Steeve Daviau reflected on his experience over several years trying to conduct fieldwork in southern Laos with Tarieng communities (Creating Space). He notes that prior to 1975 it was virtually impossible for a researcher from a non-communist regime to do any kind of fieldwork. This has softened since the end of the 1990s, and in 2007 the National Academy of Social Sciences was opened to work with researchers. He points out however that its first director was a "well-known LPRP hardliner" nominated by the Central Committee and directly connected to the Prime Minister's office (Creating Space: 199). Seeking approval for his work was a complex process that relied on personal connections and a willingness to modify its focus, and success at this by others has been rare. When received, approval brought with it requirements for using, and compensating, "officially appointed research assistants" (Creating Space: 201).

Daviau's work is with ethnic minorities and is particularly sensitive to a regime whose goal is to prevent, or at least conceal, conflicts related to land claims and cultural, as opposed to national, identities. At the same time it seems likely that in the current setting there are few areas of inquiry where independent research would not raise concerns, at least to the level that that the work would, even if approved, be closely monitored. Reflecting on the obstacles he faced Daviau proposed strategies for creating "a discursive space that allows local people without formal political positions to speak up [...] Within that space one must navigate between public performances selected for local or international audiences and the most difficult challenge of finding out about locals' honest beliefs" (Creating Space: 201-202).

IV. The Importance of Leadership at the Local Level

Leadership of all kinds is important for societies and organizations, but in this shifting institutional setting local leadership is especially significant. "Local" as used here refers to issues facing communities within district or sub-district jurisdictions. Leadership in this context is the vehicle by which communities organize and express their interests and concerns. Because of their role in focusing issues and in implementation, the work of local leaders is an important determinant of whether what a community wants, or wants to avoid, are acted on. This role takes on special significance in this still-centrally controlled but evolving system because leaders away from the system's centers of power and authority may have more degrees of freedom for action. For all of these reasons the well-being and capacity building of communities is linked to the effectiveness of local leaders. In addition, the outlook, skills and experiences of these leaders, many of whom are young, will be important in shaping the country's future.

As the preceding suggests, research, education and training related to leadership are new and still uncommon.[6] This is true more broadly for human resource development as well. The absence of education and training about leadership does not reflect a lack of interest in it, which we found to be very high. Those we met were eager

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[6] c.f., "Identifying and Developing Local Leaders in the Asia Region", which describes a training program started in Vientiane in 2007 by SNV (NETHERLANDS) in partnership with UNDP. "Leadership Styles of Construction Members in Laos Construction Industry" is a Masters thesis that surveys the views toward leadership of individuals holding management and project leader positions on public works projects.

to talk to us about their work and, because of the lack of education or training on these topics, equally eager to know what we learned.

V. Background of the Project

Our interest in local leaders has evolved over a number of years. We began by identifying five successful local leaders from northeast Thailand, Isan -- and then bringing them to the Manoa campus of the University of Hawai`i in November 2008 to share their experiences.[7] As part of this project we produced a pamphlet titled "Stories That Inspire: Five Local Leaders from Isan". The pamphlet, which highlighted the five leaders' accomplishments and shared their ideas about leadership, was produced in Thai and English and distributed in local communities in the northeast (Isan). This initial project had a number of goals. These included learning from the perspectives of successful leaders, bringing what we learned into the classroom, developing training modules that made use of these leaders as resources, and cultivating positive role models that might inspire current or future local leaders. We also wanted to use this as a first step toward identifying other local leaders who are committed to serving their local communities, learning from their experiences, and creating a network that linked them together.

In September 2009 we organized a workshop in Dan Sai, northeast Thailand, and in February 2010 another in Mukdahan on the Mekong River across from Laos. These workshops brought together a larger number of individuals from organizations operating at the local level and joined them with the first five Thai leaders. Both gatherings included a few Laotians, reflecting our interest in expanding our work and the local leader network into the Mekong region,

We traveled to Vientiane, Laos in February 2011 and again in February 2012. Our objective was to build on our experience in Isan to learn the views of leadership held at the local level in and around the nation's capital. The Laotians we met represented a range of nongovernmental organizations. Their organizations addressed youth empowerment, reduction of human trafficking, food security, sustainable development, gender equity and the empowerment of women, community capacity building, HIV education and treatment, and the status of ethnic minorities. We gained access to them through the indispensible assistance of several Laotians, relying especially on someone who is well-connected to the network of community organizations and trusted by those working in them. This enabled us to bypass the official approvals that otherwise would have been required, and which would have come with restrictions, if at all. A by-product of avoiding official channels was that we were *de facto* creating a setting in which people's opinions might be more open. Our primary goal was not to probe sensitive issues relating to the political context of their work. It was to explore their understandings of leadership and leaders. Not surprisingly however the political context appeared in our encounters with these current and emerging leaders.

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[7] This work was undertaken with financial support from a National Research Council grant received by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hawai`i.

VI. Methodology

What we have sought to learn from local leaders through group discussions, questionnaires and individual interviews has remained constant since our initial work with the five Thai leaders in 2008. That has enabled us to use, with minor adjustments, the same questions over a period of five years. Variations in questions have been a function of adapting to particular conditions, such as moving from survey to interview. Conditions did not permit us to draw a representative sample, or even to approximate one. Working through our contacts we were able to survey and interview Laotians, all of whom occupy director or program positions in NGOs that are attempting to address issues at the community level. While claims about the generalizability to other Laotians working in similar organizations are not possible, it seems reasonable to expect that what we learned applies to others in similar circumstances.

In February 2011 we utilized a two-step process to learn perspectives on leaders and leadership from 21 Laotians working at the community level in internationally funded nongovernmental organizations. They occupied positions as the heads of programs, or are likely to move into leadership roles since they currently are in middle-level organizational and community coordinating positions. In addition, through their positions they have knowledge of other local leaders. We first divided these participants into three sub-groups of seven members and used a modified brainstorming process. Each group appointed a facilitator and a recorder, and for approximately twenty minutes discussed an issue relating to leaders and leadership (these issues and the items in the questionnaire completed later are found in **appendix A**). Each issue statement was written in Lao in large script on poster board for easy viewing by all group members. At the end of the allotted time the recorder summarized the consensus points emerging from their discussion. After a short break this process was repeated by the group rotating to where another issue awaited them. At the end of the day each participant was asked to anonymously complete a 12-item questionnaire into which these three issues were incorporated.

We employed this "brainstorming" process as a way of engaging their individual thinking on issues relating to leadership, as well as to see what consensus points emerged. In essence we were asking them to have a group conversation following which they would share their individual opinions. We anticipated that participation in the group process would evoke their own preexisting thoughts, as well as be generative of new ideas. These in turn would be captured in their responses to the questionnaire. The downside of this approach is that it might overwhelm whatever prior opinions they held about leadership, shifting their individual responses toward a group norm or the views of the most articulate member.

We returned to Vientiane in February 2012 to individually interview eight Laotians who occupy key positions in international nongovernmental organizations that provide diverse social services to local communities and one village chief who is not a party member. None were among the 21 who completed the questionnaire the previous year. The interview questions are those asked in February 2011, but fitted to an interview format that accommodates probes dictated by the direction of the responses (see **appendix B**). Our work in Laos is based on questions that have been field tested over several years in different settings in Thailand. We took two different

approaches to using these same questions in Laos. In February 2011 the brainstorming questions and questionnaire items were translated directly from English into Lao by individuals fluent in both languages. These individuals also were available during the brainstorming to answer questions about meaning. The Laos responses then were converted back to English for our analysis. Responses that did not translate easily were discussed. We were able to conduct the February 2012 interviews in English because of the English ability of those we interviewed. Their language skills in turn derived from working in an international organization and from travel outside of Laos for education and work. The more flexible interview process allowed us to clarify terms when they were not clear.

"Leader" and "leadership" are key terms in the survey and the interviews. While, depending on the context, there appears to be some variation in what these mean in Lao society and culture, we think that in this context, and especially given the way the survey and interviews were introduced, respondents where talking about the same thing.[8] On this basis we believe that, despite the challenges presented by translation, cultural differences and political sensitivities, the previously field-tested questions are capturing respondent views on key issues related to local leadership's purposes, opportunities and challenges while also providing insight into the broader setting with which they must interact, and within which they are trying to operate successfully.

VII. Results/Findings

This section summarizes results from the February 2011 questionnaire process and the individual interviews conducted in February 2012. The section that follows draws some conclusions about what we learned.

A. Vientiane Group Process and Questionnaire – February 2011

The twenty-one Lao from international NGOs in and around Vientiane had the following demographic characteristics (see **Appendix C** for details). Somewhat less than three-fourths were female; more than one-half had earned a Bachelor's Degree and almost one-fourth held a Master's; slightly more than half were married; the vast majority were either coordinators or project assistants; and only two had been with their organizations for more than four years. Taken together this group is heavily female, well educated, with a large number not married and not long in their current positions. Slightly more than half are in project assistance positions. Most of the rest are in higher-level positions as coordinators, and two are directors.[9]

Prior to administering individual questionnaires each of the three focus groups discussed the following issues in the time available: what does it mean to be a leader, what is important for a leader to be effective, and where did you learn how to be a leader? As noted above, the focus groups were formed as a "warm up" to legitimate

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[8] The Lao word for "leader is "ຜູ້ນຳ" . The dictionary definition "leadership" is ຄວາມເປັນຜູ້ນຳ . A more common used term for "leadership" is "ພາວະຜູ້ນຳ" .

[9] Although we asked respondents, most did not provide it, we assume for cultural reasons. The average age appeared to us to be about 35, with youngest in the late 20s and the oldest in the 50s.

thinking about the generally unaddressed subject of leadership, and to energize thinking on that topic.

Responses to the twelve items in the questionnaire are summarized in the tables that follow. The first table shows responses to the question about successes to date. Most interpreted "success" in terms of showing pride in their ability to accomplish tasks or to be supported or rewarded for their work. Four of the 21 thought of it in terms of work she or he had been able to do for the country. In Thailand these comments most likely would be phrased in terms of work that is being done on behalf of the king. In Laos it might reflect the influence of national ideology and calls for a collective identity.

Table 1. Most important success in positions held?

Type of Success	Number	%
Got an important task and could do it.	10	48
Work on something that benefits the country.	4	19
Good work brought support to increase abilities through training, conferences.	3	14
Was selected to be director or head of organization.	2	10
Trust from boss and colleague.	1	4.5
Graduated from University.	1	4.5
	21	100

Table 2 summarizes 89 responses to the open-ended question of what defines or distinguishes a leader. The three most popular of these are clusters that focus on sense of duty and commitment to social justice and ethical behavior, abilities, and possessing a broad vision. It is significant that duty, justice and ethics are mentioned more frequently than personal ability and good problem solving. This suggests that for most good management is not enough good ethics are more important than knowledge or ability. The two next clusters highlight leaders having a strong sense of responsibility to their work and being successful in what they do. These five sets make up 70 percent of what these respondents believed defines a leader.

Table 2. What Does It Mean To Be A Leader?

Qualities (can name more than one)	Number	%
Committed to duty, justice and ethics.	17	18
Has personal ability, talents; good at problem solving.	14	16
Broad vision.	12	14
Takes responsibility for their tasks.	10	11
Successful in what they do.	10	11
Understand community environment.	7	8
Put the right person on the right job.	5	6
Can convince people in the community to participate in social work.	5	6

Sacrifice for public/community.	4	5
Self confident to lead organization and make decisions.	2	2
Consciousness in the workplace.	2	2
Be polite to older person and give chance or take care of the younger person.	1	1
	89	100

Table 3 addresses perceptions of what is needed for a leader to be effective. Although there are fewer total responses than for what "leader" means, they are spread out more evenly across more response groups. The highest five clusters incorporate about 70 percent of all statements made, with almost half of the twenty-one respondents indicating that each is important for success. They incorporate learning from experience and mistakes, accepting criticism, making sacrifices, being a problem-solver, being a role model, getting the community to participate and being effective with the public. The breadth and substantive diversity of qualities they want to see in a leader is striking. Moreover, many of these are attached to the relationship to the community.

Table 3. What Does A leader Need To Be Effective?

Needed (can name more than one)	Number	%
Learn from work and mistakes and apply this experience to improving.	12	16
Accept criticism and feedback.	11	14
Sacrifice, be diligent, be enthusiastic for community.	10	13
Be a rational problem-solver.	10	13
Join public activities and ask people to participate.	9	12
Be a respected person and a role model for others.	9	12
Have good human relationships and be smart and interesting when speaking to the public	9	12
Have the wisdom to make good decisions.	6	7
Be able to advise another person.	1	1
	77	100

Table 4 asked respondents to share the leadership qualities they believe they possess. It elicits the most responses of any question. Here too the most frequent statements fall into seven groups, but these comprise only 73 percent of total, reflecting more diversity in the qualities the respondents see themselves as having. There is a high degree of overlap between three of their own most common leadership characteristics and responses to the previous question about what leaders need to be effective. This overlap is in accepting criticism, making sacrifices and being enthusiastic, and, less directly, learning new things.[10] Table 4 also describes qualities they see

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[10] The response category in Table 3 focuses on learning from experience and mistakes while in Table 4 it is around general enthusiasm for learning.

themselves having that were not included in what leaders need: supporting teamwork, leading and being trusted by the staff, and being able to put people in the right positions. All of these focus on processes within the organization, which may reflect the fact that most of the respondents hold supervisory and coordinating roles rather than being the heads of their organizations. It also suggests that they have very high expectations of themselves.

Table 4. Which Leadership Characteristics Do You Have?

Leadership Characteristic (can name more than one)	Number	%
Initiating ideas, enthusiasm to work and able to make-decisions.	14	12
Being fair; accepting criticism and feedback.	14	12
Supporting teamwork and participation.	13	11
Making serious sacrifices to work responsibly for the community; volunteering time.	12	10
Enthusiasm to learn new things, new knowledge.	12	10
Leading staff's work and being trusted by staff.	11	9
Able to put people in right positions for them and then monitor their work.	11	9
Having consciousness, enthusiasm and commitment to work for the community.	7	6
Understanding the organization's vision, goals, and objectives.	7	6
Acting with integrity, gratitude, and sense of obligation.	7	6
Speaking politely, having good humor, good human relations.	6	5
Being humble; learning to improve from others.	5	4
	119	100

The responses in **Table 5**, which summarizes the characteristics the respondents see in other local leaders, are much fewer in number than what is found in the first four tables.

Table 5. Common Leadership Characteristics of Other Leaders?

Characteristics (can name more than one)	Number	%
New ideas; good strategic planning, management and decision-making.	10	19
Responsibility to their task; diligence.	9	17
Always honoring and respecting others and showing respect to important persons.	8	15
Place people in the right jobs; work in a team, guiding people in their work.	6	11
Have good relationships; show good manners.	4	7
Has more knowledge and ability than others.	4	7
Sacrifice and tolerance for the public.	3	6
Work closely with the community; take care of people.	3	6
Be fair and treat people with equality.	3	6

Accept the decisions of others and be open to them, flexible.	2	4
Self-confident.	1	2
	53	100

There is also a wider spread, with about half falling into three categories and the rest into eight others. Respondents see other leaders as good with new ideas, management and decision-making: responsible and diligent: and respectful of others. What they see little of, or don't see at all, in other leaders also may be noteworthy. This includes having more knowledge and ability than others, willingness to sacrifice, working closely with the community, being fair and treating people equally, and being flexible and accepting the decisions of others. Having a broad vision, being a role model and learning from mistakes also are not mentioned as qualities they see in other leaders. This suggests that they may experience these leaders as promising new things whether or not they have the ability to deliver them.

Table 6 summarizes where these respondents have gotten their ideas and images about being a leader. One-forth of the responses list the leader of their organization, understandable given that person's visibility in a small organization.

Table 6. Where Have You Learned About Being a Leader?

Source of Learning (Can name more than one)	Number	%
From the leader of our organization.	20	25
Study, seminar, training, internet.	17	21
Everyday life, experience.	14	17
Father, Mother, Family, extended family.	12	15
Success story of political leader or respected person.	10	12
Colleagues in work place	5	6
Others' mistakes or from the own.	2	3
Teacher.	1	1
	81	100

Slightly fewer point to what they've learned from studying, seminars and training, and the Internet. This may reflect the higher education levels (just over 80 percent have bachelor's and master's degree experience). The next most frequent response categories point to what has been learned from daily life, parents and family and then the success stories of political leaders or other respected public persons. Only two mention learning from their own or others' mistakes, and just one lists a teacher. The organization is the most important source of learning, but with seminars, training and the Internet close behind, it seems likely we are seeing a shift in sources of knowledge about leadership, probably in the direction of the Internet.

Fourteen people were named as role models, six of whom are Laotian. **Table 7** lists those mentioned most frequently.

Table 7. Who Is Your Role Model?

Role model[11] (can name more than one)	Number	%
Mr. Kaysone Phomvihane*	6	21
Hồ Chí Minh*	4	14
King Fa Ngum*	3	10
Master Kong *OR K'ung-tzu**	2	7

Six, or about one in four respondents, cite Kaysone Phomvihane, the leader of the LPRP from 1955 and later Prime Minister and President. Another four name Ho Chi Minh, the nationalist who led the Viet Minh fight against foreign occupation and was Vietnam's President and Prime Minister. The next most popular role model, cited by three, is King Fa Ngum, a 14th century founder of a Laos kingdom. The only other person to receive more than one mention is K'ung-tzu, known as Confucius in the West. Diverse other non-Laotians are mentioned, including Nicolai Lenin, Karl Marx and Barack Obama (see **Appendix D** for complete information about role models). Their role models are those who have fought for the survival of Laos, including those, such as Ho Chi Minh, who have done this from the outside. Westerners are not very visible.

The question about what motivates them to be a local leader brought 73 responses, summarized in **Table 8.** Two clusters are equally popular and capture 60 percent of the responses. It is noteworthy that both are related to community work, and not to their organizations. One focuses on a desire to strengthen the community and improve the capacity of its members. The other is about the chance to play an important role in and be accepted by the community. The next most frequent set of responses is the most self-referential and is associated with career success and the desire to be admired by society. It is perhaps surprising that only five of the 73 responses are about the more abstract concepts of poverty reduction, equality and justice.

Table 8. What Motivates You To Be A Leader?

Motivation (can name more than one)	Number	%
Strengthen community; improve ability and knowledge of people in community.	22	30
Have an important role and be accepted by community.	22	30
Be successful in career and with family; have a big name and admiration from society.	15	21
Strengthen local staff to be leaders.	6	8
Eliminate local poverty and build equality and justice.	5	7
Seeing the results and impact of successful work.	3	4
	73	100

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[11] Kaysone Phomvihane was the leader of the Laos People's Revolutionary Party and the country's first prime minister. Ho Chi Minh lead the Vietnamese fight against colonization and was prime minister of Vietnam. King Fa Ngum established the Lan Xang Empire and created the first unified state of the Laos people. Master Kong, known in the West as Confucius, was a Chinese politician, teacher, editor and social philosopher.

Table 9 looks at the opposite of motivation, asking what prevents these respondents from wanting to be in leadership roles. There are only slightly fewer responses than to what are positive motivators, and these organize into three clusters capturing 81 percent of all statements. This suggests a high level of shared experience. The most numerous cluster is perceived lack of experience and knowledge, containing more than one-third of all the reasons given. This is followed by a sense of lack of opportunity or support, while the third is an absence of self-confidence. The thread linking these responses is that almost all of them are personal. There is only an indirect reference to the external political environment, either national or local. That indirect reference is to others being against an idea, the prospect of failing, and the possibility of being harmed because of a disagreement.

Table 9. Why Not Be A Leader?

Reasons (can name more than one)	Number	%
Lack of experience and knowledge.	22	35
Want to be lead but not given chance because of lack of support or opportunity to show abilities.	16	25
Do not have self-confidence; not able to create new ideas, new things.	13	20
Could not adapt to the new environment; too impatient; could not stand the pressure.	6	10
Worry that someone may be against an idea; may fail; may be harmed by someone who disagrees.	6	10
	63	100

The next question asks about the challenges local leaders are facing today. **Table 10** has by far the fewest responses, except for the question asking for the names of role models. The three most frequently cited challenges are in relation to the communities with which leaders work, not to the challenges of leading organizations. Of these, what is required to solve community problems – knowledge, understanding, abilities – is the most commonly cited, getting about one-third of all responses. This is followed by the requirement to understand the community, which gets about 20 percent. Hard work, doing what you say, being respected by the community, effective problem-solving and being transparent are noted, but are less commonly cited challenges. The reasons for the small number of responses are not evident. It could be because they don't know what the challenges are, don't think they are so formidable, or don't want to draw attention to them. Did they give fewer responses because they don't know what challenges are, don't want to discuss them, or don't see the challenges as that great? In that context it is interesting that there is no mention of low pay, or of political concerns.

Table 10. What Challenges Do Leaders Face?

Challenges (can name more than one)	Number	%
They need to have knowledge, understanding, ability in the community to solve community problems.	8	32
Understanding the community's culture, traditions and structure.	5	20
Adapting to the community and doing what you say.	3	12
Solving problems with experience, self-confidence and teamwork.	3	12
Getting respect and being accepted by the community.	2	8
Need to work hard, make sacrifices, be just and fair.	2	8
Acting with transparency.	2	8
	25	100

Table 11 summarizes the mistakes these respondents have observed other local leaders making. Fifty-four responses fell into six categories, with one by far the largest. The biggest mistake, comprising about one-third of all the mistakes listed, is using the common good as if it is the leaders' "property" and making private interests the first priority. This is followed by wanting power for personal benefit, being unwilling to make personal sacrifices or be responsible for work, and low tolerance for the public. These three, which are primarily about being self-serving rather than being incompetent, constitute 65 percent of all of the responses. It is noteworthy that the word "corruption" is not used even though the words used appear to describe it.

Table 11. What Mistakes Do You See Other Leaders Make?

Mistakes (can name more than one)	Number	%
Take common good to be their own property; private interests are the first priority.	17	31
Have passion for power, but for themselves; using power in the wrong way.	9	17
No responsibility to their work, no personal sacrifice, no tolerance for public.	9	17
Do not care about comments from the community and do not know the needs of the community.	7	13
Lack of knowledge, ability and cannot make decisions.	7	13
Not sincere and not fair.	5	9
	54	100

The last question, summarized in **Table 12**, solicits advice respondents would give to other local leaders. The vast majority of responses, six of the eight clusters, deal with what leaders must do in relation to their communities. The most frequently cited advice is to listen and be open to community participation. This may reflect concerns that people in power over time forget the relationships that gave them their position in the first place. These concerns are followed by the importance of patience and sacrifice,

being guided by a vision and managing community resources, being fair in problem solving, strengthening the community and its most needy members, and working to have a peaceful community. The advice not directed at what leaders need to do in relation to the community focuses on the courage to make decisions, believing in ideology, and sharing and learning from good and bad experiences.

Table 12. What Advice Would You Give To Other Local Leaders?

Advice (can name more than one)	Number	%
Care about comments from the community; use teamwork and participation with the community.	11	23
Have patience, work hard and sacrifice for the public.	8	17
Have the courage to make decisions; believe in ideology and be self-confident.	7	15
Have vision and the ability to lead toward it; be able to manage community resources.	7	15
Have the ability to solve the community's problems with fairness, justice and equality.	5	11
Work to strengthen the community and support the lowest group in it.	4	9
Learn from earlier mistakes; share good and bad experiences with others.	3	6
Work to establish security, solidarity and peacefulness in the community.	2	4
	47	100

There are some patterns worth noting in the tables overall. First, some types of questions appear easier to answer than others. Table 13 shows that questions directed at views about themselves as leaders received more replies, even though in each case they were invited to give more than one response. Questions asking about the behavior of other leaders and the challenges that leaders face received fewer responses. This could be because they feel they do not know enough, or because they are not comfortable making such comments for cultural or other reasons

Table 13. Frequency of Responses to Multiple Response Questions

Which Leadership Characteristics Do You Have?	119
What Does It Mean To Be A Leader?	89
Where Have You Learned About Being a Leader?	81
What Does A leader Need To Be Effective?	77
What Motivates You To Be A Leader?	73
Why Not Be A Leader?	63
What Mistakes Do You See Other Leaders Make?	54
Common Leadership Characteristics of Other Leaders?	53
What Advice Would You Give To Other Local Leaders?	47
What Challenges Do Leaders Face?	25

The responses include many mentions of the importance of community, understanding and sacrificing for the community, and relations with the public. They do not refer to issues of the state or the nation as a whole. This may be in part because Laos today has many tribal communities. Community leaders need to know each community well because each tribe has a distinctive culture, language, and way of life. It also may be because these local leaders want to do social development work without having conflicts with the state. The best way to do this is to separate the state from the community, as if they are not related to one another. They recognize that if their activities create conflict with the national government their NGOs will not be allowed to function. They therefore try to do things in accordance with the state's requirements, thereby creating a "space" in which their work can continue. The state in turn gives them space to operate because the work of these local leaders is helpful in addressing social issues that, if unaddressed, might lead to political tensions. What the state gives however is limited. Even if it is not obvious that national officials are watching, it is well-known that they have numerous mechanisms for learning if a local leader's actions violate written and unwritten codes. When that happens there may be consequences for the person or for his or her organization. This space is maintained within the broader context that national leadership is not prepared to accept that Laos has poverty, inequality, injustice and corruption.[12] Since NGO leaders are always taking a risk to talk openly about these issues they instead talk about "managing community resources", "solving community's problems", and "strengthening the community", rather than it is poverty, injustice and corruption.

B. Vientiane – Individual Interviews

Interviews, because they permit longer responses and allow follow up questions, yield information difficult to obtain from survey questions. This section summarizes the results of eight interviews (see **appendix B** for the interview protocol). Seven are with individuals in key positions in nongovernmental organizations that provide diverse social services to local communities, and one is a non-party village chief.[13]

The issues addressed revolve around understandings of the meaning of leadership, the foundations for it, and the influence of context. These issues are: the meaning of "leader"; the motivation to be a leader; the sources of learning about leadership; the challenges leaders are facing; the mistakes leaders making. The interviews are summarized by identifying as themes the primary consensus points in interviewee responses to each of the five issues. Illustrative statements made in the interviews are included.[14]

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[12] This was illustrated when the government built a solid fence around the city slums in the ASEAN meeting held in Laos PDR. ASEAN Ministers and journalists from all over the world could not see the conditions of the slums or poor people.

[13] The names and organizations of those interviewed are not included in order to avoid any risk of retaliation.

[14] The statements included are either exact quotes or close paraphrases from interview records.

1. The Meaning of "leader"

Five themes emerged when interviewees were asked what makes a person a leader and how a formal or informal leader is different from a person who may be accepted or respected. The themes revolve around personal qualities, motivating others, community relations, intelligence and ability to analyze, and the use of power.

Personal qualities. A leader must be honest, consistently responsible to staff and community, be able to communicate effectively, and have integrity. It is "the heart" that provides the will to lead, not money or intelligence. It is important not to be "financially needy" because that need leads to loss of independence.

Motivating others. A leader needs to be a positive role model, which means possessing humility and being prepared to make personal sacrifices. A leader also is someone willing and able to coach and mentor others. A stronger view is that a leader has an obligation to get outside of the dominant socialization processes and in so doing offer another path by which followers can become leaders (this rejects "the current view [in which] a leader is someone who creates followers").

Community Relations. Working with local communities is difficult and a leader helps staff learn how to be successful at it. The leader needs to be aware of what is impacting the community in a world that is more and more complex and inter-connected, and he or she must help to establish trust and build working relationships. A person does not have to be the "official" leader to be influential in a community and this can be a good counterbalance to those in official positions (an interviewee said, "I am not a community leader. I bring in support from the outside. Leaders in Laos villages are selected and 'official'").

Intelligence. Leaders need to be smart enough to recognize the important issues, provide information that is relevant to those issues, and then help the average person analyze what needs to be done (a leader needs to, "Be open to not knowing what you are doing. Don't act like you know everything because then you can't learn").

Using power. Power needs to be used on behalf of people rather than over them. Power is derived from staff support and for this to happen the staff must be able to trust the leader. The leader in turn needs to trust the staff to do their own work and not be over-controlling (it is better to have "big ear, small mouth" because then challenges can be viewed as opportunities).

2. The Motivation to Be a Leader

This issue explores what motivates these individuals to do the work they do, which of those motivators are most important, and why. Five themes are identified from their responses: an alternative perspective, a less stable world, the power of personal experiences, the need to produce results, and sense of responsibility.

Alternative perspective. A leader should use his or her knowledge and information to "fill the gap" that exists for people in the community who have an inadequate education. Closely related to this is the incentive that comes from helping people to get outside of the dominant structure that has taught them to be "like a flock of birds following one another in the sky."

An unstable world. Laos' "new economic mechanism" has brought big changes and resulted in a great deal of turmoil ("Laos could not keep its culture the way it was, or keep the same level of stability"). Leaders must provide the needed stability, as well as a way to protect the future of Lao society and Lao culture.

Personal experience. Personally experiencing hopelessness, loss and unfairness is a powerful motivator if there then is an opportunity to help others avoid or cope with the conditions in which they occur (one interviewee recalled that,"In the evening [she] would see them coming in from the fields carrying a workload and a child while the men were empty handed").

Producing results. The chance to accomplish specific material goals can be a powerful incentive to be a local leader. This can bring good things to the leader, to other individuals, and to the community. At times the motivation is to out compete rival communities in, for example, getting funds to improve community infrastructure, such as roads or water systems.

Sense of personal responsibility. Everyone has a basic obligation to help because they all are products of Laos society (an interviewee asked, "If I do not to help local people, who will?").

3. The Sources of Learning About Leadership

This asks about the important people and situations that shaped the kind of leader the respondent has wanted to be, and what he or she needed to know to be that kind of leader.The themes that capture this are: accumulated experience, mentors, difficult situations and individuals, exposure to the world outside of Laos, and education.

Accumulated experience. Being placed in a position with a leadership component, no matter how small, lays a foundation for learning how to lead. Having some "natural" talent helps. Moving through diverse and higher level positions, over time builds more and more relevant experience (an interviewee shared the experience that in the [Thailand refugee] camp he was "picked out by Thai to be in charge of 60 families – food stamps, distribution, etc. It was voluntary. I was tired, but proud. Some people thought it was stupid").

Mentors. Different individuals play crucial roles in learning how to lead, and these individuals are found in a variety of places. They include parents, other NGO leaders, women who have been mentors for other women, and friends. No current national leaders are mentioned however.

Difficult situations and individuals. Facing difficult situations, such as trying to meet the challenges of poor people or fire an employee, shapes the approach to leading. Negative experiences with bad leaders, the opposite of mentoring, also can provide lessons about the right way to lead.

Exposure to the world outside of Laos. Seeing how things are done in other places, in nearby countries such as Thailand or Vietnam, or in more distant societies, brings new ideas about leadership and broader images of successful leaders (for example, "I lived in Thailand for 10 years and learned how the system worked and about management").

Education. Concrete knowledge and specific skills make a difference. They can be acquired through undergraduate and graduate education, trainings that are provided by organizations, and by making use of less formal opportunities.

4. Challenges

The focus on challenges asks what is most challenging about leading at the local level and what turns away individuals who might be effective in that role. This issue produced the largest number of responses. The themes include: using the system to get access, lack of resources, people can be difficult, the unequal status of women, dealing with the government, the presence of corruption, and getting access to local communities.

Using the system to get access. It is difficult to get anything done outside of the dominant system. Local communities are hard to get access to because the villages too are formalized systems (This was like, "They are operating inside a big box"). It is necessary to find ways to use these formal policies and rules on behalf of the work that needs to be done. Working from inside the system brings more opportunities to have an impact, but requires continuous judgments about what to accept and not accept.

Lack of resources. There is too little money. Because people working in the agencies have too few of the skills needed – such as budgeting and accounting - they have to look for ways to learn them. Everything takes a long time to do and therefore time also is a scarce resource.

People can be difficult. People in local communities can be difficult. They get frustrated when there seems to be no progress. They criticize, and they have fights with one another that need to be mediated. Addressing an issue can be more challenging because of the need, for cultural reasons, to be so indirect. (One interviewee tries to deal with local people's resistance to new things "by using the [even disagreeable] existing laws and policies to support what I want to do").

Unequal status of women. Woman are not respected as decision makers and gaining respect means they must prove themselves through hard work and consistency. Being accepted as a leader requires women to be strategic in their relations and in how they present themselves in specific situations ("Being a woman leader in Laos. It has been stressful." It took a year for her work to be respected. She got it by "meeting expectations, such as on deadlines; communicating effectively with different levels and individuals; being consistently honest; being strategic in [her] actions").

Dealing with the government. The government is controlling and paternalistic, often treating people like children. It is hard to work cooperatively and be supported, no matter how long the relationship with government officials ("The government always treats you as lower in a hierarchy. Like parent - child. It is never working together"). It also is possible to become out of favor by working with a group the government is suspicious or wary of, such as one supported by Americans.

Corruption. Corruption is serious and a fact of life. A local leader's work has to be done while trying to ignore it. Government positions give officials who come from poor backgrounds the power and opportunity for private rewards. It is hard to do anything about because the government is the party and the party is the government.

Campaigns against corruption lack monitoring and enforcement ("Corruption is very hard to address when the government is the party and the party is the government. Even if the government says it is addressing corruption, there is a lack of monitoring and enforcement").

5. Mistakes

This explores the biggest mistakes made by local leaders, and what makes those mistakes so important. "Mistakes" refers to actions that cause someone not to be successful, or does harm to their organization and community. The questions resulted in the following themes: poor assumptions, not being responsible, dishonesty, impatience, and not admitting mistakes.

Poor assumptions. Unwarranted and unexamined assumptions lead to the wrong actions ("High speed and competition lead to poor assumptions and assessments"). These unexamined beliefs include what is causing a particular problem to occur and what needs to be done about it, as well as traditional ideas about people's capabilities. Assumptions about people reflect a lack of respect for them, and, since people are seen as not competent, result in decisions being pushed away from them to the top of the system.

Not being responsible. Lack of responsibility is seen in spending money and using resources on the wrong things; seeing an issue as someone else's problem and therefore not taking responsibility for it; and talking about doing something while never taking concrete action ("Leaders show no respect for people. Talking, but no action").

Dishonesty. Important forms of dishonesty include obtaining power claiming it will be used for people and then using it over them, and government officials guiding money meant for community projects into their own pockets ("Use power and use it well; not just over people the way in government some try to use power").

Impatience. Impatience takes the form of trying to hurry something that needs more time, and failing to communicate with partners while expecting that things will go smoothly.

Not admitting mistakes. It is harmful for a leader not to accept responsibility for mistakes he or she has made. It is also wrong for a leader not to learn from mistakes even if they have been admitted ("But everyone makes mistakes. The thing is to learn from them. A person who does not make mistakes is not doing anything").

These interviews are revealing of the complex world local leaders work in and the opportunities and constraints they must negotiate. It is crucial that they understand the issues their community's face at a time when changes are impinging on those communities. This understanding is what gives them access. Once access is obtained they must try to help to solve community problems using the experience and knowledge they bring. At the same time the resources available -- money, people, and materials -- to get to the best outcomes are very limited. Ultimately is it is the joining of their desire to help, their local and outside knowledge and some limited resources with the power, or potential power, of local people that is likely to bring results.

The individuals we interviewed also must find ways to work with national and

local authorities to benefit their communities. This can be a delicate process. They look for degrees of openness to their initiatives, and hope that official policies will not be too top-down and controlling, and that their aspiration to lead with integrity and without corruption will be honored, or at least permitted.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The current and likely to be future local leaders we surveyed and interviewed know what outside observers understand about their country and motherland: it is less developed economically than its neighbors, and many of its people are in poverty. Our interviews made it clear that they have the ability, experience and motivation to make a positive difference. It also was clear from both the survey and interviews that there are few opportunities for the kinds of training that would increase their impact. Instead of receiving training and support they must learn to be skillful in seizing the opportunities and avoiding the dangers that come from any relationship with the central government.

Changes in Laos today are rapid. The opening of the economy to more economic activity and investment signaled the government's decision to catch up with Thailand and to not be the least developed Southeast Asian country. Today those ambitions for development include selling off natural resources and accepting foreign "help" that includes *quid pro quo* arrangements. The centralized authority of the government makes this easier to do. These local leaders often see themselves in the position of trying to save land, communities and culture for the future. While central authority and its capacity to establish policy and mobilize resources could also be helpful in their efforts on behalf of land community and culture, their goals commonly place them in conflict with it.

These then are the challenging circumstances to which the title of this article refers. Leaders at the local level in contemporary Laos are attempting to address difficult problems relating to the control of resources, community capacity and cohesion, economic well-being, equality and fairness. They do this with few resources, little training in what it takes to be an effective leader, while working in and around rigid and self-serving political arrangements. Despite these challenges their dedication to the work is remarkable and their expectations of themselves are high.

The meanings they give to "leader" are not surprising in either the questionnaire responses or the interviews. Similar descriptions appear in many other places, likely explained at least in part because a number have been abroad for school and work, and because everyone has access to information through the Internet. What seems more distinctive is the deep commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of their communities and the difficulties they experience in doing that.

This reflects the procedural hurdles they must surmount that come from both national and local structures. One interviewee described obtaining permission to work with a local community as working in "a box inside a box." It also is in part a function of the ambiguous role these current and emerging leaders occupy when they feel the need to do things unofficially and outside of their formal organizational positions.

Our primary goal was not to probe sensitive issues relating to the political context of their work. It was to explore their understandings of leadership and leaders. It is not surprising of course that the tightly controlled political system surfaces as an

issue, indirectly in the questionnaire responses and directly in the interviews. Our respondents, especially in the interviews, were clear that they make every effort to do their work while minimizing contact with rigid bureaucracies and powerful government officials. In effect they try to maintain a space -- a kind of bubble – that enables them to either be ignored or to have fewer encounters with the official system, thus avoiding the need to continuously seek approval and be the target of close oversight.

Corruption is part of the fabric within which they must work. Because in its various forms it is so pervasive it seems to be unspoken not to make it an issue. Elevating it as an issue would only serve to undermine their community relations, and potentially make them a target for increased scrutiny. This in effect would reduce the size of the bubble within which they work. Reflecting this, "corruption" does not appear in the questionnaire responses, even through the behavior described qualifies as a definition of it.

Looking to the future, there is not enough information to understand the personal and more inward looking reasons for not wanting to be a leader seen in **table 8**. It could represent acceptance of, or adjustment to, the broader institutional setting, or concern about the negative consequences of being openly negative about it. There clearly are constraints on open discussions of desirable and undesirable approaches to leadership. Opinions about the reason to lead ranged from having a duty to be helpful to the urgent need to be a counter balance to powerful mechanisms of socialization. While duty is acceptable as a motivation, criticizing messages issued by the dominant institutions is not likely to be. This is hinted at in concerns expressed in the survey responses about the possibility of personal harm. The scarcity of opportunities to openly discuss what is effective public leadership, and the skills needed to develop it, raises questions about the fate of today's most dedicated and successful local leaders, and about the development of those who will follow them.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire and group discussion questions – Vientiane, February 2011 (*indicates questions addressed by all three groups in "brainstorming" discussions).

1. What do you think has been your most important success in the positions you have held?
    Why do you think it is important?

*2. What does it mean to be a "leader"?

*3. In your opinion, what are the most important characteristics needed for a leader to be effective, in order of their importance?

4. Which of those characteristics do you feel you have?

5. Which of those characteristics have you seen in other local leaders, in order of how common they are?

*6. Where have you learned how to be a leader?

7. Who are your role models in leadership? Why?

8. What are the motivational factors that make you want to be a leader, in order of importance?

9. What are the factors that prevent you from wanting to be a leader, in order of importance?

10. What do you think is most challenging about being a local leader?

11. What do you see as biggest mistakes that local leaders make?

12. What suggestions would you like to give to other local leaders?

Appendix B. Individual interview questions -- Feb/March 2012 (* indicates those questions summarized in section VII.b).

Successes
Please describe your most important successes, and why they are important. (What accomplishments are most important to you? What about each one makes it important to you?)

*"Leader"

What do you think it means to be a "leader"? (Probe: What distinguishes a formal or informal leader from other another person? Many people may be accepted and/or respected, but does that make them leaders? What is it that makes a person a leader?)

*Motivation
What motivates you to do the work you do, in order of which motivators have been most important. (Probe: What pushes you to do the things you do in your community? Which of these are most important motivators. What are they?)

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*Challenges
a. What do you think is most challenging about being a local leader? (Probe: Please share what you find most challenging about being in a leadership role at the local level.)

b. What do you think turns people away from wanting to be a local leader? (Probe: Thinking about others who might be effective leaders, what are the main reasons that more don't take on leadership roles?)

* Learning and Role Models
a. Describe where and how you learned to be a leader. (Probe: What are the most important places s/he learned (1) the kind of leader s/he wanted and (2) what s/he needed to know to be able to lead.)

b. Who are your important role models in leadership, and why was each important? (Probe: A little about why each has been important.)

Question 6: Most Important
a. In your opinion, what is most important for a local leader to be effective? (Probe: These can be personal qualities, skills or behaviors, or something else. If appropriate, get a least five qualities, skills, behaviors, etc. More are okay. Try to have them ranked.)

b. How common is what you just described in other local leaders that you've seen? (Probe: Please share what has been or is seen in other local leaders. There is no need to name specific individuals.)

* Mistakes
What do you think are the biggest mistakes made by local leaders, and what makes those mistakes so important? (Probe: "Mistakes" refers to actions that cause someone not to be successful, or even does harm to their organizations and communities. Examples without naming individuals, if possible.)

Question 8: Suggestions
What suggestions can you give to help to develop local leaders who can make positive differences on behalf of their organizations and their communities? (Probe: This could include a wide range of things, but what is most important? May help to picture a meeting or conference of present or future local leaders who have asked for

advice on the most important things for them to do to be successful. Please provide as many suggestions, guides and examples as possible.)

Appendix C. Demographic Information for February 2011 -- Questionnaire Responses.

Table A. Gender

Gender	No.	%
Male	6	28.6
Female	15	71.4
Total	21	100

Table B. Education Level Completed

Level of Education	No.	%
Secondary / Vocational / Diploma	2	9.5
Diploma	2	9.5
Bachelor's degree	12	57.1
Master's Degree	5	23.8
Total	21	100

Table C. Marital Status

Status	No.	%
Single	9	42.9
Married	11	52.4
Widow /divorce / separation	1	4.8
Total	21	100

Table D. Current Position

Position	No.	%
Director	2	10
Coordinator	8	38
Assistant Project	11	52
Total	21	100

Table E. Length of Time in Current Organization

Operating time/ year(s)	No.	%
1	5	24
2	9	44
3	5	24
6	1	4
8	1	4
Total	21	100

Appendix D. Detailed Information on Role Models

Table 7. Who Is Your Role Model?

Role model (can name more than one)	Number	%
Mr. Kaysone Phomvihane	6	21
Hồ Chí Minh	4	14
King Fa Ngum	3	10
Master Kong *OR K'ung-tzu*	2	7
Prince Supanuvong	1	4
Prince Anuvong	1	4
Vice Prime Minister Somsavad Lenksavat	1	4
Mr. Nhuhug Phumsawan	1	4
King of Thailand	1	4
Jesus	1	4
Mahatma Gandhi	1	4
Lenin	1	4
Karl Marx	1	4
President Obama	1	4
Father, Mother	1	4
Teacher	1	4
	27	100

Mekong River without the Naga: People without Power

Malinee Klangprapan

ABSTRACT

This article is part of a dissertation entitled, "The Social Network of the 'Kha Okasa Phra That Phanom'" in the communities on the Mekong River Basin. It is a study of the cultural life of the Lao Wieng ethnic group in the Phra That Phanom community, which holds a traditional belief about the "Three Chao Huen". The study was conducted by observations and interviews, and it was found that this ethnic group has inherited rituals in worshipping the guardian spirit and the Naga according to Lanchang belief. As this community has experienced a number of changes in administrative power, people have needed to change their roles and create new meanings for this social phenomenon, that is the power relation between the Lao Wieng ethnic group and the monks at Wat Phra That Phanom. The worship of Satta Naga has been revived, resulting in a decrease in the power of the old traditional belief group. However, members of this group have subtly adjusted their roles for their survival.

Keywords: Mekong River, Naga, People, Power

INTRODUCTION

The geographical location of the Phra That communities on the banks of the Mekong River basin are flanked by the Annamite Mountain Range in the East and the Phu Phan Mountain Range in the West. It is the origin of many important rivers that flow into the Mekong River; for example, the Kading, the Toen, the Hin Boon, the XeBangfai, the Kum and the Songkram Rivers (Boonchuay Srisawad, 2004: 18). The diversity of the ecological system of the rivers and their richness in natural resources attract people to come and settle in this area and build towns there; for example, Muang Wang, Muang Khumkerd, Muang Khummuan, Muang Mahaxaykongkaew, and Muang Tha Kaek. Most of the population is of Lao ethnicity. The group that is called the Old Lao (the Lao Song, the Tai Dam, the Tai Khao, and the Phu Tai) established themselves in Muang Thaeng, Muang Lai and other towns in the Sipsongchutai and the Huaphantung Ha Huaphantung Hok Areas. The group that is known as the New Lao, -- namely, the Lao Luang Phrabang, the Lao Phuan, the Lao Wieng, and the Lao Champasak -- settled in Luang Phrabang, Chiang Kwang, Vientiane, and Champasak along the basin on the left bank of the Mekong River before moving to the right bank of the River (Jaruwan Thammawat, 1998: 182). Formerly, the Loa ethnic group moved to settle in the Phra That communities on both sides of the Mekong River; the laws of the Ayutthaya Royal Court show evidence of a city-state that was under the sovereignty of Ayutthaya and which presented gold and silver trees as tributes to their ruler. This city-state was Khotrapura (Charas Phayakkharatchsak, 1991: 15). The city-state of Khotrapura was originally located on the estuary of the Xe Bangfai River opposite of Phra That Phanom.

Water erosion caused the banks of the river to collapse and the communities along the river banks thus had to move several times. The place where Phra That Sri Khotrapura or Phra That Mueang Kao was located was known as Marukkhanakhon.

King Siriboonsan (1751-1779) appointed Phra Boromracha (Ku Kaew) to rule the town of Marukkhanakhon and had the town moved to the right bank of the Mekong River. This location is now That Noi Sriboonreung Village on the Bang Huak Stream in That Phanom District (Suwit Therasaswat, 2006: 54). In 1786, Phra Boromracha (Phromma), a son of Phra Boromracha (Ku Kaew), became the ruler of the town succeeding his father. He felt that Marukhkhanakhon, currently in That Noi Sriboonrueng Village, had to face the problem of water erosion so he had the town moved North and re-established in Nong Chan Village, which is three kilometers from Nakhon Phanom Province. In the reign of King Buddhayodfachulalok, the king had the name Marukkhanakhon changed to Nakhon Phanom (Surachit Chantharasakha, 1999: 1945-1957). Its history shows that Nakhon Phanom used to be an important town during the LanXhang Period and had authority over a number of subsidiary towns in the lower basin of the Songkram River and on the banks of the Mekong River as well as over the That Phanom communities, which were, for example, Chayaburi, Tha Uthane, Arthamat or Arjsamath, Ramaratch, Raenu Nakhon, and That Phanom. This power also extended to the left bank of the Mekong River in Khumkerd and Khummuan and to the Vietnamese border. As the town expanded to include the communities on both banks of the Mekong River, this area became called the "Lao Wieng Cultural Zone" or Central Lao (Phuriphume Chomphunuch, 2006: 41). It had close ties with the Kingdom of LanXhang, which had Vientiane as its center of power. The above phenomenon demonstrates that one of the causes of the arrival of the Lao Wieng Cultural Group was political conflict, especially after the death of King Suriyawongsathamikaratch. Phra Khru Phonesamek led people from Vientiane to the South, close to the Cambodian border. Yet, they had to face another problem of having to pay a levy to the Cambodian rule so, a number of people moved back to settle near the Phra That communities on the banks of the Mekong River. After the Chao Anuwong episode, people had to move out of their settlements. In 1836, King Rama III ordered the ruler of the town of Thao Pia to urge approximately 4,000 people, who lived in the towns in the North-east of Lakhon or Nakhon Phanom and included Khummuan and Khumkerd on the left bank of the Mekong River, to come and settle on the right bank of the River. In 1846, a war between Siam and Annam broke out and there was a need for men to serve in the army. Siam thus moved about 3,000 Laotians from the towns of Phin, Tapone, Wang, Phabang and Nong to settle in Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon and Mukdahan, causing the left bank of the Mekong River to become deserted (Walter F. Wella, 1971: 179).

This research aims to study the social network of the "Kha Okasa Phra That Phanom" in the communities of the Mekong River basin. It is qualitative research conducted in accordance with folklore principles. The research process consists of the study of written documents in legends and folktales and the compilation of information collected from fieldwork, which was conducted in two ways: participating in the important homage rituals for the "Three Chao Sam Huen," and acting as an outside observer of the traditional merit-making ceremony of Phra That Phanom in That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province Thailand, the Phra That Ing Hung merit-making ceremony, the Phra That Phone merit-making ceremony in Suvannakhet, as

well as the Phra That Tumphawang merit-making ceremony in Khummuan, Lao PDR. Interviews were conducted without a structure. The research is divided into two parts. The first part, relating to space, refers to the areas covered by fieldwork in the location of Wat Phra That Phanom Woramahawiharn in That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province and the Kha Okasa Phra That Phanom communities, recorded in the Urungkhathat legend, in Nakhon Phanom Province and in the Lao PDR. The second part is related to information that has been used as the principle information for this research. This information is classified into two groups: (1) information in writing consisting of legends, stories, chronicles, stone inscriptions, official records of the Ratanakosin Period, records of foreigners, and (2) information gathered from informants and observations of activities. The required characteristics of key informants were that they had to be local scholars, monks or cultural leaders. The researchers employed two important concepts; the first one concerned power and authority, and the second concerned structuration (Gidden, Anthony, 1986). In order to reach a conclusion, the researcher filed the information into groups based on the issues studied, then analyzed the overall image according to the theory used for explaining cultural phenomena and drew conclusions according to the research objectives.

The Lao Wieng Cultural Life

The field works conducted in the Phra That Phanom community shows that the Lao Wieng Cultural Group settled on the banks of the Mekong River in the North from Wat Huawieng Rangsi to the South in the area of Soi Anurak Chedi, Soi Kuson Rasadakorn and Soi Prem Puchani. The people of the Phra That Phanom community have inherited the Mekong River culture from the people of the Kingdom of LanXhang in the past, and so they share social and cultural characteristics (Charuwan Thammawat, 1997: 18). As for the LanXhang social conditions in the old days, prior to the arrival of Buddhism in the reign of King Fa-ngum, most people believed in supernatural powers. The LanXhang Chronicles show that they worshipped the Phi Fa spirit, the Phi Thaen Spirit, and ancestral spirits as well as followed the beliefs of the Chinese since their borders were connected with China and they had had social contact for a long time (Khum Champakaewmanee et al., 1996: 25). The belief in Phi Thaen coincided with the "power and authority" concept. "Thaen" is a symbol of power, having kings, Thaen's offspring, as representatives of that power. The belief in Thaen was created as a way of building up the acceptance of kings. This power and authority were formed by an awareness of the people in the group that their leaders or rulers were blessed with power and the right to rule. These were the characteristics of those who were superior to common people. The relationship between the ruler and the ruled was power related, and involved fights and negotiations, which were narrated in tales and legends and is concluded below.

Belief in spirits: this belief is meaningful to existence at both the family and the community level (Charuwan Thammawat, 1985: 31).

The respect for the Phi Fa and Phi Thaen spirits is evident in Lao folk literature. For example, in the stories of Pheun Khun Borom, Thao Hung or Chueng and Phraya

Khunkhak (King of Toad). Phi Fa and Phi Thaen represent the deities in heaven who gave birth to leaders, human beings, animals and all things in the Universe. They could do good and bad to human beings if these human beings fail to observe social conventions. Therefore, people, town rulers and kings all had to submit themselves to these spirits. The preparations for a feast for the spirits originated from the belief that all natural entities -- the land, water, vegetation, animals, and human beings -- existed in the world because of the power of the Phi Fa or Phi Thaen. They gave, protected and destroyed lives. It was a household practice that, when having a meal or drinks, a small set of food or drink had to be offered to the spirits first. Beliefs in the spirits, particularly the Phi Thaen, played a significant role in the way of life of the Lanchang people because they believed that the Thaen played a major role in designing and controlling human fate and human social status would vary according to the wish of the Thaen. This allowed the ruling class to exploit the belief to establish their rights. Kings were believed to be the Thaen's heir, sent by their father to rule human beings. This belief started in the reign of Khun Borom, making it possible for LanXhang rulers to control the people of the kingdom which consisted of a variety of ethnic groups and cultures and to make them co-exist in peace under the one fate that held them together, the Thaen. There was also Phi Mahaesak or Phi Arak, the guardian spirit, believed to maintain the country's peace and normality. Whenever there were uprisings, there would be a ceremony organizing the installation of the community's pillar to ensure it was securely fixed, and then all the turmoil would subside (Kusuma Chaiwinit, 1980: 30).

On May 13th, 2011, during the fieldwork conducted in That Noi Village, That Phanon District, the researcher found that the performers of the ceremony connected their rituals with the legends of Marukhanakhon and of Srikhotraboon Kingdom; this could be seen in BanThat Phanom Nuea, Ban Laksila and Ban That Noi. They also adapted and combined their beliefs about Phi Mahaesak and the Naga or the mythical serpents. During the ceremony, they referred to the Naga by the name of Chao Tong Kwang and the Three Chao Huen, who protected Phra That Phanom. Each year, villagers organized three rites -- one on the third waxing moon night of the sixth lunar month, another on the eleventh waxing moon of the same lunar month, and the third on the thirteenth waxing moon night. At present only the Nang Thiam (the medium between Phi and people) survives as most of the ritual performers have died. The rituals lacked support from local administration, forcing the number of participants in the rituals to decrease. Nevertheless, the way of life of the communities along the banks of the Mekong River was also related to snake worship. This can be seen in the pottery found from the excavation of the archaeological sites in Baan Chieng in UdonThani Province. The pottery, approximately 3,600 years old, features sketches and colored drawings of reptiles. This shows that the ancient communities in the Mekong River basin in the Upper Northeastern Region had worshipped serpents since the Pre-historic Period, as well as worshipping spirits; this has continued to the present.

Belief in the Naga: Humphan Ladthanawong (2008: 20-25) states that there is evidence of two strands regarding a belief in the Naga.

The first strand is related to their ancestral belief before the acceptance of Buddhism as their religion; the other shows the Buddhist influence, which came from India. The first strand believes that the ancestors of the Laotians were descendants of the Naga. It is believed that the Naga were snake-like creatures with a crest on their heads. They were sacred and had miraculous powers. They lived in all types of water sources -- rivers, streams, lakes, bogs and ponds. There are many legends about the birth of the Laotians and many of these legends are related to the Naga. One of the legends says that the Naga were the ancestors of the Tai Lao people; for example, the Laotians in Vientiane are believed to be related to the Naga. It is said that in Vientiane is a burrow of the Naga in a temple. Whenever the country was in trouble, people in Vientiane would strike the Mak Khaeng drum (solanum torvum drum) and troops of Naga would emerge from this hole to help chase away their enemies. Later, there was a story about a war between Laos and Siam in the reign of King Taksin. The Siamese army heard about the the Naga's burrow and the Siamese soldiers were sent to close the opening by building the Phra That structure on top of the hole so that the Naga could not emerge. This Phra That was assumed to be Phra That Dam (Black Phra That), located in the centre of Vientiane. So, the Tai Lao people's belief in the Naga was that of the people who lived close to water sources. The Naga were connected with their way of life. The Naga would be able to provide answers and solutions to the problems of their group and has, since then, become the symbol of their communities.

The second strand is a combination of the belief in the Naga in Buddhism with the first strand of belief. The Naga, in the second strand of belief, were believed to be sub-humans who lived in the Underwater World, called Maung Badan. Many literary works related to Buddhisms presence during this belief in the Naga. An example is the Jataka story about the Ten Previous Lives of the Lord Buddha. It was believed that before Prince Sitthatha attained Enlightenment to become the Lord Buddha, he had been born as animals in his many previous lives. In one of these lives, he was born a Naga, named Phraya Phurithat, who had led an austere life in order to make merit that would contribute to his final life when he would be able to achieve Enlightenment. Another legend is related to the ordination of Buddhist monks. The word "Naga" is used in the ordination ceremony to call on the man who is to be ordained. This comes from a story when, during the time of the Lord Buddha, a Naga wished to be ordained as a Buddhist monk but his wish could not be granted as a Naga was not human. So, he asked for permission from the Lord Buddha to make use of the word Naga at the ordination ceremony as an assertion of his strong faith in Buddhism. Therefore, Naga serpents have been closely connected with Buddhism.

Images of the Naga have been presented in Buddhist art and in ordination halls and vihara buildings as a way of warding off threats to Buddhism. Naga images can be seen in architectural decorations; for example, Gabel apex, a decoration on the roof ridge of an ordination hall or a Vihara building, Naga-shaped stairways and bridges as well as wriggling Naga designs. The tie between the Naga and the inhabitants of the Mekong Basin, both those of the LanXhang Kingdom and the people in the Northeast of Thailand, has run deep in their blood, as can be seen in their saying, "the Mekong River without the Naga, and rice lacking rain causes people to die". In literature, the Naga are the Mekong River Basin's cultural symbol, as can be seen in the stories of Pha Daeng and Nang Ai. The story about the origin of a land with large water sources, for example,

Nong Harn Noi Reservoir in Kumphawapi District in Udon Thani Province and Nong Harn Luang Reservoir in Sakon Nakhon Province, reflects the community's culture, its ethnic groups and administration. Its literature responds to the beliefs of local Northeastern society in the way that it combines the belief in spirits, the Naga and Buddhist philosophy.

The belief in the "Naga" shows the condition of pre-historic society when human beings had to depend on one another in order to survive. To ensure strength and security in society or a group of people, there was the need for man power, companions and followers. Most importantly was a sense of trust. Leaders had to establish close ties, starting from ties within the family, which were associated with blood and marriages. The Naga were classified into family groups: seven Naga families, 15 Naga families, and 24 Naga families; they were assigned to protect islands, cataracts, water resources and mountains. This was seen as a way of assigning them to protect the ecological system of an agricultural or farming society that depended on water.

The most important concept that was derived from the social background of the communities on the banks of the Mekong River is connected with the major concept related to the spirit of the household or the spirit of the community, which was the most valuable entity or power in a community. It was the centre of a unified spirit that contributed to the mutual thinking, the same way of life and the same way of behavior, no matter if it were in a village or in a town (Jaruwan Thammawat, 1998: 206-208). The major components of each town community were Kong Din (the earth) and Kong Nam (water territories), houses, temples and palaces. A town community grew from settlements that were supported by these factors -- the land and water blessed with fertility and animal food, together with high quality, wise and virtuous human beings. The land and water territories thus became symbols of the economic way in both eking out a living (cultivating) and earning a living (gathering products from nature). Houses and palaces were symbols of man power, consisting of people and leader, town rulers and kings. Temples were a symbol of invisible power, intelligence and religious teachings that were developed into social ideology and laws to regulate towns and communities. The Naga were thus a symbol that was related to the spirit of a house or the spirit of a town, which was developed into ideology and customs. There were many rites that were related to the Naga, for example, the belief that the Lai Heua Fai ceremony or an illuminated boat process along the river would make it rain appropriately to the season. This is because the illuminated boats that floated along the river would cause the Naga in the river to become hot so they would escape to the sky carrying the water with them. In the sixth month, the water on the earth would dry up. People would thus fire Bung Fai rockets during a ceremony in request of rainwater, asking Phraya Thaen to order the Naga to return the water to the earth. When Buddhism arrived in the Mekong River basin, the meaning of the illuminated boat procession was changed to paying homage to the Lord Buddha's footprint, which the Lord Buddha had pressed on the riverbank at the request of the Naga.

The belief related to the Naga is thus related to the water in the rivers and rains in the sky, which were major elements for living in an agricultural society. The Naga symbolizes abundance, and were a part of Buddhist rites; they were protectors of Buddhism and administrators of social order. They served as a medium of the power relations between receivers and givers, between those deprived of power and

opportunity and those who had more chance or were more powerful. They played a role in traditional belief and in a new religion, Brahmanism, which believed that the Naga was the King of the Underwater World. A Naga, Ananthanagaratch, served as the throne of the God Narai from which originated the legend of the God Narai Reclining on the Ocean. Wasukri Naga was used as the sash of the God Shiva. In Buddhism, the word Naga was used at the ordination ceremony. The Naga were like the rainbows that connected the way of life of people on both banks of the Mekong River. The river was therefore not a geographical or political boundary; socially, people in these communities held onto their clanship or family relationships, which had been created by their ideology about the "Naga".

Their continued rituals and rites and their sacred places were all filled with stories that reflected their beliefs and a way of life that was tied to the Mekong River, for example, the illuminated boat procession. The beliefs related to this ceremony are divided into two groups. The first group is about the story of a white crow. Before the white crow returned to heaven, his five children asked him to impress his footprint on a stone slab for them to pay respect to. The white crow told his children to light candles in cups or plates and let them float along the river on the full Moon night in the eleventh month every year. The candlewicks were made in the shape of a crow's foot as a way of paying respect to the white crow. The second group connected the belief in Brahmanism with that of Buddhism, believing that the illuminated boat process was for paying homage to the Lord Buddha's footprint, to the Brahma God, to Phra That Chulamanee and to Ganga the Goddess of rivers. It also included a belief in paying respect to the Naga which was the giver of water for life, agriculture and fishery, and which was based on their respect for nature. Evidence shows that the first illuminated boat procession along the Mekong River was organized in Vientiane during the reign of King Suriyawongsathamikaratch.

According to the travel record of Van Wusthof, a Dutch trade envoy, the ceremony was organized on the fifteenth waxing moon night or the first waning moon night of the twelfth lunar month when two hundred boats floated along the Mekong River. They were illuminated by candlelight. Three boats were made into the square That structure decorated with well lit candles (Sila Veravong, 1996: 39). From this evidence, Nakhon Phanom, as a major city in the Kingdom of LanXhang, is assumed to have organized the illuminated boat procession to follow the tradition of the LanXhang Kingdom. It is evident in the Heet 12 or jaa reet 12 (traditions) that, at the end of the Buddhist Lent, people came to make merit and present wax castles to the temples, organized a boat race and an illuminated boat procession, which were the tradition of the communities close to the river (Preeya Saenthaweesuk, 1996: 76-79). Besides, the Heet 12, Kong 14 also states that it was a tradition for kings in ancient times to make their vassals, in large and small towns, organize and illuminate a boat procession along the river in the twelfth month to pay homage to the fifteen families of the Naga in the Mekong River (Jaruwan Thammawat, 1986: 162). The geographical location of the communities along the banks of the river and people's dependence on the river for their livelihoods contributed to the beliefs and the continuation of the ceremony.

Revival and Change

The Kingdom of LanXhang declined in the reign of King Thonburi, or King Thaksin the great. This resulted in changes in the power of the communities on the banks of the Mekong River. In the reign of King Rama V, the power relations, cultural differences and political conflicts all emphasized an awareness of separation -- people living in the Mekong River basin being classified as the "Lao". With the influx of Western Imperialism, the Siamese court tried to centralize its power and promoted nationalism. The monarchy and religious institutions revived the relationship with the Mekong basin through a "duality of structure" by spreading the Dhammayutika Buddhist Sect to the Northeast, where most of the monks followed the conventions of the LanXhang Kingdom. This social phenomenon affected the Loa Wieng group, which held strong beliefs in Phi Arak or the Three Phi Chao Heun. The Dhammyuttika monks thus tried to establish a relationship with the new ethnic groups that had just arrived, for example, the Chinese, and revived a ceremony organized to pay respect to Satta Naga as a way of decreasing the power of the Lao Wieng group that worshipped the Three Chao Huen. This can be seen in the change in the rite organized to pay respect to Phra That Phanon; it was a way of moving the worshippers of the Three Chao Heun or the Lao Wieng ethnic group to organize such a rite in the communities on the banks of the Mekong River, far away from Wat Phra That Phanom.

The researcher consider that the cultural life of the Loa Wieng communities was attached to the river, therefore, the people had a tendency to adopt and employ superstition to control invisible and unpredictable powers. As Kirsch (1967) states, the religious system of Northeastern society does have Theravada Buddhism as the only major component but it is a religious system that has been derived from the syncretism of old religious components, which believes in animism, and new religious components that had come from India to the Suvarnabhumi Peninsular. These new religious components are Theravada Buddhism and Folk Brahmanism. There are overlapping components of the old beliefs about ghosts and the supernatural; there are changes and a mixture between Buddhism, Brahmanism and the spirits like the Three Chao Heun, which was originally Phi Arak or the guardian spirit, being changed into the Naga, the spirit of the river, to protect Phra That Phanom. Beliefs and religions are the cultural life that has an overlapping "power" in the cultural dimension. The Naga provided a tie that connected the communities on the banks of the Mekong River, so it can be said that the Mekong without the Naga is like a human being without power.

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Phra Lak Phra Lam: The Representation of Cultural Ecology in Lao Society[*]

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ABSTRACT

This research article aims to study the role of the literary work *Phra Lak Phra Lam* or the Lao version of the *Ramayana*, which represents wisdom in cultural ecology of Lao society in the past through the relations between human and human, human and nature, and human and supernatural things. *Phra Lak Phra Lam* in Lao society represents cultural ecology in three main parts. The first part, *"Physical space"*, shows the topography of the Mekong River Basin as described through the travelling routes of the characters. It shows the state of cities, sceneries, existing distributaries of the Mekong River, the forests, the mountains, the minerals, the plants and the animals in local areas. The second part is the *"Sacred space"* or *"ideal space"*, which represents beliefs such as indigenous and Buddhist beliefs, namely, the belief in Naga, and that humans were born from nature and is a part of nature, and represent cosmologies, traditions and rites. Lastly, is *"Social space"*, representing the relationships between humans. For example, trading exchange, tax levying, husbandry, exchange with other ethnic groups who lived around the river basin, marriage across ethnic groups, and politics. An analysis of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* will help one to understand local adaptations of a seemingly well-known literature, as it represents the cultural ecology of the Lao society in the past.

Keywords: *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, Ramayana, cultural ecology, Lao society

INTRODUCTION

Literature is one kind of folk wisdom that demonstrates a role to respond to humans' need in terms of basic factors. It is related not only to the social and mental stabilities but also preserves and strengthens the culture of each individual society (Na Thalang, 2005). The study of literature provides an understanding of the humans and societies that reflect the origins of ones who are literatures' owners and shows the civilization of people in each society very well.

Literatary works of the Mekong Basin community have been considered as an important cultural heritage that is inherited and constantly connected to people's way of life in the Mekong basin. For example, the legends of *Khun Burom*, *Tao Hung*, and *Tao*

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Chuang, all of whom are considered as heroes to the people in the Mekong basin, have been mentioned in regard to the origin of Laos. The literature of *Sin Sai* is one of the most popular local literatures among the Mekong basin. Some literary works have been taken from other cultures and were adapted to their own culture until they became the identifying literature of the Mekong basin crowd. One of the most remarkable literary works is *Phra Lak Phra Lam* or *Phra Lam Chadok* of Lao.

Phra Lak Phra Lam is the national epic of the Lao people, and is adapted from Valmiki's epic, the *Ramayana*. The original story was composed in Sanskrit around the second century BCE (Leslie, 2003). The *Ramayana* epic is prevalent in South Asia. The Indian civilization has spread into the region of Southeast Asia. Indian traders helped made the *Ramayana* widespread throughout the region. The story was modified in content to reflect the culture of the receiving country to become a national literary work as seen in many Southeast Asian countries, including Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The *Ramayana* has some literature about a national literature (Iyengar, 2006). Lao legends attribute the introduction of the *Phra Ram Chadok* to the first king of Lane Xang, Chao Fa Ngoum. In the 18th Century, manuscripts were completely adapted to Lao culture and the Theravada Buddhist religion. The versions are completely localized (Richman, 1991).

It was difficult to identify the story of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* as derived from the *Ramayana* because the contents were adapted and improved. Sachidanand Sahai (1973) describes, in his Lao edition, that part one of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* story illustrates the characters of the *Ramayana,* but it is difficult to argue that the *Ramayana* of India in this edition spread to Laos. However, the second part of the story clearly shows the same as the *Ramayana* of India. H.H. Prince Pitayalabpuettiyakon (1974) has discussed the origin of the story, saying that "Rama Jataka look[s] like Lahiri Garden Dash of Malay Sri Ram Rama fiction more than any other version". Phra Ariyanuwat (1975), who is a philosopher of Thailand, has discussed the origins of the literary work; that a plot of the story is, indeed, derived from the *Ramayana* of India, but has dramatically adapted from the original story. The name of the city and other scenes were created based on the Mekong River basin. *Phra Lak Phra Lam* has storylines from the *Ramayana* versions of Cambodia and Malaysia, which was supported by Kamala Ratanam (1980) and Chadarat Soonthorntham (1985). In addition, Thawat Punnothok (2009) stated that *Phra Lak Phra Lam* derived from the *Ramayana* of India, but was not likely to be directly from India because it is different from the original. It may have developed from neighboring countries, Thailand or Cambodia. The poet had added an additional scene to the original concept. Therefore, we may conclude that the Lao version of the story of the *Ramayana* is dominantly derived from the Cham and Khmer Empire era of Malaysia and Cambodia. The story was modified from the original content to reveal the culture and cultural ecology of the country, and later become a national literature.

The Lao version of this literary work is different from versions of other Southeast Asian countries. The writer modified and elaborated upon the traditional form, following the local principles and beliefs. It was intervened by a local identity of Lao's tradition, such as way of life, principles, and beliefs. Moreover, the real scene locations have been described and combined with imaginary scenes as well. Sachchidanand Sahai (1973), who collected all of the original manuscripts of *Phra Lak*

Phra Lam has recompiled and published a critical edition. He describes, in the introduction to his Lao edition, the reason why he chose to publish the literary work *Phra Lak Phra Lam* before other Laos literature. It's not only translated from a foreign country, but is also one of the best literary works. *Phra Lak Phra Lam* thoroughly demonstrates the different aspects of Lao culture. Furthermore, Niyada Laosunthon (2006), who studies the topic of change from written literature to ergodic literature about *Phra Ram* fable in Lao, has observed that the Lao version of the *Phra Ram* fable seems to be more remarkable than other the versions of other countries. It can well describe the combination of the roles and the statuses of important characters in the *Ramayana* with heroes of the nation, which affects the appearance of the important characters in the story. The characteristic of the literature also changed in terms of its praise for Hindu gods to the bravery of Bodhisattvas of the Buddhist pantheon.

The environment is a natural area where people come to settle down and build a city by adjusting themselves to be compatible with the nature. They also create the knowledge by using natural resources, and making specifications of traditional customs on economy, politics, and cultures together. Moreover, the nature of locality is considered at this level of cultural ecology (Wanliphodom, 2008). This article aims to study the representations of Lao society's cultural ecology in the past as seen through the literary work of *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. This article emphasizes the study of the cultural ecology of Lao society of the past through the relations between human and human, human and nature, and human and supernatural things.

Literary Sources

The Lao version of the *Ramayana* was studied from the original of *Phra Lak Pra Lam* published by Sachaidanand Sahai (1973). The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* was recorded as a palm leaf manuscript of Northeast Thailand, held in the National Library of Thailand, which was used to corroborate 43 sections, or *phuks*. One *phuk* is a bundle of palm leaves with engraved Lao script. The end of the story noted that Pra Putta Kosajan is the author of the Thai minor era 1212, which corresponds to 1850 CE.

The plot of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is divided into two main parts. The first part is about how the cities were settling down, and the history of the discovery of the Inthapattha Nakorn and Muang Chanthaburisrisattanak cities (in present-day Vientiane, Laos). It also mentions the origin of the main characters, the journey of Phra Lak and Phra Lam to find Nang Chantha, who was abducted by Thao Rapphanasuan to live in Inthapattha Nakorn. The story is similar to that of *Sin Sai*, another Lao literary work that illustrates a journey along valleys, woods, and rivers of Mekong's basin. The author attempts to explain the origin of the names of places in the areas of the two banks of the Mekong River. Each description includes an explanation of the richness of the natural resources in Laos, such as the trees, fruits, and animals, both terrestrial and aquatic, and all minerals through frequent comparisons of descriptions as illustrated in the original story. The lifestyles of the Lao society and ethnic groups living in the area of the Mekong river basin were also indicated.

The second half of the plot presents Thao Rapphanasuan who migrated from Inthapattha Nakorn to build a new city in Langka Island. The story describes the lifestyle of the peoples on the islands along his journey. It is similar to other versions of

the *Ramayana*, but there are some nuances, such as, for example, Phra Lam eating the fruit of a Banyan tree, then becoming a monkey, having a monkey wife named Phaeng Si, and begetting Hunlaman as a child. Another example narrates Phra Lam building cities in Thailand, such as Muang Phit Sanulok, Muang Nakhon Sawan, Muang Krungsri Ayutthiya, Muang Khonrat (in present-day Nakhon Ratchasima province), and Muang Phimai – all governed by his children. Besides this, the literary work of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* also includes local principles and beliefs. It is also mentions Lao proverbs, mottos, and in beautiful literary style, which are part of the principles of thought, morality, and the life maintaining patterns of Laos people that have been inherited through to the present day.

The cultural ecology of Lao society presented according to a spatial theory and the field of cultural geography, "Third-Space" is an approach built upon Henri Lefebvre's theory of specific "modes of production of spaces" (Hongsuwan, 2013) that divides an area into three types: physical space, spiritual space, and the social space.

1. Physical Space is the geological area as it appears in the real world (Hongsuwan, 2013). The literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* reveals that the cultural ecology of Lao society is represented by a physical space. It presents the topography of the Mekong River basin through the traveling routes of the characters. The names of towns and the rivers in this story correspond to the names of real towns and anabranches of the Mekong River, as well as those names of forests, mountains, minerals, plant species and the local animal species of the present time.

The names of the anabranches of the Mekong River are found on both the Thai and Lao river banks. Those names corresponding to the Lao side of the river are found in the scenes when Phra Lak and Phra Lam, passing along the Mekong River, went to Inthapattha Nakorn town to bring Nang Chantha back to her city. The various events of this story became river names, such as Nam Nguem River, San River, Sading River (Krading River), Satoen River (Toen River) Se Nam Se Don River, Se Bang Hiang River, and Se Bang Fai River. Nam Nguem River was given its name by a god who walked to Phra Lak and Phra Lam, concealing his face with his hand (*"Nguem"* in Lao means conceal). The Se River was given its name by two calves butting each other teasingly, and then staggering and falling into the water (*"Se"* in Lao means stagger).

The river banks on the Thai side are mentioned in the scene of Phraya Thattarattha who came out from Inthapattha Nakorn City to build Muang Chanthaburisrisattanak City. Included are Moon River, Somkham or Songkhram River, Huai Luang (Phonphisai District, Nongkhai Province in Northeast Thailand) and Suai Kham River or Suai River (Phonphisai District, Nongkhai Province, Thailand). Somkham River was given its name because Thao Thattarattha's soldiers were frightened by a tiger that was chasing a deer, and running towards them. They were stampeded and acted as if they were running into a war ("Songkham" in Lao means the war). Huai Luang was given its name because a big pig was soaking itself in that brook, and Phraya Thattarattha was so surprised that he had never before seen such a big pig, and so he gave that name for the river ("Luang" in Lao means big).

There were some reported of the real places' names in the area of the Mekong River Basin, such as Phan Phrao, Don Chan, Don Koet, Tha Bo Ngoen Bo Kham, Don

Kong, Phu Ba Long, and Li phi. Phan Phrao was the place where Phraya Thattarattha initially intended to build a city before a seven-headed *naka* told him to build along another bank of the Mekong River. The name "Phan Phrao" was given because of a coconut tree bearing a thousand fruits a year. In present-day, this place is Sri Chiangmai District, Nongkhai Province, Thailand. Don Koet and Tha Bo Ngoen Bo Kham are mentioned because Phra Lak and Phra Lam were born there while their mother was touring the park on a highland, so it was called Don Koet ("Koet" means born). When Phra Lak and Phra Lam were born, many silver- and gold pools broke out on the land along Thananathee's bank (Mekong River) on the west. Therefore, it was called Tha Bo Nguen Bo Kham, or today's so-called Tha Bo District, Nong Khai Province, Thailand. Li Phi was given the name because warlords, court officials and the king of *garudas* fought with the magic sword of Phra Lak and died desultorily. Because their corpses soared along the river and hung on the cliff that the king of *garudas* used to irrigate the Thananathee River, and because a fish was caught with bait, so it was called Li Phi, as shown in **figure 1**.

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Figure 1. Li Phi image. Photo by Smai Wannaudorn.

Besides the aforementioned, the literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* also represents the ecosystem of the Mekong basin's plentiful topography, including woods, local plants, animals, and minerals. Sachchidanand Sahai (1996) has reported that the plot of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* usually describes the traveling paths along the Mekong River. In each traveling period there is a description of the natural richness of Laos. It shows the different kinds of plant species, such as bananas, sugarcanes, coconuts, sugar palm trees, and also mentions the diversity of minerals, including gold, silver, and copper, mentioning them frequently throughout the literature. It coherently demonstrates Laos' geographical characteristics, as well as culture.

Therefore, the author has shown the representatives of a real topography in Lao society, which shares the same border of topography along the northeastern part of Thailand in the past. These topographies are well known in Lao society up to the present time, and are mostly relate to the rivers and highlands. Because of the particular lifestyle of people in Lao society, the water and rivers play an important role in their life maintenance. Beside is value agriculturally, Nam Nguem and Toen Rivers also play an importance role for Lao's economy in terms of using the dams to generate the electric current for domestic use, and also for exporting, to bring income to help develop the country.

The representation of these rivers in the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is one way to have them, and the highlands, remain in the remembrances of Lao society. It is also a way to consciously acknowledge the local history for the next generation to learn about the origin of all the places' names. Therefore, there is an attempt to make a memory about these rivers and highlands together with their name. The names were based on the influences and behaviors of the supernatural, following local principles and social beliefs, such as Nguem River, the highlands Don Chan and Tha Bo Nguen Bo Kham.

Today, some of these places mentioned in the literary have became tourist attractions that make income, helping the country's economy, such as Don Chan, which has become the location of one of the best hotels in the country. Moreover, there are the monuments of the kings, and a park as a relaxing place, an exercising place and a selling place of souvenirs. The literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* has not only represented important places that still remain in the memories of people, but also have an important role to the society and the country as it did in the past.

Furthermore, *Phra Lak Phra Lam* has illustrated the ecosystem of the Mekong basin topography, which was rich in woods, plant species, local animal species and minerals. These records correspond to the present data of Laos, which has been recognized as a country rich in various kinds of natural resources with a perfect ecosystem.

2. Sacred Space is the area that was built or created from imagination to show the ways and beliefs of both tradition and religion (Hongsuwan, 2013). They include the belief in the *naka*, the belief that humans are created from- and become a part of nature. Sacred Space is further divided into three parts: the upper world, earth, and the underworld.

2.1 The Upper World includes the Brahma World, heaven, Thaen city, and the universe.

      The Brahma World is mentioned in some part of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. They are described only in the Akanittha Brahma World, which tells of the birth of Intapatthanakhon. This story mentions a couple of Brahmas who came to visit the world and could not return to the Brahma World. They built and established the city called Intapatthanakhon. The story of the birth of Tao Lun Lu also refers to Maha Brahma who died in the Akanittha Brahma World and returned to create the human world.

      The Heaven Realm in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is mentioned in its reference to a heaven in the *Daowadueng* level (the highest level) where Phra Indra lives. There it describes a scene where Phra Ya Thaen handed Tao Lun Lu over to Phra Indra to recover his body, but he couldn't do it. Beside the route to Phra Indra's castle, there are decorations of smiling angel sculptures that are glazed with gold foil and glass, white elephant sculpture, two scary black stone elephants that look like they are running to pierce something. At the start of the stairs to the castle, there are two dog sculptures that are made of gold and glass, posing like they are running to fight. On the castle, there are angels playing holy music and beautiful angels surrounding Indra.

      Thaen City in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* context means the place where seven of Phra Ya Thaens have lived. Phra Ya Thaen Teuk is the chief. The role of Phra Ya Thaen is to cast a new complete body to Brahma and angel before they are born in the world; without his work they would be born with deformities.

      Universe in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is mentioned in the scene where Phra Lam travels the universe by a horse named Maneekab. The literary work describes the location and environment of the universe, which is extensive. There is a mountain at the east edge. The northern mountains are dark. At the edge of the southern mountain is full of fog. There is a Chomphu tree at the southern edge of the universe that is surrounded by the sky. The western edge of the universe is covered with fog that looks like the city walls. A the center of the universe is Meru Mountain; the Autrkuru continent is at its north; the Buphaviteha continent is in the east; the Indian subcontinent and the Amornkoyanna is in the south and west, respectively. Next to this, there is the Himaphan forest and Langka continent where people live along the Mekong River.

      Within the upper world space both traditional belief about Thaen and religion exist. The author tried to illustrate the upper world space, that the Brahma world is the highest and heaven beneath it, especially regarding cosmic nirvana where the second heaven plays an important role because it is the place where the god Phra Indra lives. The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature also shows the traditional beliefs about Phra Ya Thaen who lives in the lowest level of the heavens called Cātummahārājika, where his duty is to cast the perfect body of Bramha and angel that will be born in the world. Regarding the religious beliefs, there are four gods who live in Cātummahārājika heaven, but in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature, the Cātummahārājika four gods were born as humans. They include the father of Phra Lak Phra Lam, Tao Rappaoksuan's father, and two brothers who live on the opposite side, on top of Yukhanthara Mountain. Phra Ya Aiyasuan (Phra Lak Phra Lam's grandfather and Tao Rappanasuan) is the leader and

governs the spirits and giants. It shows the great combination between traditional and religious beliefs.

In addition, the author tries to present the universe as a combination of local and religious beliefs. The universe consists of four continents: Autrkuru, Buphaviteha, Amarakotayan, and Chomphu, but in Lao society it is believed that the universe consists of five continents, Himaphan forest is next to the four continents, and then Lanka is a continent where the people of the Mekong live. It shows that the author believed in five universes, including the Lanka continent.

2.2 The sacred space on "the earth" is referring to the trees, mountains, river and islands. The sacred places mentioned in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* are now still remarkable places of Laos, such as Don Chan, and Don Khong. The legend of this folktale played an important role for Laotian belief. For example, Laotian people believed that the Maneekhot tree is the only one in this world. Nikhot or Maneekhot tree is the one that stood in the middle of the Khonprapeng water fall in the past (**figure 2**). A head of the branch from this tree points to death and the end points to life, which is said in the Lao language as "*Kok chee tai pai chee pen*". Laotian people also believe that this tree has major tree branches. If someone eats the fruits from the branch that points to Laos, that person would get older, and if they eat the fruits from the Cambodian direction, they would become a monkey. But if someone eats the fruits that point toward Thailand, they would look younger. In addition, they believe that this tree provides a magic cure for sickness or disease, which is similar to the story in *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. The Nikhot tree or Maneekhot in the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature is a magic tree (**figure 2**).

Figure 2. Nikhot or Maneekhot tree, which is a magic tree in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* (left, from www.seasite.niu.edu). A real image of the Maneekhot tree in Champasak Province, Laos (right, from www.magnoliathailand.com).

If someone ate their fruits, depending on which direction would result in birth as different kinds of animal. If the tree branch points to the east, the fruit will give birth to a monkey, the southern and the northern branchs would become the Klayang or Chao

bird and the Ngueog or Kok bird, respectively. Lastly, the upward, pointing-to-the-sky branch would become human. Phra Lam and Pangsi lady become monkeys because they ate the fruits from the eastern branch. In addition, Nikhot tree or Maneekhot has magic to turn an animal into a human. This refers to the belief that humans originated from nature and evolved from the origin of nature. For example, the history of Don Chan derived from the merit of Phra Lak Phra Lam. Today, there is a statute of Anuwong Prince located on this Don Chan beach. Later this area was re-named by Lao's government as "Suan Anuwong-Anuwong garden" (Hongsuwan, 2012).

The Balong Mountain is a well-known mountain in the southern part of Laos. There are many different traditional stories about this mountain. In *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature, the author tried to illustrate the great power of Buddha. Balong Mountain originated, according to the literature, as a snake that was looking for food and so wanted to eat Phra Lam. It was killed and buried by Maneekab horse. Therefore, this mountain erected from the very soil where Maneekab horse covered the body of the snake, shaped like a giant coffin. Currently, there are many temples that have been built on this sacred mountain. People of Bakse, Phonthong, Champasak and other groups come to this place to pay homage to these temples.

Don Chan is the highland that was created by the seven-headed naga to bring two children from a boat. People give it the name Don Chan because they had never seen the miraculous highland before. Don Khong, another highland, was created as a result of Phra Lam gunning his arrow into the bank of the river. The river bank was ruined and become a highland in the middle of the river where Phra Lak and Phra Lam stayed.

2.3 The sacred place is an underworld space. There is Badan or the naga city. The author has presented a vision of the underworld space according to the traditional belief that the underworld has a naga city where naga people live, following the naga folklore. This town in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature mentions the two big towns, including Takkasila Noi, and Pattalum. The naga in this belief has different manners and characteristic. Some naga are good and always provide good deeds for good people. For example, the naga from Takasila Noi City, when the naga knew that Phra Lak and Phra Lam were good people, he brought his daughter and sister to be Phra Lak and Phra Lam's wives, respectively. The route of descent to the Takasila Noi City is at Kaeng-Ahong, which local people believe was a center of the Mekong River and is the road to the naga city (**figure 3**).

Figure 3. Kaeng-Ahong in Buengkan Province, Thailand (from www.bungkan.com).

Pattalum is Phraya Pattalum's town. He believes that Phra Lam was the cause of war; therefore Phraya Pattalum kidnapped Phralam and took him to the underworld in order to kill him for peace. His four daughters destroyed the stone bridge that was created by Thao Hunlaman and his three brothers in order to cross Lanka. Later, these two couples were married and begot four children.

3. Social space refers to a way of life and the common practices of people. It represents the relationship between human and human such as the relationships of different ethnic groups along the Mekong River that were a result of intermarriage, family clan, trade and exchange, taxation, plantation, and politics.

The relationship with the Kha ethnic group and the intermarriages with them is not a story only of Laos' communities but also that of the Kha ethnic group, which is mentioned in this literature. There is a mention of the journey of Phra Lak and Phra Lam passing through the Tamila village, asking the way to Inthapatta town. There are several kinds of Kha ethnic groups including the Kha Phu Kao, Kha Phu Nak, Kha Chalai, Kha Phisoon, Kha Saloei, Kha Yang Dam, and Kha Yang Daeng who settling down along the mountain cliff. There were intermarriages without separation of the social classes for instance. There was an arranged marriage of Phra Lam and Nang Khamphao, the daughter of the headman of the Kha village. Later, Phra Lak and Phra Lam were married again to the daughter of Khunkhom City's governor, and become the new rulers of that town.

There is also a similar story of intermarriages between the commoners and the royalty -- an official's child who escaped and established a new town. There are some of the origins of the new town in Laos such as Puan Chiangkhwang, Khamkoed, Srikhottabun, and Attapoe town. Also, the Khunkhom ruler and his people brought his daughters to Phra Lak and Phra Lam at Chanthaburi-Srisattanak town.

Chiangkhwang town was established by Thao Chiangkhwang. He is a son of a royal officer from Vientiane, Lanchang, who had fallen in love with Khampuan, a daughter of Uparat San in Khunkhom town. They went to ask for permission to marry, but were denied. Therefore, they decided to escape to another town in the eastern part and build their own community. Later, it became a new town named Puan Chiangkhwang.

Moreover, there was also mention of cross-tribal marriages, as shown in the scene where Thao Rapphanasuan told Chieftain Jong to bring his people back to Chanthaburi-Srisattanak after having sent him and Nang Chantha to Inthapattha Nakhon. Half way along the journey, they were reluctant to leave each other. They decided to run away together and established the new cities on the right side of the Mekong River and in the areas of Thailand and Cambodia, such as Pasak (Champasak), Surin, Srisaket, Roi Et, Khu Khan, Pha Khao Phan Na town (Phannanikhom District, Thailand), Nong Bua Lum Phu (Nong Bua Lam Phu Province, Thailand), Phra Ta Bong, and Bodhisattawa City.

Family relationships also illustrate the importance of the family system in Lao society, presenting the love and relationships of relatives and the characters of people in the family through the three characters. First, twins, such as Phra Lak and Phra Lam, Thao Sangkhib and Thao Phaleechan, and Thao Chataphraya and Thao Kanlahaphraya, Thao Wirupakkha and Thao Kuwera, and Phra Buttara and Phra Hoob. Second, the siblings, such as Nang Khamsao and Nang Aed Khai, Nang Phimmasonkhonlad, Nang Thippha-adchanmon, Nang Sakonchaocho and Nang Thipphalolao, Thao Hunlaman and Thao Khuanthaofa, Nang Buasri and Nang Khammee. And the third characters illustrate the relationship between aunt and niece, such as Nang Chanthamukkhee, the king of Nakas's sister, and Nang Uchulika, the king of Nakas's daughter.

Furthermore, it also presents the unity of the family system in terms of siblings from the same parents, and half siblings. This is represented through the child of Phra Lak and Phra Lam who were sent in pairs to govern all the cities in order to help each other without any contradiction. And also the love of half siblings, which is represented by Thao Hunlaman and Thao Khuanthaofa, the sons of Phra Lam and Nang Phaeng Sri and Nang Kottarat. They went to inquire about Nang Sida in Langka town. They helped each other to build a bridge and were commander-in-chiefs together. These representations of the twins or relatives demonstrate that Lao society emphasizes the family system and family unity. Thus, they were concerned over creating the characters of the twins and relatives to work together or in groups.

Regarding trade and exchange, there were often representations of the markets, especially during the journeys of the characters passing through different places. They also mention goods being sold, such as trading along the way, as demonstrated in the scene where the people of Khun Khom passesd through the markets in Chanthaburi-Srisattanak, which sold jewels and jewelry, sweets, meat, foods, and clothes. In addition, in the scene where Chieftain Jong sent the people of Chanthaburi Srisattanak back to

their city, the state of trading materials in markets were also mentioned. Moreover, the trading of their own stuffs for another one's was mentioned in Phaya (a type of Lao poetry) over a conversation between the native people and Phra Lak and Phra Lam, or between the native people and royal officials who were travelling to another country. Regarding taxation, there was only one scene mentioned. That is the scene where Nang Sida brought Phra Buttara and Phra Hoob to find their father in Chanthaburi-Srisattanak and stayed with a cucumber peddler. One day, the two siblings were carrying cucumbers to sell in the downtown market. Thao Hunlaman told his followers to collect taxes along the market until they came to a cucumber shop and asked to take a cucumber. However, Phra Buttara did not give way, so the followers went back and told Thao Hunlaman. After that, he came to collect the tax himself, and again, Phra Buttara refused, so they quarrelled to the point where they fought with each other. Thao Hunlaman could not fight Phra Buttara, so Phra Lak and Phra Lam came to help him. However, there was no winner or loser. Finally, Phra Lam realized that Phra Buttara was his son, and he brought him back with him to live in the town.

The practice of agriculture was mentioned most frequently, both directly and indirectly. A direct mention includes the scene of the origin of Thao Lunlu before he was born as Thao Rapphanasuan. The author presented a representation of plowing the field of Kuan Na Luang, the father of Thao Lunlu who described how to cultivate land.

There is also mention of a representation of local wisdom about chasing away with a tool those birds that eat rice in the fields. It was made by splitting the wood into two pieces, drilling holes, stringing it with wicker and then pulling them to touch each other to make a noise. The birds were frightened and flew away. It's called Hurb Lai Nok, which is the origin of today's Ban Hurb.

Besides the aforementioned, there is also a mention of farming indirectly. It mentions farming or plowing the land in Phaya, which is used to make fun in several places mentioned frequently, as well as fields is mentioned frequently.

Politics and governance, in the literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, are also represented, based on ancient Lao tradition. This includes a governor, a viceroy, and a royal official called Saen Muang. Moreover, there are other royal officials mentioned, namely, Chieftain Muen Na, Chieftain Muang Chan, Chieftain Muang Klang, Chieftain Muang Sai, Chieftain Muang Khua, and Chieftain Kaeo Moon Muang. For example, in Chanthaburi Srisattanak, Phra Lam is the governor and Phra Lak is the viceroy. In Inthapattha Nakhon, Thao Rapphanasuan is the governor, Thao Phikphi (Thao Rapphanasuan's younger brother) is the viceroy, and Thao Inthachee (Thao Rapphanasuan's other brother) is the Saen Muang.

In the scene where Phra Lak and Phra Lam have established the cities in the area of Thailand, which are governed by their sons and daughters, the words Wang Na or Fai Na are used instead of Upparat. For example, Muang Sriayutthiya was governed by Thao Aongkhot, and Thao Worayot is the Wang Na. In Muang Phimai, Thao Chanthapatchot is the governor, and Thao Thipphasotsaisaeng is the Fai Na. In Muang Khonlad (present-day Nakhorn Ratchasima Province, Thailand) Thao Thotsakan is the governor and Phan Look Thao is the Fai Na.

This study suggests that the social space in the literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* illustrates the representations of cultural ecology, the relations of ethnic groups,

families, and life maintenances according to the culture of Lao society. It's comprised of trade, exchange and tax levying. In addition, it has presented a representation of government following the traditional ways of Lao society that focuses on the family system whereby the older brother is the governor and the younger brother is the viceroy, supporting each other, and subsequently people in Lao society can earn their livelihoods together peacefully.

CONCLUSION

Although the Lao literary work of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* originated from another culture, the author adapted local characteristics following the local principles, beliefs, values and cultural traditions. The way of life that relies on nature was mentioned in the literature. The locations of real local places correspond to the imaginary places as well. There were the descriptions of the local geography, making the local history a collective memory and helps us to see the representations of the cultural ecology within old Lao society. The relationships between humans and nature is a way to understand the behaviors of people toward their natural surroundings. And it also reflects the relations between humans and the supernatural. The Buddhist principles and local beliefs were interesting; they all refer to local wisdom in terms of the cultural ecology of Lao ancestors according to eastern philosophy. People could perceive nature's significance. They believed that humans originated from nature, are part of nature, are well mannered to nature, and live resourcefully with nature. This is the base of ecosystem management, to get equilibrium for the permanence of the ecosystem and the survival of people in Lao society forever.

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Ethnic Tourism Development in Thailand: the Case of the Black Tai

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ABSTRACT

Thailand is one of many countries interested in ethnic tourism development. The greatest challenge in this field is the question of sustainability of ethnic identity and culture. The present study discusses the findings of an "action research" conducted in Phaihuchang village in Banglen district, Nakhon Pathom province, Thailand where the Black Tai or *Tai Dam* ethnic group, who migrated from Laos, resides. The researchers adopted a *6Ds* model, implementing community-based tourism (CBT), Participatory Action Research (PAR), and SWOT analysis. Such an approach to ethnic tourism may facilitate the ethnic tourism development preparation process in the village as well as promote sustainability at the site. The findings of the study reveal positive impacts not only on individuals and the community as a whole, but also tangible and intangible cultural changes. Important factors leading to the successful development of ethnic tourism are also discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Ethnic Tourism Development, Community-based tourism, Black Tai (Tai Dam), Nakhon Pathom province, Participatory Action Research, SWOT analysis

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic tourism emphasizes direct contact and experiences between tourists and a community with a culture and traditions that are different from those of the tourists (Smith 1997). Even though ethnic tourism is able to generate income for a community, in principle, it is meant to be a source of extra income, not the main generator of wealth (Hausler and Strasdas, 2002: 3). Ethnic tourism has received positive worldwide attention, especially among countries where a great variety of ethnic peoples reside. Cultural diversity and distinctiveness are attractive features for both domestic and international tourists. Countries like the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand are among the numerous countries promoting ethnic tourism (Cohen 2001; Howard 2006; Leepreecha 2005; Hanh 2008). In certain countries, tourism plays an important role in supporting the local economy.

In 1997, Thailand declared a national policy branded "Amazing Thailand" (1998-1999) promoting tourism as a remedial measure following an economic crisis the previous year. In 2001, the government introduced another policy, "One *Tambon* [district] One Product (OTOP)". As a result, eco-tourism, community-based tourism, or home-stay businesses can be seen in many places (Office of Tourism Development 2010). Different kinds of tourism in each community all share the same objective, which is to attract people to visit and learn something new while also generating more income for the local community.

Despite the advantages and positive impacts, tourism, in some cases, also has negative effects. Conflicts among stakeholders, diminished authenticity of local cultures caused by commoditization of cultural elements, and environmental problems can all have a detrimental outcome (Hoa and Lan 1999; Liang, Umezaki, and Ohtsuka 2003). The sustainability of tourism development is an issue of much concern (Teo and Chang 1998). As such, the process of tourism development needs to involve the local people as much as possible and consider all relevant information including both the positive and negative impacts of tourism on the community, as well as pay attention to lessons learned from past failures at other locations; in short, it should proceed with caution.

The main objective of this research paper is to propose an approach to developing Black Tai ethnic tourism by conceptualizing and implementing community-based tourism (CBT), based on participatory action research (PAR), and a SWOT analysis. This is referred to as the *6D*s model.

1. Black Tai People

Black Tai people have been addressed by various names such as *Thai Song*, *Thai Song Dam*, *Lao Song*, *Song*. All of these names, including the ethnic label "Black Tai" or "*Tai Dam*", were given by outsiders because this ethnic group was dressed in black (*dam*) clothing with variations. The Black Tai people migrated from Muang Thaeng, which is the mythical place of their origin according to age-old tales chanted at funerals. This place used to be under the administration of Luang Prabang government in northern Laos (Sribusara 1987). Muang Thaeng is presently called Muang Dien Bien Phu, and is now considered as part of northwestern Vietnam.

Black Tai people migrated to Thailand as prisoners of war. The forced movements took place during the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782) and during the reigns of Rama I, Rama II, and Rama III. Baker and Phongpaichit (2005: 28-29) recount the history of migration in the 1770s and 1780s, when Taksin's armies captured many thousands of Lanna Yuan, Lao Vieng, Lao Phuan, Black Tai, and Khmer. In 1827-1828, Bangkok went to war with the Lao ruler of Vientiane, Jao Anu[1], who competed to control this frontier region. Bangkok's armies destroyed Jao Anu's capital and dynasty. After the 1827 war against Vientiane, over 150,000 were captured and some 50,000 forcibly marched down to the Chaophraya basin. In the 1830s, the Bangkok armies made six expeditions into the Lao regions, de-populating the left bank of the Mekong, and bringing back with them Lao Phuan from the Plain of Jars, Black Tai from Sipsongchuthai, Khmer, and Vietnamese. One purpose of Bangkok's military expansion was to restock the population by means of forced resettlement.

Due to common migration patterns and linguistic similarities between *Tai Dam* and other Lao groups, later generations of *Tai Dam* believed they were the same group as the Laos, and called themselves *Phu Laao* 'Lao people' (Chakshuraksha 2003). Linguistically, the *Tai Dam* language is distinguished from the Lao language and other Lao ethnic group languages as a member of the Tai language group (Brown 1965). All languages belong to the Southwestern branch of the Tai-Kadai language family (Li 1960).

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[1] Lao transcription is Chao Anou.

The original settlement of *Tai Dam* people in Thailand was in Phetchaburi Province in the western region of Thailand (Piyaphan 1998). The oldest and most populated *Tai Dam* community is the village number five (Nongkhe village), Nongprong sub-district, Khaoyoi District, Phetchaburi Province (Chakshuraksha 2003). At first, they were not granted freedom of movement, but following the abolition of slavery under the reign of King Rama V in 1898, they were permitted to move to other areas, which they did in significant numbers. The *Tai Dam* people moved to nearby provinces such as Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Suphanburi, Nakhon Pathom, Samut Sakhon, and Samut Songkhram. In the Chiangkhan District of Loei Province in the northeastern region of Thailand, there is also a group of *Tai Dam* people who migrated from Laos. In addition to their migration to Thailand, *Tai Dam* people also migrated from Son La (Muang La) in Vietnam to Laos. An interview with Bakam (2010),[2] a 78-year-old who lives in Vientiane, discloses that most *Tai Dam* people in Laos migrated from Son La more than 50 years ago.

It should be noted that the Black Tai people keep in touch with one another by visiting friends and relatives, and they regularly visit others during cultural events, especially for important festivals or traditional ceremonies associated with their ancestors. *Tai Dam* in Thailand even arrange trips to visit *Tai Dam* people in Laos and in Vietnam. This has built, supported, and strengthened bonds and relationships, and helped to establish a network linking Black Tai communities in different places. It has also become a feature of Black Tai unity.[3]

2. The Black Tai People in Phaihuchang Village

A study of the language use and attitudes about ethnic identity of the Lao ethnic groups including the Black Tai in the western region of Thailand shows that, among all these ethnic groups, Black Tai are the most strongly united and thus have the most vibrant language vitality. A survey of areas inhabited by these ethnic groups reveals that, in the western region of Thailand, Black Tai villages number the most at 394 villages out of a total of 1,584 (Burusphat et al. 2011). In terms of population numbers, Black Tai are the dominant ethnic group in this region. Black Tai community-based tourism exits in some provinces of this region, namely, Petchaburi, Ratchaburi, and Suphanburi. In Nakhon Pathom Province, no successful Black Tai community-based tourism has been found so this province has been chosen as a research site.

As in other Black Tai inhabited areas, Black Tai people in Nakhon Pathom Province have assimilated well into the Thai community. There are several major factors that promote this assimilation, such as the practice of intermarriage, formal schooling in schools far from the village community and the widespread presence of electronic media in the village (Chakshuraksha 2003).

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[2] Bakam, K. 2010. Interview. November 21, 2010. Nongbuathongtay village, Sikhottabong district, Vientiane, Lao PDR.

[3] This same practice is also true of other ethnic groups, such as the Phuan, whose homeland was in the Xiang Khuang region of northern Laos. They were moved by the Siamese military and resettled in scattered communities around Thailand during the same period as the Black Tai removal (Breazeale and Samuckkarn 1988).

Consequently, the question of the nature of Black Tai identity has arisen. In general, signs of ethnic identification are religion, types of farming, dialect, diet, and dress (Moerman 1965). Black Tai people cannot be distinguished from other Thai people by the criterion of wet rice cultivation because the settlements of both groups, as well as other Tai ethnic groups, such as the Shan in Burma, are associated with irrigated wet paddy land (Leach 2004). Nor can dialect, diet, and dress be used as Black Tai emblems either. The Black Tai language is still vital where the younger generations live in an extended family environment in which older generations provide better role models for correct behavior and values. In this way, the value of language and cultural preservation has been handed down to the younger generations. A contrasting situation can be found in a nuclear family where the Thai language is dominant. Diet and dress are still preserved in old and middle generations in the latter case, but dying out in younger generations.

Apart from those criteria, persistent and permeating animism seems to be an important feature of Black Tai identity; it distinguishes Black Tai from the Thai, Shan in Burma (Moerman 1965), and the Lue in the Chiengkham District of Chiengrai Province who are Buddhists (Moerman 1965). Ancestor worship, which is related to the patriarchal family system, is also an important element of Black Tai identity. Black Tai people believe that a Black Tai house needs to have a place called *kalorhong* for ancestor spirits to reside, and an ancestor worship ritual called *senhuan* needs to be performed regularly or else the living family members will meet with unfortunate events such as illness. This strict belief has managed to survive through important rituals and customs. Nowadays, Buddhism has become incorporated into the fabric of Black Tai society but the Black Tai people persist in traditional beliefs and practices.[4]

Phaihuchang Village (village numbers four and five) in Banglen District, Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand was chosen as a research site for several reasons. Firstly, Black Tai people make up 80% of this community (1,636),[5] and secondly, a number of Black Tai language and cultural centers are located in this village. A *Tai Dam* association (Thailand) was set up at Phaihuchang Village with the primary objective being to teach the Black Tai language to the younger generations. There is also a cultural center and a traditional Black Tai model house being used as a museum that attempts to exhibit the Black Tai way of life through cultural artifacts and historical photos. This way, Black Tai children have a chance to get to know the local history and development of their own village which helps foster pride and respect in their community. These language and cultural buildings and their contents can also serve as information centers for tourists. Finally, Black Tai people in this village rely on a variety of farming methods to make a living such as rice cultivation and vegetable gardening, lotus gathering and fish/shrimp farms. Tourists may find the rural way of Black Tai life fascinating and also help to increase local people's income by buying their products.

The aforementioned factors allow the Black Tai community in Phaihuchang Village to enjoy the benefits of its cultural and social capital that serve as a quality asset

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[4] Sayphan (2011) also finds that Black Tai people in Dien Bien Phu of Vietnam use cultural practices to retain local Tai ethnic identity within the existing order of the nation and the contemporary globalizing world.
[5] The population figure is taken from Report of Demographic number of Phaihuchang population, Primary Care Unit, Phaihuchang Community Hospital, January 10, 2013, page 1.

and attraction for ethnic tourism development. What the community needs now is support in various forms from a range of organizations and interested parties to firmly establish Phaihuchang as a desirable model for emulation.

3. Research Framework

This current study conceptualizes three key ideas, namely, community-based tourism (CBT), Participatory Action Research (PAR), and SWOT analysis.

Community-based tourism focuses on the involvement of locals in the management and development of tourism in the community. The concept of community-based tourism is also echoed in the work by Suansri (2003). She states that community-based tourism should recognize environmental, social and cultural sustainability as the primary community concern. The management of tourism can best be planned and operated by the locals themselves as opposed to government officials. Community-based tourism originates from the assumption that, in theory, every villager owns the cultural resources in the village. As such, they should properly be the main stakeholders in the business enterprise of ethnic tourism. The planning and management of ethnic tourism should carefully consider relevant factors, as well as focus on developing local human resources and the roles of all stakeholders (Office of Tourism Development 2010). Yang and Wall (2009) note that stakeholders or partners are an important foundation of ethnic tourism development and management. Different stakeholders may have different needs. Some people set linguistic and cultural preservation as the priority of CBT, while others aim mainly at gaining extra income. Working together to achieve both goals helps to balance needs leading to successful and sustainable development among all sectors.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the combination of different research concepts, combining methods and ideas in action research, research and development (R&D), and participatory research. The essence of PAR lies in participation. This framework encourages community participation at all stages of the process, from identifying problems, planning and implementing remedies, to assessing the results, and consolidating knowledge to be applied in planning and implementing solutions anew if the problem is not satisfactorily solved. By adopting a PAR approach, the community members are by no means mere subjects of the research; rather, they play a role as active co-researchers (Mikkelsen 1995; Whyte 1991; Dulyakasem 1993). PAR is a continuous cycle of correlative research work -- an ongoing process to the point when the objective is achieved. That is, the problem is solved to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. PAR is a framework that allows for democracy; everyone is equal, working together as a team, sharing information and learning from each other. Significant outcomes of PAR are not only acceptable solutions to problems, but also the integration of local researchers into the process and the creation of new networks. PAR provides mechanism to strengthen and develop human potential. An underlying assumption of the framework is that people always seek to improve their own condition, and that there is a need to resolve one's own problems in the course of achieving a better quality of life and in this way, self-reliance is encouraged. In other words, PAR is a research process that can lead to sustainable development and is, therefore, the most suitable research framework for this current study.

A SWOT analysis is an important tool for identifying and assessing the potential of the community and for providing guidelines towards achieving goals. Ghazinoory, Abdi, and Azadegan (2011) define SWOT analysis as a survey of all relevant internal and external factors, contributing to appropriate strategies suited for the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of an organization. *S* stands for the "strengths" of the organization; internal factors that could help facilitate and lead to success. *W* refers to "weaknesses"; internal factors that may impede progress. *O* is for "opportunities" which are external environments that allow the organization to grow or develop. And lastly, *T* refers to external "threats" or limitations or obstacles in the process. This study uses SWOT to assess the feasibility of developing a sustainable ethnic tourism model in the Black Tai community.

4. Black Tai ethnic tourism development

The objectives of Black Tai CBT are twofold. The first objective is to develop the Phaihuchang community as a sustainable ethnic tourism model to be emulated by other ethnic communities that have the potential. It is anticipated that the Black Tai CBT will help to preserve Black Tai language and culture as well as refocus Black Tai children's attention onto their own identity in the face of strong influences from Thai language and culture in the public arena, especially in schools where the main language of instruction is central Thai.

The second objective is to promote team work in the community where Black Tai people learn to analyze a problem and find its solution by themselves. In so doing, community members are able to create a learning social network within the community and extend this network to other communities as well.

Following the above objectives, a *6Ds* model has been implemented at Phaihuchang Village. This *6Ds* model, as seen in **figure 1**, comprises three core ideas as its principle framework for research, that is: community-based tourism, PAR, and SWOT analysis. Such a framework stresses the importance of participation, operations, and mutual understanding at all stages. These steps enable the community to develop and resolve issues together, which will facilitate sustainability.
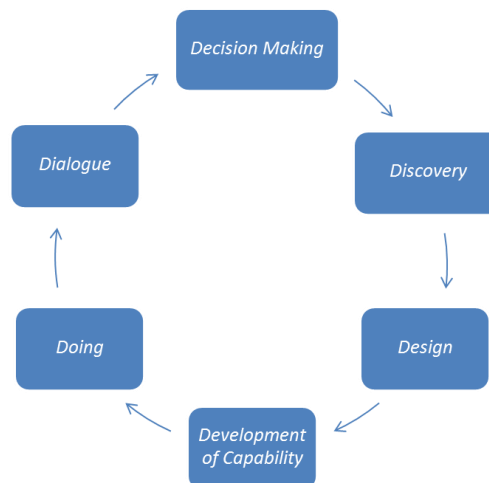

Figure 1. the *6Ds* model

Decision making

The 6Ds model begins with "decision making" focusing on community leaders. The external researchers of this research project recruited community leaders as partners in this research project. These community leaders work with the researchers as colleagues, participating in the conception and design of Black Tai ethnic tourism. Rabinowitz (2013) offers the following advantages of having community members participate in the participatory action research. First, local people in the community are more liable to be willing to talk and give straight answers to community researchers whom they know than to outsiders with who they have little in common. Second, community members are on the scene all the time and may obtain information even when they are not officially engaged in research. Third, the research may receive more support from other community members because it is conducted by people in the same circumstances as their own.

The operation step starts with a PAR technique called "focus group". For this study, a group of community leaders was recruited based on their involvement in community service. The focus group included the chief administrator of the Phaihuchang Subdistrict Administration Organization (PSAO), the deputy chief administrator of PSAO, the PSAO members, the chairman of the PSAO Cultural Center, Phaihuchang Subdistrict headman, Phaihuchang village headman, the director of Phaihuchang Public School, instructors at Phaihuchang Public School, and the chairman of the *Tai Dam* Association (Thailand), as well as learned men or local scholars.

The first meeting with this focus group was held at the field site at which they were invited to participate as partners in this research project. This meeting provided the community leaders with information addressing their rich cultural heritage and the feasibility of developing a model village for tourism development at the research site. The objectives of the research projects were outlined for the community leadership, namely: to preserve ethnic language and culture; to promote the conservation of ethnic cultural heritage; and to generate extra income. After the community leaders had agreed to get involved in the project, they officially became the participatory action research team. As a part of the community, this research team was trusted by other community members and proceeded to inform the wider community of the project's agenda.

The next step employed the orientation technique of PAR to extend collaboration to other community members. A meeting at the research site was arranged with external researchers, community leaders, and interested community members -- as potential researchers -- to discuss the feasibility of CBT in the community. The orientation consisted of an introductory activity to help everyone get to know one another; an explanation of community-based participatory action research; and the objectives of this research project. The basic assumptions of CBT were emphasized, namely: to conserve the language and cultural heritage of the Black Tai people; to share Black Tai traditions and culture with tourists through performances, ceremonies, and community products; and to generate extra income for the benefit of the whole community. The orientation provides community members with an opportunity to ask questions or to discuss anything which is unclear to them. It also helps to build a true understanding of CBT among community members and fosters a sense of partnership

with community members whilst cementing their approval and confidence. Each individual may have different ideas and different needs at the beginning, but they quickly learn to listen, compromise and make decisions together as a team. As team members, people are able to work cooperatively throughout the project.

Discovery

After a number of interested community members had agreed to be additional community researchers, the "discovery" followed. The major concern of this step is to find tourist attractions in the community. A brainstorming and SWOT analysis were used to evaluate tourist spots. Community researchers, as members of the community, know best what to offer tourists. Members worked together to determine the community's potential cultural capital which will serve as tourist attractions.

Through the process of SWOT analysis, each potential tourist attraction was analyzed in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Finally, the commonly-agreed-upon tourist attractions were identified. In searching for the cultural capital of the Phaihuchang community, community researchers realized that there were numerous potential tourist attractions in their community that needed professional management and presentation to attract tourists. They also became more aware of their ethnic identity and developed a better understanding of their own culture. This was most evident in the younger generation who began to better understand the underlying significance behind Black Tai rituals and customs.

Design

After the SWOT analysis had been used to evaluate the potential tourist attractions, the workshop technique of PAR was applied to the "Design" step. Workshops were conducted to bring the community researchers together to make plans for the ethnic tourism management. As community researchers were actively involved in the planning and implementation themselves, they soon felt a sense of ownership in the project and collaborated enthusiastically to make it successful. At workshops, the group discussed the management of the Black Tai ethnic tourism at Phaihuchang village. The major concerns were how to present suitable cultural sites and activities to tourists and how to enable them to experience and learn about the Black Tai culture and way of life. The group analyzed issues such as prospective tourists, tour routes, patterns of tourism (one day trip or home stay trip), timeline for completing each phase of the plan, job assignment (who would be responsible for what), and public relations. In making a decision on these issues, the SWOT analysis was also used to determine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of each issue. As pointed out by Rabinowitz (2013), the workshops helped the community researchers to develop meeting skills and negotiating skills. The group became confident about expressing their opinions and felt comfortable with the meeting process.

Development of capabilities

Before the ethnic tourism plan was implemented for the Phaihuchang community, it was necessary to enhance the capacities of community researchers who

had no experience in tourism management. Three capacity-building activities were provided for them.

First, the observation technique of PAR, called "learning by doing", was used. Field visits to successful tourist attraction sites were arranged for the community researchers to observe and learn from other ethnic communities, namely, the Lao community at Jim Thompson Farm in Nakhonratchasima Province in the northeast region of Thailand, the Tai Yuan community at Tontan Village in Saraburi Province in the central region, and the Black Tai community at Huakhawjin Village in Ratchaburi Province in the western region. This activity enabled community researchers to gain useful information on ethnic tourism management, to exchange ideas with members of other communities, and to create a social network with Black Tai people and other ethnic groups in other areas.

Second, a workshop about the techniques used in PAR was conducted. Experts and professionals of the Thailand Community-Based Tourism Institute were invited to host a workshop on community-based tourism. The community researchers, not only gained a true understanding of community-based tourism, but were also guided in how to design ethnic tourism for their location.

It is important to note at this point that many Black Tai people have already been assimilated into the larger Thai community; the cultural activities and rituals of Black Tai as well as the Black Tai language have been gradually dying out. Most young generation Black Tai do not want to appear different from the Thai majority and feel reluctant to reveal their ethnic identity. The research on Black Tai attitudes toward ethnic tourism in the western region of Thailand (Burusphat 2011 et al) disclosed that most middle-aged and elderly people believed that ethnic tourism would help to refocus Black Tai children's attention onto their own language and culture. Transmission of language and culture from the older generation on down will help maintain their ethnic identity and allow Black Tai language and culture to survive through succeeding generations.

Consequently, the PAR training technique was applied so that the Black Tai young generation would be encouraged to get involved in the project. A two-week training course on how to be a junior tour guide was arranged for twenty-six students of Phaihuchang Public School. These students were primary and secondary students who had volunteered to participate in the training course. The training was fully supported by the head of Phaihuchang Public School. It focused on how to be a tour guide, the village history, Black Tai beliefs and way of life, and worthwhile tourist spots. The students also learned basic English expressions for tour guides. The training was followed by workshops in which students were separated into three groups and worked on an assignment with the external researchers as mentors, after which they presented their solutions or findings to the other groups. The training and workshop, not only provided the students with the knowledge about Black Tai ethnicity necessary for tour guides, but also fostered the students' consciousness of their ethnic identity. The students soon took pride in their unique language and culture; they learned to treasure the customs and folk wisdom of their ancestors and were motivated to conserve them. The junior tour guide training was a PAR activity which enabled Black Tai people of all generations to share in the Black Tai ethnic tourism enterprise. The

involvement of the younger generations suggests a promising future for the conservation of the ethnic language and culture.

Doing

The "Doing" step involves the implement of the agreed plan. The community researchers activated all the plans that had been formulated with individuals doing what they could do first.

A Black Tai market was opened for tourists on Sundays only. Tourists could buy food and Black Tai products or souvenirs from there. A traditional Black Tai model house was constructed and served as an information center. Restrooms for tourists were built. The cultural center and museum were remodeled and staff at the Black Tai learning center and weaving/basketry center prepared places for visitors. By "doing", the community researchers and villagers learned from their mistakes and cooperated in solving problems. This created a sense of unity in the community as they became more aware of their unique ethnic identity and the need to preserve their ethnic cultural traits. They also expressed the hope that CBT will improve the Black Tai economy.

When the village was ready for tourists to visit, the research team needed to promote tourism in the village through press releases. A number of activities were organized such as: inviting governmental organizations in the province to attend the opening ceremony of the village; publishing local news; making a VCD and advertising tourism in the village on-line; and holding a press conference for publicity on local radio, in newspapers, and documentary and travel magazines. The research team also invited a group of visitors, including experts in the field of ethnic tourism, local administrators from other communities, and publicists to visit the village and provided feedback and recommendations for future improvement. After collecting all the feedback and recommendations from tourists, visitors and experts alike, the research team met to evaluate the plans and discuss future improvements.

Dialogue

All steps to ethnic tourism development discussed so far included "dialogue", a PAR strategy that leads to mutual understanding and a satisfactory solution for all. Group discussions were arranged with an assumption that all discussants were treated as equals. They themselves treated others as colleagues, not as superiors or inferiors. External researchers kept professionals, academics, and community leaders from dominating. By adopting "dialogue", the researchers freely exchanged views and, as a group, reached a mutual decision, a process that is key to successful teamwork.

As Yang and Wall (2009) noted, different stakeholders might have different needs. By adopting PAR, differences are mitigated and balanced, and this helps to relieve tension and avoid conflicts that might arise during the group discussion. Everyone learns from each other through collaborative endeavor.

The 6*D*s model comprises various steps which do not occur successively but rather simultaneously and repeatedly. The external researchers encouraged the involvement of community researchers at all steps, and they themselves acted as mentors accompanying the community on its route towards ethnic tourism development. The 6*D*s model was implemented at Phaihuchang Village and enabled this village to reach the first goal of this research, namely, the village as a model of Black Tai

ethnic tourism. It is hoped that other ethnic communities, either in Thailand or outside Thailand such as in Laos and Vietnam, would learn from- and use this model to develop ethnic tourism in their own communities.

5. The effect of community-based tourism on Phaihuchang community

The community-based tourism at Phaihuchang Village has brought about both tangible and intangible changes to this community as discussed below.

5.1 Tangible changes

Through the processes of CBT, PAR and SWOT analysis, the community researchers implemented action solutions and recommendations from all the meetings and discussions. For example, they took part in selecting and planning featured tourist spots, making traffic signs, building a model of a traditional Black Tai house and designing a learning center for tourists, as well as improving facilities in the village to cater to tourist demands. All of this was achieved through co-operation, donations and a volunteer spirit enlivened from within by community members themselves.

After Phaihuchang Village had been prepared as an ethnic tourism site, three tourist features were realized, that is, things to see; things to taste; and things to buy. "Things to see" included a trip to experience the local lifestyle of the Black Tai people, e.g., a visit to the cultural center, Black Tai learning center, weaving house, native basketry group, lotus farm, local musical band, ethnic costume, and archaeology sites in the village. "Things to taste" presented a variety of local Black Tai foods. "Things to buy" included local products such as handicrafts, agricultural products, and souvenirs.

In addition, the community drew up a tourist calendar announcing that the village would be open for tourists every Sunday from November to May each year. May is the beginning of the rainy season when villagers prepare to cultivate their rice fields. The village is open on Sundays only so as to minimize the disruption tourism may have on the local way of life.

5.2 Intangible changes

Four aspects of intangible changes on the Phaihuchang community were found from this research.

First, community researchers and other villagers have become very interested and enthusiastic about the project. They realize the value and importance of language and culture to their identity and are increasingly keen to share their cultural traits with others. When visitors arrive in the village, the villagers are determined to be good hosts. They are very helpful and offer as much information as they can.

Second, the ethnic tourism project has enabled the community researchers to recognize the importance of team work for the maintenance and preservation of Black Tai language and culture. For example, community researchers put forward the idea of setting up a Black Tai market in the village. Even though the Black Tai language is still spoken by most Black Tai people, especially the middle and older generations, merchants at the Black Tai market were encouraged to use the Black Tai language with local buyers and tourists who mostly speak standard Thai, a language within the Tai language group like Black Tai. By encouraging more villagers to actively use the

language daily, it not only strengthens the vitality of the language, but also helps foster pride in their ethnic identity. When tourists visit the village, they have the opportunity to learn the language and the culture at the same time. Local people are encouraged to wear Black Tai costumes at the market, not just speak the Black Tai language. The Black Tai children also played a part in the project. They enjoyed wearing traditional costumes, performing traditional dances, and playing traditional music. By establishing this Black Tai market, the community researchers underwent a cooperative learning process and learned how to solve problems by themselves.

Third, the chance to participate in the CBT workshop and to visit other tourist attractions enabled community researchers to learn how to effectively manage ethnic tourism as well as fully understand the principles of CBT. They were able to develop management skills such as how to share the benefits fairly and how to welcome tourists to their village. They learned how to apply the knowledge they had gained from the CBT workshop and from other successful ethic tourism communities to their own community.

Fourth, another intangible outcome of the project was a network of collaboration. By adopting PAR as a framework, all parties and stakeholders were offered the opportunity to participate in the project. Everyone came to recognize that strong teamwork and effective networking was the key to success. In order to bring the project to fruition, they had to collaborate and help each other along each step of the way, from brainstorming and planning, to solving problems, and assessing the results. This has strengthened ties amongst partners and facilitated the creation of a network of interested parties that includes household members, teachers, monks, community leaders, local governmental officers and stakeholders.

6. SWOT analysis of Phaihuchang community-based tourism

To properly manage sustainable community-based tourism, operating strategies suitable to the context of each community are needed. PAR strategies were used to develop Phaihuchang Village as an ethnic tourism village and the results were analyzed using SWOT analysis as discussed below.

Strengths (S)

This research identified four distinct advantages that make Phaihuchang a potentially ideal ethnic tourism village.

First of these is its location. The village is situated in the northern part of Banglen District, Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand, which is only 85 kilometres from Bangkok. A number of well-known tourist attractions are located in this province, for example, Phra Pathom Chedi, the largest pagoda in Thailand and the official provincial symbol of Nakhon Pathom, and Thai Human Imagery Museum. Phaihuchang village is near these tourist attractions so tourists may well choose to include this village as part of a tour of the region.

Second, Black Tai people in Phaihuchang Village face challenges in the maintenance and preservation of their language and culture. They have met these with campaigns and activities to conserve cultural practices and promote local wisdom and

pride among succeeding generations through greater appreciation of the group's history, culture, dress, language, rituals, tales, ands art and crafts.

Third, the villagers have unique culture which they can share with tourists. Phaihuchang community members have managed to safe-guard key cultural capital, especially that concerning traditions and rituals, e.g., wedding ceremonies, funerals, *khwan* (soul*)*-blessing, ancestor worship, and handicrafts like weaving, embroidery and basketry. The food culture of the Black Tai group is also rich. During important festivals, Black Tai people prepare food for monks, friends and relatives. The sound of their traditional musical instrument, the *kaen* (reed organ), can be heard all around the village. Children also learn and play traditional music. They have even formed a village musical ensemble which can be hired out to perform at festivals and elsewhere. These authentic and unique traditions and rituals will attract tourists.

Finally, the village is strongly united. Black Tai ethnicity unites them as a single group. Pride in their unique language and culture helps bind and secure them to this location as a strong ethnic group.

Weakness (W)

In spite of the mentioned strengths, some disadvantages of ethnic tourism development at Phaihuchang Village were also found.

First, in a rural community, one may find various kinds of social networks such as family network and political network. If these networks are harmonious, they will bring unity to the community and help to facilitate any kind of development. During the period of project development, the community researchers did not build sufficient networks with all groups of people, such as some local administrators. In addition, networks with outside organizations still need to be established such as networks with district chief office and chief executive of provincial administrative.

Second, Phaihuchang is rich in cultural capital. However the management of this cultural capital is still not professional business-wise. Even though the PAR technique was used in implementing ethnic tourism at this location, some community members believed that ethnic tourism management should be conducted by an organizing committee alone, not by everyone. Consequently, some were not so committed to the idea of CBT management by means of this business model.

Third, villagers were busy with their routine activities and had little time to participate in ethnic tourism activities, especially meetings that they thought had nothing to do with their well-being. In addition, Black Tai people conduct numerous rituals and ceremonies which are usually held on weekends, for example, ancestor worship, ordination, and weddings. These ritual activities make it difficult for villagers to spare time for tourists.

Finally, insufficient financial support is another weak aspect of Black Tai CBT at Phaihuchang. At the initial stage of "doing", the ethnic tourism development was financially supported by donations from a group of community leaders and the external researchers' organization. Consequently, other community members might have felt that they were just subordinates or assistants, not the owners of the CBT project. To find a solution to this problem, community researchers drafted a budget proposal and submitted it to the Phaihuchang Subdistrict Administration Organization. However, the

grant process will take at least a year, so, in the meantime, the community researchers should consider serious fundraising, and a professional business plan draft.

Opportunities (O)

Three external factors encouraging Black Tai ethnic tourism at Phaihuchang Village were found.

First, ethnic tourism is a new trend in tourism in Thailand. Tourists are now interested in learning about different cultures so that people of different ethnicities can live in harmony. Second, Phaihuchang Village is situated near Bangkok; it is easier and more economical to access this village compared with other ethnic villages that are in other regions of Thailand. In addition, local products and food are cheap and of good quality. Finally, support from external parties is essential for CBT. This ethnic tourism project was supported by the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University; the Phaihuchang Subdistrict Administration Organization; Tourism Authority of Thailand; and mass media. Support from these organizations included initiating the CBT; capacity building; partial financial aid, public relations; and communication technology.

Threats (T)

External factors that may hinder the ethnic tourism management includes the reputation of the destination and the quality of the whole facility. Most tourists imagine ethnic tourism in a traditional way, that is, the destination is associated with beautiful scenery, nature and perhaps mountains in the northern region of Thailand. Ethnic tourism in the western region of Thailand is where one can find a departure from this traditional image; hence some tourists may think that Phaihuchang Village is not so interesting. There are no such things as floating markets or malls where tourists can shop for local products. The next threat is the standard of facilities. Most tourists expect full facilities at Phaihuchang Village as found at other high-end tourist spots. This seems to contradict the principle of community-based tourism. Ethnic tourism is arranged to serve community members and to allow tourists to observe and learn about the Black Tai villagers' way of life. The expectation that full facilities are available at the community suggests that members have failed to convey this CBT concept properly to tourists.

7. Suggested strategies for future sustainable development of ethnic tourism

Development of ethnic tourism in the Black Tai village of Phaihuchang is the fruit of the strong determination of all researchers involved in this project. Participatory research supported by the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders has had a positive effect. This research project initiated community collaboration and it is expected that the Black Tai ethnic tourism development at Phaihuchang will continue beyond the end of the project when the external researchers have left. Hence, the external researchers have proposed additional strategies, which should be helpful for the improvement and management of ethnic tourism into the future. The suggested strategies are presented using a SWOT analysis as discussed below.

Proactive strategy (SO)

The proactive strategy is derived from the internal strength of the community, i.e., cultural capital, and the external opportunity; i.e., the current trend of tourism. The Black Tai community has a unique cultural heritage which should be effectively shared with tourists in line with the current trend of tourism, i.e., cultural diversity tourism. Social capital is another internal strength of the Black Tai community. Black Tai community members live in a reciprocal society, people are cooperative. Participating in the research project has drawn their interest to manage tourism that highlights Black Tai cultural values and meaning. This social capital serves as incentive for sustainable community-based tourism management.

Preventive strategy (WO)

The preventive strategy comprises community weaknesses, in this case, the shortage of financial support and the lack of an efficient managing committee, which prevented the benefit of opportunities or external environment from encouraging the CBT management.

Financial support can be achieved through fund-raising within the community. The community should set up a mutual fund for which community members can take shares. This not only attracts monetary support for CBT, but also brings about a sense of belonging or ownership in this tourism project. In addition, a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) project could be proposed to the Phaihuchang Subdistrict Administration Organization (PSAO) to be included in the PSAO development plan together with a budget allotted to the CBT project when the plan has been approved.

A managing committee was set up for the CBT. However, the roles of committee members are not clearly specified, consequently, the CBT management was controlled by a limited number of community leaders only. It is suggested that an organization with explicit vision and mission should be established so as to encourage community members to work together equally on CBT.

Defensive strategy (ST)

The defensive strategy is used when the community strength is threatened by the external environment and hence prevents the CBT mission from being fulfilled. Therefore, the Black Tai community needs to use its existing strengths to prevent this threat. That is, the community members must effectively raise awareness of Black Tai's rich cultural heritage in the western and central regions of Thailand, to the wider community. This is a convenient place where one can learn about cultural diversity, since it is located not far from the city, has an easy access and it is more economical to get to than other regions. This important message can be relayed to a wider community through various channels such as interpersonal communication, websites, and social media.

Improvement strategy (WT)

The improvement strategy helps to overcome community weaknesses and prevent threats from effecting CBT management. The main community weakness is its inefficient management of tourist spots and activities and its inability to effectively attract tourists. An improvement to amenities should also be done such as restrooms,

parking lots, recreation/service center, and catering. Such improvements should not aim at five-star standards but rather simplicity with a focus on hygiene, convenience, and comfort.

The strategies mentioned were developed from the Black Tai CBT experience of external researchers, who believe that other ethnic groups will be able to apply them in the context of their community.

8. CONCLUSION

The CBT research project confirms the external researchers' belief that the Black Tai community members at Phaihuchang Village have the potential to manage ethnic tourism by themselves because they have a rich cultural heritage that would impress tourists. However, community members should not aim for monetary benefit only. The true benefit of CBT is to bring Black Tai people together to collaborate on CBT as well as to enable them to take pride in their Black Tai language and culture, which will be preserved as part of their general way of life. Cultural heritage and community collaboration are definitely the driving forces towards successful CBT as seen in other CBT projects such as that of the Tai Yuan ethnic group of Tontan Village, Saraburi Province. This CBT village is highly successful due to its efficient team work in presenting Tai Yuan language and culture to tourists.

Successful management of CBT is challenging and time-consuming. If the Black Tai community goes through the development process alone, they may feel discouraged or reach their objective only after great difficulty. Even though the CBT at Phaihuchang was initiated and fully supported by Mahidol University, it is a short-term collaboration. Therefore, a joint venture with external organizations such as the Sub-district Administration Organization and companies with a strong corporate social responsibility record may facilitate efforts. This is evident in the case of Black Tai CBT at Huakhawjin Village in Ratchaburi Province. This ethnic tourism village was opened in 2011 and has rapidly developed with the full support of various organizations such as the Community Development Department, the Cultural Council, the Sub-district Administration Organization, and the Provincial Administration Organization. If the Black Tai community can create a partnership with such organizations, any development mission will likely be successful as the Black Tai community possesses the essential social capital: pride; unity; and an ardent love for their Black Tai ethnic identity.

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Phra Chao Ong Tue Myths: The Role of the Sacred Narrative within the Communities along the Thai-Lao Border

Channipha Doungwilai[1]

ABSTRACT

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddhist image that has been believed by the peoples along the Thai-Lao border for many years; it is a respected sacred object of their faith. The image has been influential to the thinking and behavior of these people. The image also plays an important role in Thai-Lao Society. This research article is designed to analyze the myths and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue, as well as to reflect on the social thoughts, the cultural significance, and the ethnic relationships prevalent throughout the communities located along the Thai-Lao border. The research shows that the myths and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue can be observed through the thinking of the people and their relationships, which has been built through the channel of Buddhism as well as the common beliefs among the peoples. Phra Chao Ong Tue sets the roles in the negotiations between the authorities and the villagers in regards to: the relation between the people and the existence of the monarchy; the significance of Buddhist gestures; the relationship between the female and the male symbols; and the function of a Buddhist symbol relating to the prosperity and fruitfulness of the economy in the globalization era.

Keywords: Phra Chao Ong Tue, myth, role, sacred narrative

INTRODUCTION

In the past, Buddhism was performed as a symbolic mechanism in relation to the monarchy, the powerful authority, and political stability. Besides the political ability to expand the city territory, Buddhism also played a role in building religious common sense for Buddhists. However, some political changes occurred, the belief in Buddhism and the monarchy had been lowered in both its roles and its importance. Consequently, the philosophy of Buddhism has been reformed to suit the new generation of religious followers. Yet, belief in Buddhism in Thai-Lao society is still observed through a Buddhist image, a symbol representing their faith in Buddhism that is commonly found on the border between Thailand and Laos. This implies that Buddhism has a significant role in the lives of Thai and Lao people. They have followed the faith deep in their hearts.

The significant role of the Buddha image in Thai-Lao society has been adapted from old beliefs of the past to reflect new significances based on the changing social context of the present. The Buddha image is the center point of faith, building religious, meaningful sense for the communities. The mutual travel

between Thai-Lao communities on both sides of the river with the purpose of worshiping the same image reflects the fact that, despite the border, Thai and Lao people still have the same faith in the same image, which helps construct an intimate relationship, surround, an origin of Buddhist traditions, rituals, and practices shared among those communities. These religious beliefs have contributed to a form of myth to give cultural significance and to reflect on the importance of connecting people through faith in Buddha. The myth of Buddha also communicates a hidden philosophy, which is still believed by the younger generation.

"Phra Chao Ong Tue", a sacred religious image for the communities along the Thai-Lao border, is a symbol of belief with related myths signifying the culture and thinking of those people. The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue were constructed to be cultural lessons. They help to establish a cultural awareness and a sense of belonging among the people that share a common and distinctive culture within the border area. In this article, the researcher is presenting the significance of culture and the roles of social-relationship between the myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue within the communities along the Thai-Lao border in order to point out that the Buddha image is the representative of the Lord Buddha and the sacred narratives (myth) that reflects the iconic statue and symbolizes the power of the king. Moreover, the image is an important symbol in the negotiation of power between women and men. The content of this article is based on a study of myths and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue. The study area is the border between Thailand and Laos. The objective was to search for the significance of a hidden social philosophy and the relationship between the people within the study area and Phra Chao Ong Tue.

From the study of Phra Chao Ong Tue myths within the communities along the Thai-Lao border, the author has found significance through the social and cultural divides in three respects:

1. "Kha okaas." or servants of Phra Chao Ong Tue : the relationship between the state, the people, and the negotiation of power;

2. Phra Chao Ong Tue: the significance of the Buddha image's posture and the symbol of gender; and

3. Phra Chao Ong Tue: the role in providing the communities with prosperity and fruitfulness.

1."Kha okaas" of Phra Chao Ong Tue: The relationship between the state, people, and the negotiation of power

Phra Chao Ong Tue, the principle Buddha image of Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue temple in Ban Nammong Village, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province, Thailand is considered sacred. It holds the role of signifying the relationship between the people from both sides of the Mekong River. These people have great faith in the image and have passed on their traditional practices from generation to generation for many years. It reflects the role in the negotiation of power between the state and the traditional practice of serving Phra Chao Ong Tue for the people living nearby the temples of Phra Chao Ong Tue to follow. The myth relates to the practice of serving Phra Chao Ong Tue according to the belief of the ancient kings, which is a clever tactic with hidden purposes to serve the political power and to enhance the king's power. Phra Chao Ong Tue is a symbol reflecting the negotiation of power between

the state and the villagers; the people have been granted this negotiation since ancient times, a privilege under control of the state through the role of the servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue.

The establishment of the traditional practice in serving Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Srichomphu Ong Tue temple originated from the strong faith that King Xaiyasethathirat, the ruler of Vientiane, was a Buddhist. He was the king who founded Buddhism and introduced the religion to the people along the banks of the Mekong River. The religion has been promoted for prosperity ever since King Xaiyasethathirat constructed a vihara for Phra Chao Ong Tue using 500 workers. There were 13 villages around the vihara. After the construction of the image and the vihara, the king divided the areas nearby the vihara and announced them as the territories of the servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue. Those territories had responsibility in providing a tribute to the state. Being servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue, the people had a duty in providing a temple, Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue, a tribute that was recorded by Phra Mahanimit Bhanditsewee (B.E.2547: 20) in the history of Phra Chao Ong Tue. For example, if a person made a living by working with iron, he had to provide iron work to the temple. If a person made a living by farming rice, he had to provide the temple with rice. If a person made a living by producing salt, he had to bring salt as his tribute. The temple would arrange people to be responsible for the tributes, which were sold later.

King Xaiyasethathirat established a traditional practice in having servants to Phra Chao Ong Tue. The servants would safeguard the image. They would receive a special privilege. They received the same privileges as those to Wat Phra That Phanom, and Vientiane for example; they did not need to serve the nation as soldiers during war time. They were exempt from providing tributes to the state. According to Phichate Saiphan (2541-2542: 47), the servants of Wat Phra That Phanom did not need to pay tribute or any taxes. The groups are considered special as they were assigned by the king to serve the religion; and that assignment was not invalid. The younger generations would continue the responsibility forever. Sitthiporn Na Nakhornphanom (2541: 91-92) indicated that the servants of Buddha would be called 'kha okaas' which means the workers whom are specifically instructed to take care of Buddhism under the supervision of both the temple and the state. The workers had responsibility in serving the state during wartime or public construction as assigned by the state government. When they were not on duty with the state, they would have responsibility in serving the temple as instructed by the state. Once they were assigned by the king, servants of Buddhism were not allowed to do any other work. They had to devote their time strictly following his instruction. They were provided with many privileges: the servants to Wat Phra Chao Ong Tue or Wat Sri Chom Phu Ong Tue at Pak Huay Nam Mong, opposite of Muang Vientiane did not pay tribute to the state. In other words, the Buddhist servants of Phra Chao Ong Tue were a special group with political privileges. They were different from ordinary civilians even though they were faithful to the same Phra Chao Ong Tue.

Volunteering as 'kha okaas' to serve Buddha has been a tradition since ancient times as proved by the traditional practice of volunteering to serve and safeguard Buddhism. According to the records of Lan Chang history regarding the "kha okaas" of Phra That Phanom during B.E.2073-2102, Phraya Bhodhisalaraj, ruler of Luang Phrabang, came to restore Phra Mahathat (pagoda) and offered to increase the number of "kha okaas" to 3,000. In B.E. 2157, Phra Chao Na Khorn Luang Phichit Rajathani Sri Kotrabun, a ruler of Muang Sri Kotrabun came to restore

Phra That, and investigated the former Buddhist servants donated by the former king. It was revealed that those servants were from Ban Sa Due, Na Wang, Tan Terng, Fak Fua, Dong Nok, and Dong Nai. These villages were located on the left bank of Say Bang Fai River. The ruler sacrificed his men to be attendants to Phra That Phanom (Phra Thep Rattana Molee, 2512: 83-87). In addition, Tossaphon Ard-Harn (2542: 86) stated that according to the Royal practice of the Lan Chang Kingdom, a kingdom's ruler must do restoration of Phra That Phanom to enhance his virtues, the kingdom's fruitfulness, and unity. In the same way, offering up one's self as "kha okaas" to Phra Chao Ong Tue is considered an attendant of Buddhism. So, the offer of "kha okaas" to Phra Chao Ong Tue has been a traditional practice of the king since ancient times until the late King Rama V of the Rattanakosin Era, terminated the practice.

However, the belief in the practice still exists in the memory of the Thai-Lao younger generation. They share the sense of responsibility in taking care of Phra Chao Ong Tue, which leads to the continuation of the traditional practice of having "kha okaas" to Phra Chao Ong Tue among them. According to the Ring Punna (B.E. 2533: interview), such servants still exist and continue their duties to Buddha as witnessed by their descendants regularly worshipping Phra Chao Ong Tue during the worship festival to the image starting on the 11th day of the waxing moon of the fourth   lunar month to the first day of the waning moon of the same lunar month. The Thai and Lao villagers as well as all the servants (kha okaas) will bring offerings to worship the image. It is believed that if they do not follow this practice, they will be punished by the guardian spirits or the guardian angels. The spirit shared among the descendants of "kha okaas" reflects the role of Phra Chao Ong Tue in building an ethnic relationship. The area under the supervision of "kha okaas" was formerly the place where people of Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand were taken back and forth across the border. Therefore, many different ethnic groups were found: a group of Thai/Lao people, and a group of Tai Phuan and Vietnamese (Khattiya Chaimanee, http://nongkhaiculture.igetweb.com, 13 December B.E. 2553). The traditional worship to Phra Chao Ong Tue was then important in building the relationship between the descendants of "kha okaas", and among the groups of people who had faith in Phra Chao Ong Tue. The relationship encouraged those people to continue this tradition. Anthony D. Smith (referred in Suthep Sunthornpesat, 2548: 52) said that memory, experience, religion, custom, and tradition are major elements to form a sense of belonging among a group of people. Although the descendants of "kha okaas" or the people who have strong faith in Phra Chao Ong Tue, are not members of the same ethnic group, they treat Phra Chao Ong Tue with the same practice, which puts them into the same group with a sense of belonging.

The 'kha okaas' had the privilege of exemption from payment of tribute to the state and assignments by the state, but had the responsibility in safe guarding Phra Cho Ong Tue, acting on behalf of the Buddhist king in providing all offerings for worship to Buddha. This practice indicates the status and the power of such groups, which had privilege over other groups, even the king or the state. The volunteering as kha okaas, which has been passed on from generation to generation reflects the negotiation of power between the people and the king or the state. During wartime, they are granted an exemption from military service, but continued to provide service to Buddhism: a temple and safeguard the Buddha image in the temple. Based on this reason, these people are found to stay permanently in their home communities   while   most   other   people   did   not.   Moreover,   the   King

Xaiyasethathirat's provision of kha okaas to Buddhism was considered a great merit enhancer for his own power. His political administration indicated the combination of the monarchy and Buddhism to join the state sector with the people's sector. The provision of kha okaas is also considered a king's duty which originated from the purpose to continually stabilize Buddhism throughout the authority's channel. This was a strategy that King Xaiyasethathirat used to encourage mutual benefit between the religion and the state. It also supports the existence of a monarchy through the sacred symbol of Buddhism. It could be concluded that the existence of the sacred symbol needs to attach itself to the significant power existing in the community. Max Weber (1963: 80-118) said that a religion had relationship and influence to the economy and the political administration of the states. Religion has created legitimacy to the state by issuing social regulations while making the ordinary people feel comfortable by providing them opportunities to acquire merit for the next life. Therefore, Buddhism was considered a tool of the state to negotiate for its power. In turn, the power of monarch or state was also governed by the power of Buddhism. In conclusion, volunteering as kha okaas to Phra Chao Ong Tue was used as a tool by ordinary people to negotiate with the state in forming public privilege with legitimacy in society. However, the provisions of kha okaas to Phra Chao Ong Tue was a royal practice to enhance the monarchy and promote the unity of the kingdom and the formation of royal legitimacy, which signified prosperity and the state of being in power by the monarch. This practice has reflected the relations between Buddhism and the social and political philosophy.

2. Phra Chao Ong Tue: The significance of the postures of the Buddha image and symbol of gender

The myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue are sacred narratives that reflect the relations between the belief and ritual of the people along the Thai-Lao border. The myth explains the background of the community history, as well as the relations between people and supernatural power. They are creative stories that were invented in response to the basic needs of people both physically and mentally. Their meaning relates to the cultural and social context that is functional and influential to the peoples' way of life within society. Therefore, Phra Chao Ong Tue became a sacred symbol in Buddhism that reflected the people's thinking. Clifford Geertz (referred in Akin Rapipat, 2551: 83-84) stated that religious symbols are a kind of symbolic system, which forms moods and motivations in human beings. It is influential and long lasting by inventing concepts, and general rules of life. It makes the invented concepts come true. Phra Chao Ong Tue is a symbol created by peoplein order to respond to the needs for communication, which is still not interpretable. The postures of Phra Chao Ong Tue are symbols with complicated meanings that signifies the thoughts of the people in the society. The power and the relationship of gender are also signified through those postures.

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture with graceful characteristics of a Buddha image. It is a large image made of bronze. There are several postures of the image such as sitting cross-legged, smiling, eyes half-open, broad forehead, erect and upright body, and sitting in peace, which makes people feel happy and faithful to the image. These postures signify the power of Buddha in ancient time. Sakchai Saisingh (2549 : 49) stated that the Buddha image is built as a

representative of Lord Buddha, and to tell history. Buddha is constructed for the purpose of telling history from time to time. The Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture is also known as the Buddha image with the gesture of subduing Mara. Khaisri Sri Aroon (2546: 20-21) explained the posture as follows: sitting cross-legged, left hand with palm upward on the lap, right hand with palm down at the knee, the index directing to the ground, the King of Mara and his men are a personification of the lust which is the difficulty to obstruct the Lord Buddha's enlightenment. The index finger directing to the ground means that the Buddha is calling the goddess of earth to witness that during his past lives, he had enough accumulated merit to do enlightenment to become a Lord Buddha in this life. The goddess then twisted her hair to drip holy water out to wipe away Mara in a flood. According to the Buddha's history, the construction of the Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture is for the purpose of telling the story of when the Lord Buddha conquered Mara. The meaning of the Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture signifies some hidden meaning in constructing the Buddha image Phra Chao Ong Tue, which is that King Xaiyasethathirat built Phra Chao Ong Tue in the gesture of subduing Mara as a symbol of power and authority of his own during wartime. He had high perseverance and sacrifice in succeeding his mission of constructing the biggest golden Buddha image at that time. The image was the biggest made with the traditional style of that period but most of all it was seen as a symbol of victory, which was the king's strategy in discouraging his enemies, bringing him victory. It has been said, regarding the miracle of this Buddha image in the myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, that in Vientiane, when the king of Burma came to attack Vientiane, Phra Chao Ong Tue had created a miracle, discouraging the Burmese troops who retreated. The same is said for the myth of Phra Chao Lan Tue, Chiangsaen District, Chiangrai Province; the Buddha image had created a miracle by stopping the army led by King Anouvong every time he attacked Chiangsaen.   The purpose in constructing Phra Chao Ong Tue was based on the strong desire of King Xaiyasethathirat to build a huge Buddha image in Mara Vichaya posture as a symbol of victory over the enemies of the country, and as the king's good luck charm: the Buddha image of King Xaiyasethathirat.

The gestures of Phra Chao Ong Tue also indicated the relationships between male and female, as noticeable in Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue, Ban Nammong, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province. According to local tradition, King Xaiyasethathirat had built the image in memory of his beloved Queen. The characteristics of the image were made to be similar to the queen's, which is why the characteristics were womanlike (Khammee Nantha, B.E.2553: interview). This corresponds to the information from Weeraphan Rajaphon (B.E. 2553: interview), a resident of Sawannakhate District, with reference to an abbot of Wat Phra That Ing Hang, that while King Xaiyasethathirat and his wife were having sexual intercourse, they could not withdraw their organs from each other. The queen decided to sacrifice herself to save the king for the kingdom. The king was in so much grief he decided to build a Buddha image with gentle and tender characteristics especially the hips, which was shaped to be like a woman's (Weeraphan Rajaphon, B.E.2553: interview). The Buddha image at Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue and at Wat Phra Chao Ong Tue in Vientiane was understood by the locals as kind of a sister-brother relationship. The Buddha image in Vientiane was of King Xaiyasethathirat, called "Ong Pi" which means older brother, and at Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue was of his queen, called "Ong Nong" which means younger sister.

According to the myth, the female gracefulness of Phra Chao Ong Tue signified power, sexual relationship, and the important role of women supporting the continuation of political administration and Buddhism. Even the thought of women's rights in Thai and Lao societies had been limited since ancient times, in practice, the right had not been reduced; women could not express their creative intelligence at all. On the other hand,women had an important role in encouraging the success of the kingdom's administration and the prosperity of Buddhism as proved by the construction of Phra Chao Ong Tue in Vientiane telling that, before casting the image of Phra Chao Ong Tue, the king had assigned his queen to take all responsibilities of the kingdom on his behalf during his meditation at Wat In paeng. When the auspicious time for casting the image came, all the traditional ritual activities were performed, and the enemies had attacked the kingdom. The king, therefore, could not fulfill his desire of building the Buddha image. His queen warned him that, "Whatever will be will be, do not hesitate to fulfill your desire to build the huge Buddha image for being a Lord Buddha in your next life. If the desire could not be fulfilled and the kingdom is to be overcome by Burma, may the king's hands be melt [sic] into the cast. If it could, may the cast cool down,be light in weight, and be acted like putting a on [sic] hat" (Phra Kaew Wongsai Duangpajan, B.E.2553: interview). Due to the queen's words, the construction of the image was successfully completed.

In conclusion, the role of women has had some contribution to the higher power of the king both politically and religiously. In ancient Thai society the structure regarding the thought of gender was emphasized on the male because of the influence from Buddhism, and women had to accept that they were to be treated in a lower fashion than men. The role of men in Buddhism helped to support the men's status to become higher and more privileged in society (Waranee Phokhaphanichawong, 2548: 89). Women were not allowed to get the same opportunity in Buddhism as men did. It was not possible for women to be appointed the highest religious rank as men did. However, women had rights and responsibility in supporting the success of religious rituals as well as other religious activities. The gracefulness of Phra Chao Ong Tue was purposely constructed to be like the queen of King Xaiyasethathirat, signifying the hidden meaning that the religion could exist with prosperity because of support from women. In the same way, the king could not reach his highest power without support from women.

Figure 1. Phra Chao Ong Tue at Srichomphu Ong Tue Temple, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province

Figure 2. Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue Mahavihara Temple, Vientiane.

3. Phra Chao Ong Tue: The role of providing the communities with prosperity and fruitfulness

According to Buddhist belief, Buddha's image represents the Lord Buddha. The image is important as a protector and it maintains power to safeguard people. It can create miracles of peace, fruitfulness, and medical treatment for people who have faith in 'Phra Chao Ong Tue' It is believed to be a sacred object and a good luck charm for the villages. If the believers follow the right practices step by step, the outcome will be as wished. The faith the people along the Thai-Lao border have towards Phra Chao Ong Tue comes from the origin of the myth and the stories told within the communities, passed on from generation to generation. These myths are related to history and miracle, which has been in the memory of the ancestors; the stories are repeated, they are not just ordinary narratives but powerful and valuable lessons to the people in modern-day society. Siraporn Na Thalang (2552: 366) stated that myth helps to empower communities and give information regarding the traditions of groups of people that existed in ancient times. It has added higher value to the person who has supernatural powers stated in the myth. For example, the miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Sre Chomphu Ong Tue, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province. It is said that a hill tribe, "Haw," came across the Mekong River to Wat Nammong, which was located on the opposite side of the river, in order to destroy Phra Chao Ong Tue; destruction of the image meant destroying the people's good spirit. The enemy used an axe to cut the knee of Phra Chao Ong Tue, there was a scream of pain from the mouth of the image, the wound was bleeding, and the image's eyes were watery. The miracle discouraged the enemy and they retreated. However, they were all later found dead.

The Phra Chao Lan Tue, the centre of good spirit for Buddhists along the two banks of the Mekong River, the golden triangle area, Chiangsaen District, Chiangrai Province, is also known to have seen miracles. During the reign of King Anouvong , Laos wished to colonize Chiangsaen; they tried to defeat the town but the attack was unsuccessful. During that time, it is said that all temples located along the banks of the Mekong River were sunk into the water, including Phra Chao Lan Tue. The failure of King Anouvong in conquering Chiangsaen was believed to be from the miracle of Phra Chao Lan Tue. The image helped protect the town from its enemies. The faith towards the image was so strong that the people agreed to organize a ritual to retrieve the image, which had been sunk in the Mekong River. However, during the ritual, there was a strong wind and thunder storm. The ritual was attempted two times, but failed. It was said that a huge black snake with shiny scales, long body, and green-red eyes was often found swimming in the water and crawling around Koh Don Haeng, the place used for the ritual. This story has been repeated many times; the sacredness of Phra Chao Ong Tue to the people residing nearby still exists until now. Chiangsaen people had agreed to build a Buddha image called 'Phra Chao Lan Tue' as a representative of the one sunk in the river. A ritual was set up to invite the spirit of Phra Chao Lan Tue in the river to reside in the new image. Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Ong Tue Maha Vihara, Vientiane, was also involved in a miracle when the Burmese came to attack Vientiane. King Xaiyasethathirat made a wish to Phra Chao Ong Tue to make the enemy sleep unconsciously during his visit to the Burmese army. His wish came true. The Burmese were discouraged by the power of the image; they decided to leave the town.

The miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue according to the beliefs of the people along the Thai-Lao border is a symbol representing the miracle of the Lord Buddha in protecting Buddhists from danger and bringing prosperity to them. This reflects the significance and the repetition of the sacredness of the image. Therefore, the myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue has some meaning related to modern day cultural and social contexts. The myth has played a role and influenced the way of life of people in these communities for a long time. The way the people have followed their beliefs became their tradition and ritual of Phra Chao Ong Tue whilst forming symbolic meaning for communicating among people within the community. Taking part in the ritual is a way for people to consolidate their thoughts. Geertz (1983: 121) stated that from a social view-point, "religion helps organiz[e] social disciplines in the same way that the environment, the political power, the wealth, the legal obligation, the interpersonal relationship, and the vision of beauty have done with the social regulations." In conclusion, the tradition and the ritual related to Phra Chao Ong Tue are not only meaningful to the communities in terms of their way of their life, but it also, reflects the role of social relationships connecting the people".

The traditions and rituals related to Phra Chao Ong Tue include, for example, the practice of 'wian tian,' or walking with light candles around the vihara of Phra Chao Ong Tue during the worship festival, the rocket festival to worship Phra Chao Ong Tue, and the tradition of sprinkling water onto Phra Chao Ong Tue. These traditional practices signify the hidden meaning of belief through the ritual and the traditions related to the prosperity and fruitfulness of the communities. The most significant tradition is the Phra Chao Ong Tue worship festival. The belief is very meaningful to the community especially those along the Thai-Lao border whose lives depend on farming. The rituals to worship Phra Chao Ong Tue represents the meaning of farming within the communities since ancient times. In the current climate of social change, the self-supporting farming has gradually changed their farming to support the economic system under supervision of the government sector that plays an important role in directing the development of local agriculture. Therefore, farming within the community has been reformed to serve modern economic trends. Consequently, the community has changed their way of life to suit the circumstances, but still pay respect to Phra Chao Ong Tue with the hope of more prosperity. The traditional practice related to the image is still to have strong faith. The role of the image as a symbol of sacredness to give fruitfulness to the community is still strongly believed and meaningful to the communities regardless of changes.

The fruitfulness of the farming community strongly relies on the amount of rain. For example, the tradition of sprinkling water onto Phra Chao Ong Tue or the rocket tradition to worship Phra Chao Ong Tue indicated that water is a significant symbol of the ritual and to the worship of Phra Chao Ong Tue. This method of thinking relates to the wish for fruitfulness, which is very important to the agricultural community that relies on rainwater for farming. This is why the two traditions are meaningful to the people in an agricultural society. Pathom Hongsuwan (B.E. 2552: 217) stated that regarding the ritual of rocket for rain in the myth of the Lanna Buddha that the image of the Lanna people has some relation to the belief of fruitfulness, similar to a god of rain. The rocket ritual of ancient Lanna is similar to the present-day ritual found in the northeastern region. They both have the same purpose, which is to worship "Phaya Thane", a god of rain residing in heaven who is powerful in giving or not giving rain to the earth. The rocket ritual is

designed to signal to the god that the farmers still need rain, and also to worship the god. In conclusion, the belief of the tradition of sprinkling water onto Phra Chao Ong Tue and the rocket ritual are to help Phra Chao Ong Tue be a medium between people and Phaya Thane, the god of rain, who can bring fruitfulness and prosperity to the community. The two traditions are not only ceremonies for the annual festivals for merit making but they are also valuable and meaningful to both the people of Thai and Lao where Phra Chao Ong Tue is the center of the faith.

The Phra Chao Ong Tue worship festival plays a significant role in reflecting the close relationship between Thai and Lao communities. A ceremony of Phra Chao Ong Tue at each temple is organized annually after the harvest season; each event is attended by Thai, Lao, and foreigners. The purpose is to worship and wish for prosperity and good luck. Lao people that work in other countries will return home to join the ceremony. The worship festival is a good time to reunite with members who work away from home. According to Phra Kru Buddhawarathikhun (B.E. 2553: interview), the festival of worship to Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Phra To temple, Na Tan District, Ubonrachathani Province is another event that Lao people working in Thailand always come to attend. Therefore, the worship of Phra Chao Ong Tue is more meaningful than just being a religious ritual. It is a festival of reunion, of a building a stronger relationship with both the family and a group of people who share the same faith. It is a symbol that brings people together through the channel of the same belief and is another way to create unity between those of different ethnic back grounds.

CONCLUSION

The myth of Phra Chao Ong Tue is a sacred narrative within the communities along the Thai-Lao border. They contain cultural meaning and play a significant role in establishing social relationships. The delivery of the sacred narratives related to Phra Chao Ong Tue reflects some significance hidden in the ideological concept of the ancestors. Phra Chao Ong Tue is a symbol of power for negotiation, which has been passed on through this belief. The negotiation of the meaning through traditional practices, the negotiation of meaning through the power of sexuality, and how people respect Phra Chao Ong Tue in helping to form a sense of ethnic unity along with the belief in miracles. This encourages people to have tighter relationships and harmonize, connecting themselves via the same belief that they have had since ancient times. The role of Phra Chao Ong Tue in relation to the monarchy has been to express the significance of the great power which has gradually varied in response to the mood and fashion of society as time changes. Phra Chao Ong Tue even today still has its role in ritual. It represents the Lord Buddha who has supernatural power to give prosperity and fruitfulness.

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    Phra Tow temple, Natal district, Ubonrachathani, 27 November B.E. 2553.

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    Hang temple, Sawannakhate district, 6 December B.E. 2553.

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APPENDIX

The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue according to the perceptions of the people along theThai-Lao borderland

The survey of the myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue in the communities along the Thai-Lao border was conducted with the scope that the study areas must be the places along the Thai-Lao border where the myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue were told. The study showed that there were both literary and oral sources of the myths. Nine versions of those were selected for this study. The findings are as follows:

1. The myth of Phra Chao Lan Tue in the golden triangle area, Chiangsaen District, Chiangrai Province

Phra Chao Lan Tue is a big brass Buddha image that sunk in the Mekong River.During the reign of King Anuwong, a king of Laos, the king had attacked the Chiangsaen Kingdom. Phor Phra Ya Sombun and his family had moved from Laos to Thailand. Because of his great faith in Phra Chao Lan Tue, in B.E.2488, he decided to bring the image from the river. Grandpa Kornkaew Sumchaiya went fishing in the Mekong River in the north of Koh Don Heang Island. When he threw his net into the river, he happened to pull out a big head of a Buddha image. When Phor Phra Ya Sombun had learned about it, he and his men of around 100 people went by boat to the island. They had made a sacrificial ritual in order to bring the image from the Mekong River. As soon as the ritual started, the area was affected by a huge storm. They then had to get back to the river bank. Seven days after the event, the men had arranged a sacrificial ritual again, the same situation had occurred. The task to bring the image from the river then failed. After the death of Phor Phra ya Sombun, his nine grandsons had constructed a Buddha image covered with plaster in the same size as that under the river. The image was named 'Phra Chao Lan Tue'. To follow Phor Phra ya Sombun's great faith in Phra Chao Lan Tue, the people had organized a ritual to invite the heart or the spirit of Phra Chao Lan Tue under the Mekong River to reside in the new-constructed Phra Chao Lan Tue (Mitaporn, www.bp.or.th on-line, 13 Dec. 2010)

2. The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue at Srichomphu Ong Tue Temple, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province (Version 1)

Phra Chao Ong Tue was built in the reign of King Chaiyachatethathiraj during B.E. 2105 with donations from the local people who had faith in Phra Chao Ong Tue. The donated brass and copper was weighed one Tue in total. The monks together with the local people had casted every parts of the image separately at the same time. On the last day, which was the day for forming the head part of the image, the first casting in the morning was not successful. The casting then had to be re-made again. While waiting for the material to be completely melted, it was lunch time for the monks. So, they left the work to have lunch at their places and planned to finish the casting after lunch. When they came back, they found that the head part had been casted more beautifully than what they thought it would be. People then asked for the answer of this questionable incident and had learned that there was a man dressed in white who came and completed the casting. As the cast was very hot, the man then ran to the north of Ban Nammong. A witness informed them that he was standing hesitantly by a pond before vanishing away. The witness understood that the man was an angel who came to get the cast done. The casted Buddha image was moved to a temple where King Xaiyasethathirat happened to see it and had faith in the image. He then built up a vihara, for the image. It was

constructed by 500 people. Its satellites consisted of 13 villages. The areas surrounding the image had been divided and marked off as the space of Phra Chao Ong Tue's followers: in the east, the area ended at Ban Makongchiangkhwa(opposite Phon Phisai District, Thailand); in the west, the area ended at Ban Wark Muangsome (Namsome district presently); in the south, the area ended at Ban Bor Eide Bor Ard (Pen district presently); in the north, no evidence was found but expected that the area would end at Ban Phran Phrao Srichiangmai District, Nongkhai province, Thailand, and the present Muang Jinaimo in Laos (Phra Maha Nimit Bhandittasewee (B.E.2547: 19-27)

3. The myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue at Srichomphu Ong Tue Temple, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province (Version 2)

Once King Xaiyasethathirat went to the underwater world and had a relationship with Queen Naga. Before he returned to the human world, his Naga wife had asked him not to have sexual relations with his human wife for seven days otherwise something bad would happen to him. When the king got back, he did not follow the Naga's request. While the king and the queen were making love, their sexual organs were attached to each other. The queen then sacrificed her life by cutting her own organ. The king was in deep sorrow. When he came to Ban Nammong, Thabor District, Nongkhai Province, he built up a Buddha image in memory of his wife. The Buddha image was named Phar Chao Ong Tue. The image's hip was shaped to be like the queen's. That was the reason why the image's hip is in the shape of feminine characteristic. (Weraphan Rajaphon, 2010: interview)

4. The myths of Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue at Wat Phra To Temple, Na Tan District, Ubonrachathaini Province (Version 1)

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddha image made of sandal wood floating along the Mekong River. It was believed that the image was moved together with Phra Bang from Cambodia during the reign of King Fa Ng-oom. Phra Chao Ong Tue was floating along the river until reaching Wat Pak Saeng temple, the image was just floating around the area; not going anywhere else. The villagers then tried to carry the image from the river but not successfully; so, they used holy thread to tie around the image's hands and tried to take the image from the river again. It was successful. The villagers took burnt earth to plaster over the image to make it earth-look before placing the image as the principle Buddha image of Wat Pak Saeng temple (Phra Khru Buddhawarathikhum, 2010: interview)

5. The myths of Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue at Wat Phra To Temple, Na Tan District, Ubonrachathaini Province (Version 2)

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a Buddha image sitting in a Mara Vichaya Pospure. It was made of bricks and lime with the lap width at 2.90 meters and a height of 4.36 meters. Thai and Lao people have paid respect to the image since ancient times. According to the narratives told from generation to generation, there was a king of Cambodia named Phra Ya Khaew Jed Than who was travelling along the Mekong River during the rainy season until dusk at Ban Pak Saeng. He stayed there overnight. In the morning, he entered the village and met Chao Kuan of the village. He asked about the history of the village from Chao Kuan who said that the village was located by a vast beach. During summer, the water was lower and the beach appeared in the middle of water. It was amazing that when the beach appeared, the village people would live in peace and happiness. Having learned that, the king was so happy and received great faith in his mind. He hoped that one day he would return to the village to develop it into a city. In B.E.1154, he had fulfilled his

desire by coming back to the town with a large number of his men. When they arrived, he assigned Chao Saeng to supervise the construction. The city and a big Buddha image were constructed at the same time, and finished in B.E.1180. The image was named Phra Indra Sai Chome or Phra Chao Ong Tue (Guide Ubon, http://guideubon.com, 13 Dec.2010)

6. The Myths of Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue Matetraiyasatdho, Wat Tai Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue Temple Muang District, Ubonrachatani Province

Phra Chao Yai Ong Tue is a Buddha image made of pure gold sitting in a Mara Vichaya posture,with a lap width of 51 inches, and 85 inches in height (measured from its base). It was constructed in the reign of King Xaiyasethathirat, the ruler of Vientiane. Formerly, the image had been constructed outdoors, left in the sun and in the rain for a very long period of time. Because of this, the image's surface had been broken. During ancient times, there were many attacks from enemies for the image, as it was made of pure gold. Chao Muang Ubonrachathani and a high-ranked monk during that time had covered the image skin with 'Pom' which is grinded bark mixed with Yang boung or Persea kurzii, gold, silver, alloy of gold and copper, bronze, and the liquid from a kind of bark mixed together until it was sticky enough to use as plaster to cover the gold surface, to be hidden and safe from robbery. The image was left in an abandon temple for 200 years. Until the reign of King Rama III in B.E. 2373, the seven year, a year of the tiger, the king assigned Somdej Phra Phrom Woraracha Wongsa Bhumin a king of Muang Ubonrachathani and Somdej Phra Akaworarachakru Pussitathamma Wongsa Chao as the chairpersons in charge of casting the gold to cover the Buddha image. The image still exists today. The total age of the image is about 177 years (Phra Rachathammakosol, 2008: 14-15)

7. The Myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue Mahavihara Temple, Vientiane

In B.E. 2019, King Xaiyasethathirat had a strong intention to construct the biggest Buddha image of the era. Upon an auspicious time, the king assigned all his jobs to the queen, and then dressed in white and left the city to follow the course of the Buddhist monk's way in a temple called Wat Inpaeng temple. During that time, Burmese army had reached the city entrance. They wrote a letter to King Xaiyasethathirat. The letter said that if the king disagreed to be colonized by the Burmese, he was invited to fight. The king then hurried back to his palace. The queen noticed his sadness, so, she asked him for the reason. He told her all. The queen advised him to calm down and be reasonable. The king had a prayer and went to the place where the Buddha image had been constructed, and received the answer that he would not be a colony of Burma, and would be ready for the fight after completion of the Buddha image construction. He proposed that Burma join the great merit practice before fighting. He went to the construction site and placed the gold into the cast. Burma agreed to the proposal. After the completion of the image, the king had a prayer and wished for a miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue to make the Burmese unconscious. He then came to the Burmese army camps with his best men. When he arrived at the camps, he found that the troops were sleeping unconsciously. He was sure that his wish came true. He used his sword to behead the king of Burma. His men had reminded him of the queen's words. The king then stopped and used the lime to reconnect the beheaded heads to the bodies of the Burma king and the army leaders. When they woke up and noticed their re-connection severed necks, they realized that it must have been a miracle of Phra Chao Ong Tue as wished by the King Xaiyasethathirat. The Burmese army then decided to stop the war but offered to make a vow of friendship instead. Before going back, the king of Burma requested to study how to re-connect the

neck or 'Karn Khor'. King Xaiyasethathirat could not accommodate his request since 'Karn Khor or Karn Poon' is not local wisdom but it's a miracle made by Phra Chao Ong Tue and his queen's words for not committing a sin. The king of Burma felt very grateful to the queen and wished to reciprocate her kindness by making a realistic sculpture of the queen as a memorial. King Xaiyasethathirat had requested the artist make a realistic sculpture of him as another memorial and placed the two together at Wat Inpaeng Temple. The memorials are treated as a symbol of relationship (Phra Kaew Wongxai Duangpachan,B.E. 2553)

8. The Myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat That Muang Kao Temple, Kham Muan District

Phra Chao Ong Tue is a sacred Buddha image constructed at the same time with Phra That Sri Khotrabun and Phra That Phanom, which has been part of the faith among the Thai people for a long time. Phra Chao Ong Tue in Wat That Muang Kao Temple had a brotherhood relationship with the one in Thailand. The villagers in Muang Kao believe in the sacredness of Phra Chao Ong Tue. It was said that once there was a thief in a village. The villagers made a wish with the image that the person who was the thief would have sticky rice stuck on his mouth when eating. The wish came true. The thief got caught as evidenced by the sticky rice on his mouth. (Mon Phet-lawong, B.E.2553: interview)

9. The Myths of Phra Chao Ong Tue, Wat Phra That Ing Hang Temple, Sawannakhate District

Phra Chao Ong Tue at Wat Phra That Ing Hang Temple was constructed in imitation of the one at Wat Ong Tue Maha Vihara, Vientiane.Phra Archarn Lamphan Saibunkong, an abbot of Wat Phra That Ing Hang, was the leader in constructing the image with assistance from the villagers. This Buddha image was shaped with masculine characteristics, similar to the one in Vientiane, its prototype which represents King Xaiyasethathirat. The Ong Tue Buddha image at Thabor District, Nongkhai Province has feminine characteristics because King Xaiyasethathirat made it in memorial of his queen. So, the image is a symbol of his love for his wife (Siew Parnnawong, B.E. 2533: interview)

BOOK REVIEWS

Pholsena, Vatthana, and Oliver Tappe, eds. *Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post-Conflict Landscapes in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.* Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

Reviewed by David Biggs, University of California at Riverside

Despite over six decades of scholarship on three Indochina Wars (1945-1986) and associated conflicts, relatively little has been published about the remote highland areas where much of the fighting occurred. Even fewer publications have concentrated on post-conflict social and environmental legacies of war on the diverse communities and landscapes in the region. Political anthropologist James Scott, in his recent work *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, deliberately ends his study of many different upland tribal communities in 1945 for the following reason: "Since 1945, and in some cases before then, the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies—railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology — so changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states, so diminished the friction of terrain, that my analysis largely ceases to be useful."

Interactions with a Violent Past effectively takes up this task, delivering nine unique chapters that each approach the legacies of violence and distance-demolishing technologies in different ways. The editors of the volume identify three approaches taken up in different ways by the contributors: landscape as a frame of analysis, Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, and theories on processes of ruination and transformation. They use the term landscape as a signifier of material and semiotic meanings intertwined at particular sites. Other essays examine the different ways that historic sites, especially sites of war-related trauma, often trigger conflicting narrative-making on the parts of states and individuals. Still other essays in the volume critically address processes of destruction or ruination, examining how states, corporations, and individuals may use them to advance new creative agendas. The essays that follow from these approaches show in deep particulars how past conflicts have become embedded in landscapes and social processes of remembering (and forgetting).

The first three chapters of the volume consider rituals of commemorating war-dead and the many different tensions that have emerged between individuals and states over sites of commemoration and the nature of commemorative ceremonies. Sina Emde explores the tension between state and individual commemoration in her study of two of the most notorious sites associated with the Cambodian Genocide, the infamous high school-turned-prison, Tuol Sleng, and the "killing field" just outside Phnom Penh, Cheoung Ek. Emde explores the work of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to identify names and dates of those killed at these sites. Throughout this chapter, Emde contrasts individual acts of memory-making such as ancestor worship rites as oppositional to state-led acts of mass commemoration. The result, she argues, is a polyphonic memoryscape; however just how local acts are opposed to the state is not clear. In

Chapter 2, Oliver Tappe brings Pierre Nora's notion of "lieux de mémoire" to bear on another iconic memorial site from the wars, the cave-city of Viengxay located in an upland border province of northern Laos not far from Hà Nội. This network of caves served as an administrative redoubt for the leaders of the Lao communist movement from 1964 to 1973. After the war, Viengxay was transformed from a provisional capital into a kind of prison camp where people from the losing side went for "re-education". In the 1990s, the Lao government closed the camps and then set to developing the site as a tourist center. Tappe considers this newly fashioned, national tourist site as an important *lieu de mémoire* for the Lao state, however he notes that it doesn't function along the lines of what Nora had described as multi-vocal sites key to a living "memory-nation" (p. 61). The third chapter by Markus Schlecker moves from important national sites of memory to a highly localized one, a recently discovered stone stelae turned up as a result of road construction in a northern Vietnamese village. Schlecker considers the resurgence of local ancestor cults and the fading interest in the more modern invention of war stelae dedicated to "war martyrs". In an era of village depopulation and declining state monetary support for war veterans, Schlecker suggests that village residents have returned to older practices of family-centered, ancestor veneration as a strategy to reclaim some autonomy from the state.

The next two chapters in the volume by Elaine Russell and Christina Schwenkel move from sites of commemoration to the practices of removing thousands of unexploded bombs left behind after the war. Russell's study of sites in Laos includes an eloquent, concise history of the overall effects of American bombing campaigns here from 1964 to 1973. She weaves in biographies of individuals involved in the removal of unexploded ordnance (UXO), showing how individual experiences, often traumatic, intersect with ongoing national and international dialogues. In the chapter's conclusion, she suggests the provocative notion that UXO might be considered as another type of *lieu de mémoire*, but the idea is not really developed in the essay.

Christina Schwenkel addresses more specifically the evolving *practices* of mine and UXO clearance in the former demilitarized zone of Vietnam in present-day Quang Tri Province. Schwenkel first provides a detailed synsopsis of professional, state-managed demining programs, and then she draws on field work and other anthropological research to examine the parallel, often derided work of "hobby" deminers. In parallel with the earlier chapters, Schwenkel delves into the conflicting practices of hobby versus professional ordnance clearers. Rather than accept commonly accepted views on the hobbyists as untrained volunteers or social outcasts, Schwenkel considers more carefully why these individuals take such high risks and how they mitigate them. This chapter is especially useful for its deep theoretical reflections on the often-competing "moral economies of risk" (p. 153) that define UXO clearance and scrap metal collecting.

The final four chapters in the volume address various acts of post-conflict renovation. Vatthana Pholsena describes one of the most iconic roads of the war, Highway 9 that ran east-west connecting Savannakhet Province (Laos) and Quang Tri Province (Vietnam) just below the former DMZ at the 17th parallel. In the first half of the chapter, Pholsena articulates a vivid historical geography of this road from its inception as a commercial route to its role in the war as a side-branch for North Vietnamese troops and supplies moving north-south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Focusing on the Lao town of Sepon in the uplands not far from the border, Pholsena notes the different, conflicting memories associated with the road through such sites as state-sanctioned war memorials and the erased ruins of now-closed, post-war prison camps. Pholsena's interviews with residents of Sepon are fascinating, especially as she contrasts the experiences of villagers with former prison camp detainees who have since settled in the area.

Susan Hammond provides a chapter on Agent Orange based on her visits to one heavily sprayed site, A Lưới, and studies of archival and other records on the American deployment of tactical herbicides. The chapter lacks a theoretical focus comparable to other contributors – i.e., no discussion of *lieux de mémoire* – but it is nevertheless a compelling survey of issues attributed to Agent Orange/dioxin exposure in post-conflict landscapes.

In Chapter 8, Krisna Uk examines highlander villages in northeastern Cambodia, in particular studying how iconic images from the war such as planes, bombs, and guns have been worked into motifs of funerary art and in traditional weaving. Studying the motifs painted on the thatch roofs of funerary structures in these villages, Uk shows how the use of war-related icons suggests how wartime experiences or deadly legacies of the war such as UXO are visually woven into personal and collective narratives of individual lives. The second art-form in the chapter, woven handicrafts, conveys similar images from the war but for very different purposes. Here women weaving textiles have included icons from the war *not* because they relate to personal experiences but instead because the women believe tourists are more attracted to these references to war.

The final chapter by Ian Baird details a twenty-year saga of conflicts between one upland minority group, the Heuny, and Lao state officials anxious to use their homeland for hydropower projects and the associated mining of bauxite. Baird follows the struggles of this group of almost 7,000 persons who were forcibly resettled in the 1990s when a hydropower project was built. Many individuals left the resettlement zone and returned to ancestral homelands, citing a lack of agricultural land in the new area or a wish to recognize spiritual ties to old sacred sites. In this chapter, the relationship between the Heuny's conflicts and legacies of war is not clearly defined. Baird suggests that the community's involvement with American special forces units may have played into the Lao government's lack of concern with the destruction of their homes and home territory.

Scott ended his study of upland Southeast Asia in 1945, because he believed that the model for his argument ceased to exist; this collection of essays features the fine work of nine scholars who have ventured past the "distance-demolishing" technologies of the mid-twentieth century to find new "frictions of terrain" in select sites. Each essay draws on a slightly different mix of theoretical approach and subject, but all more or less show how new forms of social or political friction persist despite the trauma of war or post-war social upheaval. In some cases, new frictions reveal the persistence of older tensions, especially between upland minority groups and lowland elites and their allies. *Interactions with a Violent Past* is both a scholar's and a teacher's book. It offers students of upland Southeast Asia a variety of models and theoretical tools that open up new possibilities, new archives even, for more research. It's especially useful for teachers in two ways. One, each chapter stands alone very well as a case study. Two, most chapters feature concise, well-annotated summaries of key historical events such

as the Lao resistance at Viengxay or the extent of American bombing in across Indochina. Few edited volumes manage to seamlessly stitch contributor chapters into a coherent super-narrative, and this is no exception; however, these contributors bridge multiple languages, archives and fragmented geographies to shed light on a little-studied, deeply traumatized part of the world. Engaging absences in the literature and the diversity of perspectives and experiences on the ground certainly takes precedence, and *Interactions with a Violent Past* is exemplary in this respect.

Lefferts, Leedom, and Sandra Cate with Wajuppa Tossa. *Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka Scroll at the Asian Civilisations Museum*. Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012 [pp. xv-163; Hb. 24.7cm x 30.7cm; full-color illustrations, map, glossary, bibliography, index]. ISBN: 978-981-07-2478-8

Reviewed by Susanne Ryuyin Kerekes, University of Pennsylvania

This monograph is an extensive study of one mid-century Thai cotton-cloth scroll that features the *Vessantara Jataka* (Thai: *Phra Wetsandon/ Phra Wet Chadok*). The study displays the 31-meter long scroll in rich detail, while also elaborating on the scroll's broader socio-cultural context within the Thai-Lao and Lao communities of Northeast Thailand (Isan) and lower Laos People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), addressing, in particular, the annual *Bun Phra Wet* festival, a religious merit-making ceremony that honors Prince Vessantara. The miniscule shortcomings of this book are outweighed by the holistic and innovative treatment of the scroll, which is held at the Asian Civilisations Musuem in Singapore, rendering this 163-page volume a noteworthy publication of Thai/Lao Buddhist art and ritual.

This book may serve as: an introductory text for students curious about Thai scroll painting or Thai-Lao Buddhist ritual; a source of comparison regarding the narrative of the *Vessantara Jataka* for scholars of manuscript or literary studies; and an essential resource for scholars of cultural anthropology, art history, and religious material culture, especially those appreciative of materiality as more than merely art, but also agency, shaping the socio-economic and ethical relations among artisans, clergy and lay community. Furthermore, with its tri-lingual (Lao, Thai, and English) analysis of the scroll's *Vessantara* account, the book may also serve as a self-guided reader.

The *Vessantara Jataka* is regarded among Theravada Buddhist cultures as the most significant (even though the last) of the 547 *Jatakas* (Birth Stories of the Buddha's previous lives). This last *Jataka* relays the story of Buddha's penultimate birth as Prince Vessantara, who perfects the Buddhist virtue of *dāna* (generosity), relinquishing everything dear to him, his wife and children included. Its popularity in Southeast Asia is evident in its frequent re-telling and re-enactment during religious ceremonies. For Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate, the parable of the *Vessantara Jataka* serves as edification, and the communal ritual use of these scrolls, known as *pha yao Phra Wet* (literally "long *Vessantara* scroll"), further reinforces social and moral values among the communities where such scrolls are produced and employed.

In their innovative work, Lefferts and Cate address the aforementioned in two ways: (1) by analyzing in great detail the factory-produced white cotton-cloth scroll, painted in 1959-1960 by Thai artist Sopha Pangchat (1909-1960); and (2) by analyzing the broader socio-cultural context surrounding this scroll through an account of the *Bun Phra Wet* festival (in which the scrolls play a significant role), while also comparing

this Pangchat scroll with other *pha yao Phra Wet* as well as *Vessantara* mural paintings in *wat*-s (temples).

Their data was collected from their ethnographic research across the Isan and Lao PDR regions (where the *Vessantara Jataka* often takes precedence over the life story of the Buddha), surveying over 200 *wat*-s, 100 *pha yao Phra Wet*-s, and two towns (Ban Samrong Tai, Ubon Ratchathani, and Ban Kau, Mahasarakham) where these scrolls are still in production today (p.70).

An extensive treatment of Pangchat's scroll is addressed in chapters 1, 4 and 5. The surrounding context of the scroll is covered in the remaining chapters, 2 and 3.

Chapter 1 completely illustrates the entire 31.43-meter long scroll, from start to end, spanning over thirty pages of the book. Each page features an image of the scroll extending roughly two-thirds of the page's height (20.5 cm) and the entire length of the page (approximately 24 cm across). Beneath each image is recounted the general story of the *Vessantara Jataka* as described in the captions found in the particular "panel" of the scroll depicted on the page.

Chapter 4, thanks to the significant contributions of Wajuppa Tossa, reproduces, verbatim, all written text, including the dedication panel at the beginning of the scroll. Each page of this chapter is meticulously laid out. It includes three columns of text for the Lao, Thai (both written in Thai script) and English languages; and an inset image of the particular panel under analysis, annotated with numbers corresponding to the scroll captions addressed in the three columns of text. This 46-page-long chapter, so minutely detailed, renders this book as the next best thing to a facsimile edition.

The fifth and final chapter shares biographical information of the artist, Pangchat, who learned about scroll painting techniques while he was a youth, ordained in the monkhood.

Chapter 2 documents the three-day grand affair of the *Bun Phra Wet* festival. Day one marks preparations, including the selection of members of the community to play Prince Vessantara for the parable's re-enactment, and the transformation of the *wat* into the royal city where Prince Vessantara returns. The climax of the festivities is on day two, the re-enactment. The community parades the *pha yao Phra Wet* (which ranges between 18-75 meters in length) into the forest, mimicking Prince Vessantara's banishment. Before Prince Vessantara can return to the city, a religious ritual is conducted in the forest to invoke Prince Vessantara's spirit into the scroll, thus providing an opportunity for participants to "connect with the *saksit*, the spiritual power of the blessed scroll, [as well as] connect with each other, making merit together, and further binding the community together" (p. 56). On the third and final day, monks perform an oral recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka*. While previous scholarship of the *Bun Phra Wet* has focused mainly on the monks' chanting, Lefferts and Cate, instead, emphasize the significance of the scroll and its material agency.

Finally, chapter 3 explores the telling of the *Vessantara Jataka* found on other scrolls in the region, as well as on temple murals. Some general comparisons are made, and individual stylistic differences are also noted, alongside a further showcasing of the artistic details and production techniques involved in the making of the Pangchat scroll.

As evident in the book's title (*Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos*), Lefferts and Cate offer an interesting leitmotif: narrative. The authors present the *Vessantara Jataka* through various agents of "tellings": as told by the Buddha (within the *Vessantara Jataka* itself); as visually depicted by the Pangchat scroll; as chanted by the monks; as ritually performed by the community. Apart from a typo on the back cover ("exception detail" instead of "exceptional detail", referring to the scroll's illustration), I have no major criticism of this monograph. Given the theme on narrative, however, it would have been beneficial to include a chapter (or even an appendix) on the narrative of representation and reception -- that is, how is/was the scroll exhibited at the Asian Civilisations Museum? Just as the physical dimensions of a scroll limit the visual telling of *Vessantara*'s story, museum galleries, having a particular constrained space, determine a certain narrative of their own that influence the reception of their displayed objects, framing them into certain imagined ascetics. Such an addition (i.e., a telling of the ACM's own exhibition [read: "telling"] of the scroll) would have distinguished this book as more than merely a museum catalogue, further enriching the study for scholars of material culture, art historians, and museumologists. Overall, Lefferts, Cate and Tossa's innovative study is an essential resource for students and scholars of Thai Buddhist art and ritual, and may serve as a model for future monographs dealing with Buddhist visual and material culture.