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CONTESTING VISIONS OF THE LAO PAST
LAO HISTORIOGRAPHY AT THE CROSSROADS

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NIAS Press
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Modern Laos is one of those fascinating twentieth century nation-states that sprang from the intersection of ancient cultural and religious zones, cut its teeth negotiating larger peninsular state-building processes to the east and west and came into its nationalist own in the crossfire of competing colonialisms, nationalisms and revolutionary ideologies. The birth of any nation is always more complicated than official historiographies purport and the complex positioning of present day Laos at the crossroads of a wide range of historical, cultural and ideological undercurrents makes this particularly true. This also makes its historiography especially interesting to study.

Non-Lao writers of various political views have employed different approaches to make sense of this country’s past. Many have seen Laos making a delicate ‘balancing act’, an almost never-ending struggle between its two larger mainland Southeast Asian neighbours – Vietnam (the name adopted by nationalists around World War II) and Thailand (known as Siam until ‘Thai’ nationalists changed it in 1939). For some it is a Buddhist kingdom and a Marxist state. Others have analysed it in terms of its position in Cold War Southeast Asian geopolitics and the seemingly endless wars occurring next door in Vietnam. It was the ‘next domino’ to fall to communism, the ‘buffer’ or the ‘linchpin’ to holding the line for the ‘free world’ against the ‘spread of communism’ further into the region. Some writers continue to conceptualize Laos as a ‘special’ part of larger French, Vietnamese, Indochinese or Thai worlds, with the Lao playing the role of ‘apprentices’, if not the ‘younger brothers’. Others simply pass over Laos rapidly, a sideshow to seemingly more important stories.

Of course, Lao historiography goes in the opposite direction. Lao nationalist historians – like their counterparts the world over – focus naturally on their nation-state and the writing of its national past. Laos is at the centre of the story, not the periphery. A Lao nationalist historiography began to emerge slowly after 1945, when French colonialism began to lose its grip on what had then been known as l’Indochine Française (the French colonial structure
created in 1887 consisting mainly of today’s nation-states of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). Royalists, nationalists, communists, democrats, whatever, all agreed on the need to write a ‘new’ and ‘authentic’ history of Laos, one which would correspond to the respective governments or nation-states they supported and less to a colonial past, whether Thai, French or other. However, 30 years of a complex mixture of colonial, civil and ideological wars left little time for serious history writing at official, academic or independent levels. Other than the work done by young Lao intellectuals in Western universities or by older ones who had holed themselves up to ride out the violent wartime storms plaguing Indochina, the instability of the times put serious Lao historiography on hold. Moreover, torn by a variety of internal and external forces, Lao historiography was faced with the formidable task of trying to make sense out of not just ‘one’ Laos, but several. Lao historiography itself, like the competing Lao states vying for the political high ground after World War II, has been contested. And the fact that the Lao People’s Democratic Republic’s (LPDR) official party history of Laos has only recently appeared in its entirety is, to some extent, an accurate reflection of the battered state of ‘revolutionary’ Lao nationalist historiography.

National historiographies exist in Laos, as the contributions to this book show. Following World War II, different Lao writers began publishing histories that sought to give the new Lao state, moving out of the French colonial orbit, its origins in a deeper and oftentimes wider historical geography than French Laos. Since 1975, however, with the coming to power of the communist-minded nationalists linked to Vietnam and, theoretically, a larger internationalist world running to Moscow, non-communist and royalist versions of the past have been sidelined, suppressed or simply pushed away from Laos to Australia, France or the United States. This has given rise to a somewhat schizophrenic nationalist historiography for Laos (and for Vietnam). While the official historians of the LPDR try to establish their own official ‘revolutionary’ version of the past, their opponents (not necessarily of the same mind) continue to construct a ‘counter-revolutionary’ nationalist historiography in various places and through several publishing houses outside Laos. In short, the Lao contest their own past.

Lao writers, however, wherever they might be living, have gone back to the past in search of symbols and founding myths on which to root and legitimate the modern Lao nation-state. They found them, of course, and there is nothing particularly original about this. Every nation does this as it shifts from religious and dynastic accounts of the past or from colonially or even communist authored ones to the ‘truly French’, ‘Serb’ or ‘Lao’ ones. Anything less would be impure, simply ‘un-national’. This means that contesting evidence or interpretations of these linear nationalist visions of the past should be avoided. Here, too, Lao nationalist historiography has been no exception. Unity and harmony take precedence over anomalies and contradictions. The idea that Lao
history could be a complex construction emerging out of the intersection of complicated cultural, geographical, religious and historical pasts, and not a timeless, natural entity that was always ‘there’, just waiting to be ordained nationally, is as difficult to accept for nationalists in Vientiane as it is for their counterparts elsewhere across the modern globe.

To take one example, some observers have questioned whether Laos’s current form is ‘real’. The argument is that the border running between Laos and Thailand is ‘unnatural’, since this French-imposed colonial line divided the precolonial ethnic Lao population into two groups which were later incorporated into two different national forms. The largest group of ethnic Lao, living in the Khorat Plateau, has been turned into ‘Thais’, while a smaller Lao population lives across the Mekong in ‘Laos’, the nation-state whose name is associated with the Lao. More than half the population of Laos is made up of ‘ethnic minorities’. The nationalist anomaly is obvious for these observers: Laos is somehow not quite natural in its emergence from the French colonial layer of historical experience. It should have included all of the ethnic Lao extending across the Khorat Plateau, but struggles instead to integrate its ethnic minorities. Foreigners were not the only ones to make this observation. Laos’s first modern nationalist, Prince Phetsarath, put his weight behind this larger, trans-Mekong Lao nation, arguing for an ethnic ‘Greater Lao Nation’ extending well into present day ‘Thailand’. It is perhaps not quite an accident that he had Europe in mind when he wrote to Prince Kindavong in October 1945:

The present report is aimed at asking for the creation of a Lao State. Besides the territories [located between] the Left Bank of the Mekong and the Annamese Range to the East, it consists of [the lands] extending to the right bank of this river and is delimited *grosso modo* by: to the North, Burma; to the West the province of Chiang Mai and the dividing line of the waters between the Mekong and the Menam [River]; to the South, the Dangrek Chain and the Khone waterfalls. This request is motivated by geographical, historical, ethnic and social reasons. […] The current Laos, born of the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 3 October 1893, is as much a geographical error as an economic one, for the natural borders indicated above englobe populations of the same origin, speaking the same language and having together, through five centuries of common history, felt the same joys and suffered the same national ordeals. The Mekong has never been a barrier but a bridge. The LAO and the THAI (these words have both designated race) came from the mountains of the North in the beginning of the 13th century and divided into two slices: the Thai of the Mekong and the Thai of the Menam. The former under the name LAO and the latter under the name THAI confronted one another during the centuries [in a bid for] political pre-eminence. This struggle, just as it occurred in Europe for the kingdoms emerging from the Empire of Charlemagne, resulted in cementing
on both sides [of the Mekong] the national sentiment; and the LAO and THAI ended up forgetting that they were of the same origin. The Thais won out at the end of the last century, and when France intervened in 1893, still badly informed of the political realities of central Indochina and in particular the Thai problem, She in a way agreed with the Siamese pre-eminence by giving Siam the [Lao] territories on the right bank of the Mekong. […]’

However, this dream of a ‘Greater Lao’ nation conveniently forgets that had Thai nationalist colonialism been more successful against its French colonial counterpart in building Indochina, ‘Laos’ could have been absorbed by Thailand rather than the Khorat Plateau by Laos. Or Laos could have become part of a postcolonial Indochinese nation. There is never just one possibility, but several.

This book is about the contested nature of Lao historiography. The idea for this volume emerged from earlier work that brought us to Laos via the ‘outside’ – from Siam’s attempt to incorporate Laos into a larger Thai space (Thailand) and French and Vietnamese moves to place Laos in an Indochinese world. In many ways, we arrived in Laos from the east and the west, instead of via the more travelled nationalist route of studying Laos from the inside, via its present nationalist form and from the ‘Lao perspective’. Moreover, we were both interested in questions of Southeast Asian historiography in general and the Lao one in particular. What especially interested us was the degree to which Laos’s historiography was contested not only by the Lao on the ‘inside’ (see above), but also by her neighbours on the ‘outside’. This got us thinking about whether it would be possible to look at the construction of Lao historiography itself in terms of its contested nature and in a wider geographical context than just the modern Lao state located on the map today. We tested this idea during a panel we organized in 1999 on the ‘Contesting visions of the Thai-Lao Past’ at the 7th Annual International Conference on Thai Studies in Amsterdam. While the panel theoretically focused on Laos and Thailand, several of the contributors opened the forum to a larger debate on the writing of the Lao past over the long term both within Laos and in a number of non-Lao nations.

As we compared notes and documents and re-read these contributions to the conference panel, we were struck by the fact that this small, seemingly unimportant country’s historiography seemed important to study for at least three reasons. First, it seemed to offer a new and fascinating opportunity to examine how national historiography is contested not only inside the modern nation-state, but also from places ‘outside’ that same state by other nations making claims on that country, in this case Laos, and its right to define the past. Numerous papers clearly stated that the construction of the modern Lao nationalist historiography had to work itself out in terms of internal ‘Lao’ factors as well as in response to attempts by others to define the Lao past for the Lao and, in some cases, to write the Lao past out of the historiographical picture. If much of this is lost in nationalist historiographies, these contestations
of the Lao past seem extremely important in understanding that which had to be forgotten in the current historiography today and that which went into this process at the time. To see one without the other is to miss the point and the larger picture.

A second important and related factor emerging from the panel and the papers was the need to view this historiographical process over the long term and in a wider geographical context than just Laos itself. Like modern nations in general, Lao nationalist historiography did not exist in a regional vacuum. In order to understand these transitions from religious, monarchical and cultural perceptions of the past to the ‘modern’ nationalist, colonialist and even communist internationalist ones, it is important to adopt a long view in terms of time. This helped us pick up on conjunctures and shifts in the historiographical discourses. The contributions to this volume respond to these wider temporal and geographical needs.

Following on this wider and longer view of the writing of the Lao past was the third possibility that Laos’s position at the ‘crossroads’ of complex historical, religious and ideological forces could shed new light on how Lao historiography has changed. For example, how the spread of twentieth-century ‘isms’, such as colonialism, nationalism and internationalism, bumped up against, superseded or ceded to pre-existing notions of history and its writing seemed worthy of serious examination, even if a volume such as this can in no way claim to be exhaustive. This seemed warranted, since Laos is not the only country to find itself in such a complex geo-historical zone. Similarities with southeastern Europe certainly come to mind. Both Southeast Asia and the Balkans are, after all, complex contact zones where various peoples and ancient religions and kingdoms have long intersected by land and sea. In Eastern Europe it is Islam and Christianity in particular that overlap, while Southeast Asia is home to animistic beliefs, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Islam and a Sino-Confucian politico-cultural religion. On to these were added politico-religious empires and monarchies, each incorporating territories in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. One has only to think of the Roman Empire, the (German) Holy Roman Empire and, of course, the Ottoman Empire for Europe and the Balkans in particular, whereas Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and French rules extended and overlapped with each other across what is known as Laos today, stretching into present-day southern China. Ethnic groups never fitted nicely into ethnic states; nor did they coincide with the modern construction of ‘Europe’ and ‘Southeast Asia’. Laos, like several counterparts in central and eastern Europe, is at the intersection of these various layers of historical experience, as chapters in this volume reveal.

While cross-border exchanges certainly continued into the twentieth century, colonial and nationalist states began to try to exert greater control over coveted territories and the people living within those domains – much more intensively than the phenomena Michael Vickery discusses in his analysis of precolonial
Monarchies had to rethink their domains in national terms or succumb to colonial ones, as Volker Grabowsky argues in this volume and as Thongchai Winichakul has shown elsewhere. The French and the Thai could not share suzerainty over ‘Laos’. In the case of Laos, the French would try to incorporate a variety of pre-existing Lao Buddhist principalities into their larger colonial state called ‘Indochina’, whereas the Thais would try to absorb ‘Laos’ into their greater national territory called Thailand, and not Siam (see Agathe Larcher-Goscha and Søren Ivarsson’s contributions).

To get at the contested nature of Lao historiography in this wider context, we have organized the contributions to this book into three main sections as a way of tracking the increasingly contested nature of the Lao past across changing time and spaces. The first part starts wide both temporally and spatially and examines the non-nationalist forms of the Lao past and how they began to change as European colonialism made its way into the region, forcing local rulers to rethink their frontiers and domains in new ways. The second part turns to how the Lao have contested their past with one another and against emerging nationalist, colonialist and communist ones on the ‘outside’. The last section focuses on how the ‘others’ have tried to write Laos into or out of their pasts. Viewed in this way, at the crossroads, the small seemingly unimportant country of Laos can tell us a lot not only about Lao historiography, but also a great deal about the historiographies of those around them.

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Michael Vickery opens the volume with a broad historical panorama. Relying on two little-studied Lao chronicles, Phongsawadan Phu Khiao and the Phongsawadan Xamneua, Vickery presents a two-fold argument on Lao historiography before the modern nation-state period and its implications for other parts of mainland Southeast Asia. In the first part of his chapter, he takes to task the oft-repeated idea that the political economy of early Southeast Asia resulted in rulers being more concerned with control of people than with control of land. Before focusing on the Lao chronicles, Vickery examines a number of mainland Southeast Asian examples to show the problems in assuming that premodern rulers were always interested in controlling people and gaining (unskilled) manpower to build up their states. Having framed his argument in this wider regional critique, he then turns to the two chronicles which place more emphasis on descriptions of territory than on enumeration or control of the population within it. On careful reading, the Xamneua chronicle reveals ‘an attempt at detailed organization by higher authorities of a delimited administrative area with its population in order to furnish special local products to central authorities’. Vickery concludes by suggesting that this may well represent influences coming from Vietnamese cadastral and census practices.
just to the east. In so doing, he points up the connections that linked Laos to the east and to the west and examines the degree to which local states were concerned in this early period with controlling land.

Volker Grabowsky picks up on Vickery’s work to focus on how premodern notions of space bumped up against the ones the French and the British would introduce via colonial negotiations over territory. In his chapter, he concentrates on the Chiang Khaeng Chronicle (CKC) and the town of Mueang Sing in an effort to show how an ‘indigenous elite’ and even the population reacted to the Franco-British ‘tug of war’ over their world. He shows that the CKC reveals much about the end of the premodern political order and how the ‘loss of sovereignty and territorial division of the country stand in the centre of this unique historical document’. Like Thongchai Winichakul, Grabowsky sees this chronicle as an important reflection of the difference between premodern conceptions of frontiers and space and a new concept of sovereignty introduced by Britain and France. But he also shows that local rulers did not sit by idly. They were actors, too. The Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng and his nobles, for example, were fully aware of the threats posed by the British, the French and their negotiations and ‘tried hard to manipulate’ events in their favour. Grabowsky makes an important observation, one which runs through this book and across the colonial divide:

The Mekong offered the colonial powers a border that could easily be defined and controlled. But this border created by foreign powers divided traditional polities possessing political and cultural identities that had developed over centuries. For the Lue in the Upper Mekong and the Lao in the Middle Mekong, the mighty river was never a border but their most important lifeline (sai siwit). Their settlements extended to both banks of the river. The traditional pattern of tributary relations based on ‘multiple overlordships’ [...] with overlapping margins of suzerainty, enabled the Tai polities of the region to survive. European notions of sovereignty brought an end to the erstwhile political autonomy. It was sacrificed for the new concept of uncontested sovereignty of nation-states which had to define internationally recognized borderlines.

Through the use of different chronicles, both Vickery and Grabowsky point up the fact that Lao principalities in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia had their own conceptions of the world, of manpower, space and frontiers which obviously did not coincide with later ones ushered in by the West and adopted by local states in their colonial or national forms, or even the internationalist ones. They also point up the fact that influences ran in and out of the Lao territories from Vietnam in the east across the Mekong into what we define as Thailand today.

The second section of this book turns to the evolution of a ‘Lao’ nationalist historiography to make sense of the nation emerging from this wider,
precolonial geo-historical context. Martin Stuart-Fox makes the transition by taking us on a comprehensive tour of the major trends of modern Lao historiography, the various attempts which have been made in the twentieth century to make sense out of Laos. He analyses ‘traditional Lao historiography’, explaining the importance of the founding myths and their roles in political legitimation. His chapter focuses on the twentieth century, running from French colonial writing on Laos to the postcolonial royal and communist nationalist historiographies. This overview serves as an excellent basis for grasping the difficulties in Lao historiography and for those writing on Lao history. Stuart-Fox is a Western writer sensitive to the importance of creating a national history for Laos. He is concerned with the importance and the difficulty of negotiating that premodern ‘multiplicity of Lao historical experience’ in such a way as ‘to reinforce a more inclusive national identity’, which, for him, is key to Laos’s ability to navigate the ‘threats’ of regional economic and social pressures. Indeed, Stuart-Fox calls for a new, specifically Lao national historiography which is nourished by the ‘creative tension’ between a ‘pluralistic investigation’ of the complex past and a ‘synthetic’ drawing together of those experiences to reinforce a uniquely Lao identity. So far, however, the regime has not shown any commitment to open up to the kind of investigation for which Stuart-Fox calls.

Grant Evans shares Stuart-Fox’s sympathy for Lao intellectuals trying to work out Laos’s past today. However, if Evans also presents us with a historiography of Laos, he is less concerned with the need to support a Lao nationalist historiography. What interests him most are the ways in which Lao historians have gone about doing this and suggests new ways they might consider. Rather than focusing first upon Laos, Evans looks across the Mekong to Thailand to make his point. He starts with an irony: while leftist historians in non-communist Thailand were able to tap into the best of Marxist historiography and philosophy in order to provide alternative and critical versions of the royalist and nationalist Thai historiography, the opposite has happened in Laos where the imposition of an authoritarian, communist government has prevented any such critical history. Indeed, Evans opens his chapter with reference to Thongchai Winichakul, one of the most prominent contemporary Thai ‘radical’ historians who has published widely in both English and Thai. Had Thongchai been a Lao national and tried to publish the Lao equivalent of his critique of official Thai historiography in Laos, he would have probably landed, Evans suggests implicitly, in jail in Vientiane. It is not an accident that Evans compares Thai ‘radical’ historians, influenced by the ideas of Jit Phumisak, to the ‘progressive’ Lao historians of the same generation, Pheuiphanh and Mayoury Ngaosyvathn, who represent what Lao historiography could have been had it not been for the communist takeover of Lao historiography in 1975. To put it another way, if 1973 is celebrated by Thongchai’s colleagues as a liberating moment in Thai historiography, the
victory of communism in Laos in 1975 resulted in the opposite, in Evans’ view: it shackled critical inquiry into the Lao past.

With this paradox in mind, Evans turns to an analysis of the history of Lao historiography, reviewing the main trends in Laos after 1945 before focusing on the significance of Pheuiphanh and Mayoury Ngaosyvathn’s recently published history of Thai-Lao relations: *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, 1778-1828*. Here Evans reminds us of the importance the ‘other’, and the role the ‘outsider’ has played in constructing a modern nationalist historiography. He lauds their book as a turning point in modern Lao historiography, one which communist authorities have tried to deny and, sometimes, shut down. However, even if their work is far more scientific than that which party historians have so far produced in terms of methodology and approach, Evans takes the two Lao historians to task for still writing a very nationalist history, symbolized by their singling out the ‘historic’ Thai threat as the defining external force in Lao history. Evans is not asking Lao or foreign writers to deconstruct Lao history; he is inviting them to explore its complexity. Like others in the field, he is asking Lao and non-Lao writers to ‘denationalize’ their approaches and representations of Laos. Picking up on larger historiographical shifts in the study of nationalism, Evans reminds us of the need to be aware of the dangers of writing the present nation back into a past which was much more complex.

Chalong Soontravanich is aware of this. Through a reappraisal of Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* of 1957, he analyses how the shift in Lao historiography towards an increasingly nationalist one had internal and external driving forces. To Chalong, even though Sila used the chronicle form in his history of Laos, the style and the message represented a break from those studied by Grabowsky and Vickery. The royal trope had begun to fade; Sila’s *Phongsawadan Lao* was being linked to the coming into being of the modern Lao nation-state. Chalong shows that Sila was going back to the past in new and modern ways in an effort to provide a timeless and legitimate story for this new Lao nation and its unified people. Sila defines the Lao language and Lao literature as the essential components of a Lao identity. Chalong also shows how Sila pulled Theravada Buddhism from those deeper layers of historical experience in order to craft a national identity of a religious nature: being Lao meant being Buddhist. Thai nationalists were looking in similar directions, but both the Lao and the Thai forgot that not all of those within their borders were Buddhist.

Finding an historical enemy is also important. Like Pheuiphanh and Mayoury Ngaosyvathn in *Paths to Conflagration*, Sila spends a great amount of his time on Thai domination and Lao struggles against it. Chao Anou’s ‘liberation struggles’ against the Thai ‘invaders’ is essential to this nationalist version, just as the Trung sisters opposing the invading Chinese is for Vietnamese nationalists or Joan of Arc’s heroic resistance to the English is for
the French. As Chalong convincingly shows, the chronicle was slowly but surely transformed into a nationalist narrative under Sila’s pen:

Sila Viravong makes an attempt to define Laos as a nation, rightly or wrongly, in terms of people, that is all those who call themselves Lao and are descended from common ancestors, and in terms of territory, that is all the land under the rule of the Lan Xang Kingdom and its successors. Phongsawadan Lao is therefore the history of the Lao nation and not simply the royal chronicle of the old kingdom of Lan Xang. Laos is a nation with a common identity formed basically by a people of common stock who has settled on this land.

Chalong goes further in understanding this shift in modern Lao historiography. He asks to what extent did the birth of modern nationalist writing in ‘Thailand’ during the first half of the twentieth century influence Sila’s nationalist writing. Chalong does not raise this as an ‘anti-Lao’ observation or because he is ‘Thai’, but rather in light of the trans-national exchanges which continued in this region in spite of the national borders being constructed across the region or the colonial ones the French hoped to impose to protect their ‘Indochinese’ collection in the name of French nationalist interests. Having spent years in Thailand, especially during the nationalist heyday of the early 1940s, Sila must have been influenced by Thai nationalist history in full expansion on the eve of World War II. The shift from Thai chronicles to nationalist ones was occurring in the writings of Prince Damrong, Khun Wichitchatra, Luang Wichit Watakan and Phya Anuman Rajadhon among others. If many, mainly Western, observers always emphasize how Western colonial schools and newspapers transferred the modern idea of nationalism into Asia, Chalong raises the possibility that the Thais (themselves adapting the Western notion of the nation-state) served as a more important nationalist conduit for introducing modern nationalism into western Indochina. The French, after all, were always much more concerned with Vietnam (see Agathe Larcher-Goscha’s chapter). This raises an interesting possibility and paradox: that the channelling of modern nationalism into Laos (and Cambodia?) may well have come through the Thais, the ‘historical enemy’ of modern Lao nationalist historiography itself.

Bruce Lockhart takes this book’s story a step forward by examining how a split occurred in modern Lao nationalist historiography after World War II between ‘Lao Issara’ patriots associated with Prince Phetsarath and those led by Lao communist nationalists linked to the Indochinese Communist Party and Vietnam. Lockhart fleshes out the overlaps and omissions in various Lao nationalist historiographies for the twentieth century. He also underscores that there is no single ‘Lao perspective’ on the past, for it remains contested. As Lockhart puts it:
A study of the variations and discrepancies between the two versions will necessarily raise more questions than it answers, but these questions are both significant and revealing because they have implications for the evolution of Lao historiography – and, ultimately, Lao nationalism – over the past half-century.

The ‘Lao Revolution of August 1945’ is a contentious and revealing signpost in current Lao historiography. Up to 9 March, ‘revolutionary’ and ‘nationalist’ versions of Lao history more or less follow Sila’s account. From there, however, the historiographical battles begin as the need grows to legitimate or discredit the different Lao nationalists fighting over control of Laos between 1945 and 1975. Lockhart uses three main examples to show how the nationalist and revolutionary discourses provide contesting and therefore revealing perspectives on Lao historiography: 1) Who provided the real leadership of the Lao Issara government, 2) the role of Prince Souphanouvong and 3) the place of the August-October 1945 period in Lao history. One of the most interesting things emerging in this battle over the past is the need to lay claim to the ‘Revolution’ of 1945. For non-communists, Phetsarath plays the essential nationalist role in opposing the return of French colonialism and forming Laos’s first independent government, whereas the current regime in Vientiane sees the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) as the leader of the ‘Lao Revolution of August 1945’, while Phetsarath is largely written out of the picture.

Like Chalong, Lockhart shows how a variety of non-communist Lao chronicles written during this time on the events of 1945 in particular are fitting increasingly into a nationalist mould. However, Sila attributes much more importance to the activities of Phetsarath, his former boss in the early 1930s, than to such ‘Red Princes’ as Souphanouvong, let alone to a ‘communist’ like Kaysone Phomvihane. Lockhart shows that the claim to 1945 as a source of nationalist legitimation will remain contested in Laos and, as communism fades, the role of Phetsarath will have to be dealt with, as well as his role in the events of 1945. He cannot just be ignored in the existing nationalist pantheon. Other chapters in this book make a similar point. Lockhart furthermore argues that Prince Souphanouvong’s role in the events of 1945 has quite possibly been manipulated to legitimize revolutionary historiography.

Lockhart makes the point that the current nationalist and/or revolutionary historiographies have trouble dealing with the fact that all of modern Laos is not inhabited by ethnic Lao. Akiko Iijima addresses this question in her chapter on the Nyuan people in Xayabury province in LPDR. By focussing on the transnational transmission of Nyuan manuscripts between Xayabury in Laos and Nan province in today’s upper Thailand, she shows how a combination of a unique geographical position and strong cultural links have allowed the Nyuan to maintain an identity, a trans-national one in this case, outside of the Lao and...
Thai nationalist hegemonies, a reflection of the deeper levels of connections suggested above. Akiko’s work in the Thai archives and on the ground among the Nyuan in the upper Mekong region highlights the importance of never overestimating the power of nationalism or underestimating the capacity of other, contesting or pre-existing identities to continue to persevere in spite of the state or their absence from the official Lao nationalist history.

As Akiko implicitly suggests, it all depends where you look. Oral history, upon which Akiko’s work among the Nyuan is based, can reveal other identities, ones which have much more in common with the deeper levels of Laos’s geo-historical past than those provided in school textbooks or in party or royal nationalist chronicles, whether in Thai or Lao. Akiko’s work suggests the existence of little studied non-national links running across the frontier, well into the late twentieth century. Of course, part of this is because of the underdeveloped transport and road system, which has kept the Thai and Lao nationalist projects at a distance. Nevertheless, Akiko’s fieldwork reminds one of the need for more studies of this kind.

This also leads one to think about other zones. For example, a study of the commercial, cultural and religious exchanges extending across the Mekong between the ‘Lao’ of modern Laos and the ‘Lao’ of modern north-eastern Thailand could shed similar light on what seems to be a complex process of identity-making. It is worth recalling that throughout the entire period of ‘French colonialism’ in Indochina, Theravada Lao and Khmer novices and monks never stopped going across the Mekong to fine-tune their Buddhist studies in ‘Thai’ pagoda schools and higher institutions of Pali learning. The continued pulling power of this deeper religious layer was the main reason for the French decision to build religious centres of study in Vientiane, Luang Phrabang and Phnom Penh, to keep the Lao and the Khmer in western Indochina from continuing to go west for religious study outside of the French colonial hold. To put it another way, those deeper layers are still there, in spite of the modern veneer brushed on top of them. Western notions of national identity and historiography may not work themselves out as easily as we might think or in the linear ways modern nationalism would like us to believe.

Peter Koret takes us deeper into this territory in his study of the Lao epic poem, Luep Phasun. To Koret, the Luep Phasun is a ‘looking glass’ into the Lao past and its present. Its very ambiguity allows it to ‘represent just about anything to just about anybody’. What interests Koret in this work is not trying to establish the ‘original’ meaning of the text, but rather how it has been transformed into a ‘recomposition’ over time. He concedes that the spread of Western, ‘modern’ ideas have certainly had an impact on the continuing evolution of Lao interpretations of their past. However, one of his major, underlying arguments in this chapter is that a close study of how the Luep Phasun has been interpreted points up the dangers of assuming the universal applicability of Western assumptions on the existence of a set of principles for
understanding Lao literature and, by extension, historiography. Instead, he switches tack and goes towards the particular, to a reflection on interpreting Lao literature, to ask ‘what does literary interpretation mean to the Lao, what are its objectives, and by what rules or conventions is it practised’.

Using the *Luep Phasun*, Koret analyses how Lao writers interpreted this poem in diverse political and literary ways. On the political side, he considers how Sila interprets the *Luep Phasun* in a modern nationalist context, using it to show how the battles of the past legitimize those of the present and to evoke the importance of national independence and the need to love the nation in the making. On the one hand, Sila’s interpretation of the *Luep Phasun* is designed to promote modern nationalist consciousness, in line with the events of the time (see Bruce Lockhart’s discussion). On the other hand, the *Luep Phasun*, ‘as seen from a cultural perspective’, suggests that these modern political interpretations are themselves linked to a deeper set of cultural and historical factors that inscribe Lao literary interpretation, which Western literary models for interpretation fail to take into consideration. Koret uses numerous examples to argue that the significance of Lao literary criticism as a source of understanding Lao historiography is that it cannot be assumed that *Luep Phasun* is ‘a fixed and unchangeable body of text, the meaning of which needs to be uncovered through a rigorous and objective process of investigation’. *Luep Phasun* is a text that has been and still is in the process of being interpreted and reinterpreted, written and re-written.

Most studies of Lao nationalism and particularly Lao nationalist historiography would have ended the story with part two. However, we maintain that a major contribution of this book is its going a step further to show how Lao historiography is part of a larger regional battle over Laos’s national past. The last section of this book examines how the Lao past has been contested by Thai, French and Vietnamese attempts to write Laos into their versions of the past, out of the picture entirely or associate them with ‘special’ historical relationships. Building on the first two parts of this book, the last three contributions show how the twentieth-century expansion of nationalism, colonialism and internationalism led Thai, French and Vietnamese writers to assume a special right to write exclusionary versions of the Lao past in order to legitimate their expansion into this contested region. Laos and its historiography have been in the crossfire of these competing peninsular powers.

This last step back into the wider context is important for several reasons. By examining how the French, the Thais and the Vietnamese have incorporated Laos into their own national historiographies, we can learn much about that against which or with which Lao writers have had to formulate their own historiography. We have already seen signs of this with Sila and Phetsarath in early contributions. By putting the French, Thai and Vietnamese on the same analytical level, regardless of ideology, civilization, nationality or state of economic development, we just might be able to flush out similarities and
differences not only about Laos, but also about the nationalist historiographies of these countries themselves. Interestingly, Bangkok, Paris and Hanoi would like us to believe, as their leaders often do, that they have a timeless ‘special relationship’ with Laos, born of special circumstance and destined to live forever. The French can no more stand the idea of the Vietnamese claiming a special relationship with Laos’s past than the Vietnamese can fathom that France can claim the same.16

Agathe Larcher-Goscha’s contribution examines French historiography on Laos via the personage of the famous explorer, Auguste Pavie. Her analysis is two-fold. On the one hand, she looks at how French colonial historiography of Laos has used Pavie as the archetypal French explorer, diplomat and unifier of modern Laos. His ‘peaceful’ work for Laos at the turn of the twentieth century serves to legitimate France’s colonial mission there. On the other hand, Larcher-Goscha tries to understand why the colonial myth of Pavie was – when compared to other French colonies – never as strong as it most certainly could have been.

The bibliography of Pavie’s life is sparse. Writings on him occurred at certain conjunctures, in particular when Thailand began to challenge France’s colonial claim to western Indochina in the 1930s and especially in the 1940s, when France’s hold over Laos no longer seemed assured. Larcher-Goscha analyses how a variety of French colonial writers, almost all concerned with assuring France’s special colonial relationship with Laos, used Pavie’s legacy to construct an historiography which put France at the centre of modern Lao history. In their eyes, Pavie was the last in a long line of illustrious colonial architects, the one who laid the last Lao brick in the larger French Indochinese colonial edifice. His ‘peaceful’ actions reflected France’s good intentions, in opposition to the ‘deceitful’ and ‘greedy’ Thais. Indeed, thanks to the work of Pavie, France helped ‘resurrect’ Laos and ‘give her back’ her glorious past.17 While this is certainly true to a significant extent, this trope is also used by the French to play up their special role, forgetting that they were not the only ones to do such things and it could have just as easily been the British or the Thais or the Lao themselves with Western assistance who could have ‘re-discovered’ the ‘glorious Lao past’.

In Pavie, French nationalist colonizers argued that the French had been called upon by the Lao, that the French colonial project in Laos was one of peace, one which had occurred without the French even really knowing it (malgré elle is the French expression). Pavie ‘conquered hearts’ peacefully; he had not provoked bloody wars with local Asians. Of course, as Larcher-Goscha demonstrates, these representations were essential to justifying France’s continued role in Laos, especially when her colonial claim in mainland Southeast Asia was under threat from other powers or when the Lao themselves began to carve out a nationalist past for the future and not necessarily a colonial one.
Larcher-Goscha goes further to point out that the French missed an incredible myth-making possibility by failing to exploit Pavie more effectively. She suggests that one reason for underdevelopment of the Pavie myth in French colonial historiography is that French colonization of Laos had not been steeped in blood and repression as it had been in Vietnam. The French needed the person of Pigneau de Béhaine and his ‘historic’ assistance to the Vietnamese monarch Gia Long in the eighteenth century in order ‘to smooth over the suffering and bitterness’ violent French colonization had caused. It was important to have these things forgotten; but those things were just not as present in the origins of Lao colonization. This, too, she suggests, might explain why the French, ‘in spite of themselves’, were never really interested in building up a policy of ‘Franco-Laotian Collaboration’ as they did in Vietnam, with links to Pavie in the faraway past. It is also possible, as we have suggested above, that Lao nationalist interests were less influenced by France in eastern Indochina than by Thailand across the Mekong to the west.

Coming at Lao historiography from that direction, Søren Ivarsson provides an investigation of how the Thais viewed – or sometimes did not view – Laos, its people, frontiers and possible existence as a separate state, whether it be colonial or national or otherwise. Ivarsson considers how the Thais maintained, in spite of the French colonial presence, a fascinating counter-vision of French Indochina which absorbed Laos into ‘Thailand’ and even larger ‘Tai’ spaces. By looking at how Thai nationalists conceived Laos spatially in terms of geography and its people in terms of their defining their nationality, Ivarsson demonstrates how Thai nationalists before World War II went about trying to make Laos ‘Thai’. He first discusses ‘how the “loss” of the territories on the left bank of the Mekong making up Laos was integrated in the perception of the history of Thailand’. If Akiko Iijima reminded us of the importance of oral history, Ivarsson points up the importance of maps and geographical perceptions, or projections, of the Thai nation-state eastwards. Through this study, he shows how Thai nationalist imagining was such that it did not even accept that the left-bank territories, which had been legally and diplomatically integrated into a French Indochinese Union, existing outside a larger ‘Thai’ defined space.

The second part of this chapter complements the first by showing how ‘the Lao were defined into a greater Thai space with reference to notions of race’. Not only did ‘Laos’ (French or otherwise) have to become ‘Thai’, but the ‘Lao’ as a separate nationality had to become ‘Thai’ as well. As Ivarsson puts it in his conclusion:

According to this discourse the colonial state of Laos was perceived as an ‘anomaly’ or a ‘non-country’, as the Lao were presented as part of the same ‘race’ as the Thai and the territories making up Laos were seen as an integral
part of a historical Siam rooted in a distant past. From a Thai point-of-view Laos was a Thai-space and thereby a contested space.

Ivarsson’s point here is not to deny Laos’s nationalist identity, but rather to reiterate, like others in this volume, that Laos’s emergence in the twentieth century was not a linear, teleological process. It is only by examining these historical processes and historiographies in a wider context that one can appreciate more fully the fascinating history of modern Laos and the interesting views of her neighbours.

On that note, Christopher Goscha ends this section by shifting back to the east to show how Vietnamese communists with an internationalist mission have replaced the myth of Pavie and French colonial historiography on Laos in general with a ‘new’ revolutionary internationalist view of the Lao past. In Goscha’s view, this internationalist layer needs to be added to the earlier challenges to Lao historiography posed by the arrival of Western nationalism and French colonialism. Lao historiography is unique in this sense. Other than Cambodia for a short while and perhaps Yugoslavia or Poland, few other modern nation-states and nationalist historiographies have had to deal with an internationalist identity that, at least theoretically, considers nationalism as retrograde.

Under the umbrella of Vietnamese internationalism, Lao LPRD historiography has followed in the steps of Vietnamese revolutionary history. Anti-colonialist struggles became essential parts of a larger revolutionary teleology running straight towards victory and ineluctable socialist transformation. The sources of legitimation for present-day Laos are the October Revolution in Russia, Hồ Chí Minh’s foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party and the ‘simultaneous’ Lao and Vietnamese revolutions of 1945 and 1975. What is striking, however, is the degree to which Vietnamese internationalists have maintained in remarkable ways the French colonial myth of a timeless, legitimate and unbreakable ‘Indochinese’ model. In many ways, Vietnamese revolutionary internationalism – opposed to French colonialism but based on the modern colonial state of Indochina – has replaced the French modernizing and civilizing justifications for inscribing the Lao past.

Goscha’s chapter suggests the degree to which those writing about Laos, whatever their ideological goals or whatever their nationalities, have done so in ways that exclude other forms of the Lao past and other voices, above all Lao ones. In this sense, rather than adopting worn-out clichés dropped time and again about the ‘greedy’ Thais, the ‘pacific’ French or the ‘expansionist’ Vietnamese, it might be more interesting to examine those things which are common to all three of these official historiographies on Laos: what they leave out in a comparative context, what that might tell us about their own nationalist historiographies and nationalist endeavours and those things against which the
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Lao nationalists have contended and will have to contend as they write their own history.

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The chapters in this book are not designed to be the last word. Much remains to be done in our understanding of the Lao past. We know little, for example, about counter nationalist historiographies that have emerged outside of Laos, in France, the United States, Australia and perhaps even Thailand or Vietnam. How the Lao state has taught its version of the past, say, in the schools or among the non-Lao populations remains largely unknown. It would be useful to know what went into the making of Lao museums and especially its nationalist monuments or the internationalist ones. If such efforts have been made, then to what are official memory builders responding? Is there a need for a national past on the part of the Lao people? Is the national past an “invention”? Or is it linked to deeper layers of historical, cultural and social layers and transformations discussed in this volume? This volume has touched on some of these ideas, but the bulk of the work remains to be done.

We can only hope that this book might lead to a dialogue based less on trying to build or destroy nationalist history than on trying to understand its complexities, as Martin Stuart-Fox rightly reminds us in his contribution. For this small, seemingly unimportant country at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia has a lot to offer in terms of understanding nationalism in a wider geo-historical context, in light of the contested nature of historiography on such nations, and how such an historiographical reflection can tell us just as much about those who have tried control it, escape it, colonize it, write it off the modern world map, transform it ideologically and, perhaps most importantly, live within it.
1. The authors would like to thank Andrew Hardy, Agathe Larcher-Goscha and Viggo Brun for their very helpful remarks on and critiques of an earlier draft of this introduction. We would also like to express our deep gratitude to the referees of this book. Their comments, critiques and suggestions were invaluable.

2. We use the term ‘Laos’ to refer to the present-day nation-state of that same name located at the heart of the Southeast Asian map. We use ‘Lao’ to refer to the ethnic group of that same name. We have done this for reasons of clarity and textual consistency, not for political reasons. On the contested nature of such names, see the early nationalist essay penned by Katay Don Sasorith, ‘Lao, Laos, Laotiens’, Sud-Est, no. 16, 1950. It should be noted, however, that like the terms ‘Vietnam’ and ‘Thailand’, ‘Laos’ also englobes a number of different ethnic groups, which do not necessarily consider themselves as ‘Lao’, even if the nationality declared on their national passports is ‘Lao’.

3. The LPDR’s historiographical relationship with communist Vietnam is, significantly, slightly different. See Christopher Goscha’s chapter in this volume.


6. This, of course, was also true of the French and Russian revolutions. Unfortunately, few studies exist on either Vietnamese or Lao non-communist historiography written outside these two countries since 1975. François Guillemot has begun research on the state of Vietnamese historiography outside Vietnam.

7. Even the imagining of a larger European state has sent a wide variety of ‘European’ journalists, authors and even historians off to find the roots of this new Europe in the faraway past of the Roman Empire or Charlemagne.

8. Søren Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha are currently preparing an article-length biography of Prince Phetsarath and his role in developing a ‘modern’ Lao nationalist discourse.


10. Søren Ivarsson, ‘Bringing Laos into Existence: Laos between Siam and Indochina, 1860–1945’, PhD thesis, Copenhagen, University of Copenhagen, 1999 and Christo...

11. Even though we are by no means convinced that the modern state has come anywhere near fully controlling, let alone shutting down these ancient movements of peoples, ideas and goods. But this question goes far beyond the scope of this book.


13. In 1973 huge public demonstrations led to the fall of the military regime in Thailand. The promulgation of a new constitution in 1974 led to a brief period of parliamentary democracy. The changed political environment also implied an intellectual freedom which stimulated historical studies to challenge existing historical paradigms. In October 1976, the military took power again and ended this period of political and intellectual openness.


15. It would also be interesting to know whether Thai authorities used this ancient flow across the border (or even to Phnom Penh) in order to promote a greater Thai nationalist idea or, perhaps, to promote the idea of a larger Theravada Buddhist identity running across colonial and national borders.

16. How many of the French nationalists promoting *la francophonie* in former ‘French Indochina’ would acknowledge that Vietnamese internationalists have probably been more successful in Indochina in promoting the Vietnamese language, literature and arts, at least until Vietnam’s hold on Indochina began to melt into ASEAN by 1995 and give way to English, not French?

17. A similar discourse was created for Cambodia.
PART I

BEFORE MODERN BOUNDARIES
1. TWO HISTORICAL RECORDS OF THE KINGDOM OF VIENTIANE

MICHAEL VICKERY

In this chapter, I would like to present a description and analysis of two apparently unstudied historical documents, one illustrating early Lao influence in what is now Northeast Thailand, and the other about Xamneua, in the northeast near the border with Vietnam. They are both from the reign of Chao Anou.¹ I found these documents among the old historical and literary records in Wat Phra Kaeo in Vientiane in 1966, when I was living there, teaching English and studying Lao history and language.² Not only are they records of areas which have been neglected by historians, and in the case of the second still little known, but they also bear direct evidence on one question that has preoccupied Western historians of Southeast Asia – whether the political economy of early Southeast Asia resulted in rulers being more concerned with control of land or control of people.

Unfortunately, as I shall demonstrate below, both sides of this discussion have offered ad hoc, case-by-case pronunciamentos, which are then repeated like mantra, without attention to what the sources really show, or to the contradictions which ensue. Critical discussion of the question is long overdue; I now take the opportunity to launch it in connection with the Vientiane documents, which provide clear evidence in one direction for one area of mainland Southeast Asia.

LAND OR PEOPLE?

The conventional wisdom is that ‘the concept of national boundaries […] did not exist in Southeast Asia […]’;¹ and close to the area of interest here: ‘The boundary of the kingdom, or of a province, was always left vague, while the
Some expositions of this doctrine, which has acquired mantra quality, are the following.

Charnvit Kasetsiri, in his *The Rise of Ayudhya*, wrote that:

[T]hroughout the history of mainland South-East Asia manpower has always been a major problem. The land area has been very large but the population to maintain a wet-rice economy has been small. Therefore, the socio-economic system of the low river-valleys tended to welcome a large influx of population. In short, the old kingdoms of the lowlands, whether Mon or Khmer, probably were more hospitable to the new people. Thus their economic system created a situation in which the Thai could move south and settle in the lowlands of the Menam Basin.

This implies two things: 1) that the lowlands populated by Mon and Khmer, before the arrival of the Thai, operated a commercial rice-production economy, presumably for export (a view which, I believe, is not held by any historian), for the ratio of population to land is irrelevant if rice is grown only for subsistence, provided only that there is enough land to feed the existing population; 2) that the Thai, before they moved into the lowland river valleys, were relatively overpopulated in relation to land, which is the opposite of the mantra, and is also demographically illogical, for the lowland areas, with ample fertile land, were more likely to have had faster growing populations. At most it says that some polities may have been land hungry, while others were not. In any case, the examples evoked by Charnvit are infelicitous.

Moreover, earlier in the same work, Charnvit had written that ‘the central region of the kingdom of Dvaravati was […] economically important’, with rich soil from several rivers, Menam, Mekong, Suphanburi, Lophburi, Pasak. He adds that because it was ‘[c]riss-crossed by these natural river-lines, no very great human effort was necessary to turn the region into a major producer of rice’. Thus this area would not have been seeking to artificially increase its population. On the contrary: ‘As production developed, it required and provided the means of subsistence for a considerable body of manpower [meaning that with easy food production population would have naturally increased]. It is noticeable that when the empire of Angkor reached the height of its power, it repeatedly tried to control this area to absorb its reserves of manpower […]’.

First, this central region of Dvaravati was the same area which Charnvit in the context cited above had said was lacking in population and therefore open to immigration, and this statement contradicts Charnvit’s other view of the Menam basin as short of population in comparison with available land. Second, there is no evidence for this type of Angkor interest in the Menam basin.

The history of Angkor-lower Menam basin relations is anything but clear. However, there is certainly no clear evidence that Angkorean expansion
westward was designed to acquire control over manpower. Since Angkor had the same type of economy as the Menam basin, its man-land relationship would have been similar. Angkor influence, both cultural and political, did expand into the Menam basin, especially in the eleventh to twelfth centuries (most clearly in the reigns of Suryavarman I [1002–1050], Suryavarman II [1113?–1145/50?] and Jayavarman VII [1181–1220?]); but the economic aspect was more likely to have been acquisition of valuable produce more than people, and control over the ports on the Gulf of Thailand. The latter two of those kings tried to impose Cambodian control over the coast of Champa and invaded Vietnam. Jayavarman had roads constructed from Angkor into Champa, central and northeast Thailand and Laos, at the same time opening new relations with China. All of this occurred when the Sung were encouraging new developments in maritime trade between China and Southeast Asia. One must hypothesize that the Cambodian initiatives, in the twelfth century especially, were connected with the new Chinese policies. The evidence is even stronger in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when there are more Chinese records of contact with Cambodia than during the previous 500 years.7

Charnvit continued, ‘both Ayudhya and Bangkok were able to stabilize their power only because of their secure control over this centre of rice production’. This is not at all certain. The most recent studies of the area suggest that both Ayutthaya and Bangkok developed and prospered as international maritime trading polities, not as states based on control of agricultural land, and not, until the nineteenth century, with primary emphasis on export of rice.8 And when Charnvit further argues that, compared to ‘Chiengmai and Sukhothai, both of which found eventually that they could not feed their populations from their own agricultural resources, and so lost military ascendancy’, he is in fact acknowledging that some important Southeast Asian polities were land-hungry (and abstracting entirely from the historical validity of the statement).

Thus the problem for the northern kingdoms may have been lack of land. It is not at all certain that Angkor desired manpower in central Thailand, rather than simply control over the rich agricultural resources. It is also noteworthy that the legends of the founding of Ayutthaya, whatever their value as history, imply a search for land, not for people.9

In a similar vein, Akin Rabibhadana wrote as follows:

One particular characteristic of the historical Southeast Asian mainland states was the lack of manpower. The need for manpower is well illustrated by events following each war between Thailand and her neighbours. The victorious side always carried off a large number of people from the conquered territory. Whole villages were often moved into the territory of the conqueror, where they were assimilated and became the population of the conqueror. The Thai seem to have been especially aware of the importance of having a large population. The famous inscription of the early Thai King Ram Khamhaeng could be interpreted...
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as an advertisement inducing people to come and settle in the Sukhothai kingdom.¹⁰

Akin commented further that La Loubère said ‘the people developed only half the plain into rice fields, and commented that the size of the population was not commensurate with the size of the country’.¹¹ As noted above, this situation would only be relevant to the mantra in an economy attempting to expand rice production for export, which was not the case in the 1680s, when export of rice was generally prohibited. Interestingly, Akin contradicts Charnvit’s view of the reasons for the eventual weakness of the north compared to Ayutthaya: ‘From existing evidence, the history of Thai society can be traced back to the early thirteenth century when Thai chiefs attacked and defeated the Khmer commander of Sukhothai […] which became powerful during the latter half of the century’. But ‘the dominant position of Sukhothai did not last long, for within the next century her power was eclipsed by another Thai center, Ayutthaya’. Continuing: ‘It appears that the main problem of establishing a viable kingdom in this area [Sukhothai] was the control of manpower. The area was under-populated, and the movement of people was extremely difficult to control’.¹² Before attempting to theorize this problem, some agreement on basic facts is required. Was Sukhothai underpopulated, or short of land?

Another example of the mantra quality is the blatantly contradictory treatment of this subject by David Wyatt: ‘As much as anything else, the Tai müang was an instrument for the efficient use of manpower in a region where land was plentiful in relation to labor and agricultural technology’. And Wyatt continues with the Thai elite view of class relations, saying that patron-client relationship was not too one-sided, ‘Pushed to a confrontation, the chao could rely upon superior force, but the village farmer could resort to flight to the surrounding wilderness or to a neighboring müang eager to gain his labor’.¹³ The contradiction, however, starts on the following page: ‘During the first millennium of the Christian Era, the population of the Tai communities of upland, interior Southeast Asia apparently steadily increased. Under the prevailing ecological and political conditions, it was natural that there should have been a slow expansion of this population in a western and southwestern direction’.¹⁴ Thus for those communities it was land-hunger, not desire for more labour. As Wyatt continues:

The early chronicles of Tai groups […] are filled with stories of demographic and political movement and expansion. The patterns of movement they depict are remarkably consistent. Characteristically, a ruler would gather together the men of his müang and form them into a military expedition, usually under the leadership of one of his sons. They would conquer, or simply colonize, a distant region and settle it with families from the parent müang, who would ‘turn the forest into rice-fields’ and settle in organized communities ruled by the young
prince. The ruler might organize such campaigns for a whole succession of his
sons, giving each a principality of his own to rule while enhancing the power of
the parent müang [...]. In northern Vietnam and Laos, where this movement
must have occurred, the mountain valleys suitable for rice cultivation are
extremely small and narrow, and are separated by difficult, mountainous
territory. Thus the demographic and political center of gravity of the Tai
population could have moved fairly rapidly.15

Even more evidence of land hunger is presented by Wyatt, who states that
‘[a]s late as the end of the twelfth century, no regional Tai states had yet
descended to the great plains that alone would support the expansion and
enrichment of a population to the point where it could form the basis of a major
kingdom on the scale of Angkor or Pagan’.16 Although on the same page Wyatt
compounds contradictions with, ‘What local Tai chieftains and princes had in
these areas was control over manpower, which was always in short supply
throughout Southeast Asia. Their ability to mobilize a population was both a
danger to the major empires and a source of potential strength to them’.

We might note here that the Lao legend of Khun Borom sending out sons to
take possession of new territories implies conquest of territory, not acquisition
of people to work on surplus land.

Studies of another thickly populated part of Southeast Asia, Java, also show
evidence contrary to the mantra. In the second half of the seventeenth century,
Tegal Wangi, Susuhunan of Mataram (1646–77), sent groups of people to settle
his western frontier. The central Java border was along the Ci-Tarum River
300 km west. Some people from Ayah settled in Krawang, some from
Banyumas settled at Tanjung Pura and people from Cirebon settled at Ci-Anjur.
These are examples of surplus population looking for more land. In the 1660s,
an inscription in Krawang records the collection of surplus rice to send to the
Susuhunan in Central Java, and the Dutch confirmed that Mataram people were
moving into the wet-rice area of Krawang in 1620–50. These migrations
infiltrated Javanese into a Sundanese area.17 (A ‘beach-head’, as in Kachorn
Sukhabanich’s ‘Beach-head States’?) In West Java, at the time, rice cultivation
was not usually wet-rice, but dry fields of gaga or tipar types;18 and the Central
Java people brought wet-rice cultivation, which may have resulted in a kind of
land colonization (thus surplus people searching for more land).

There is no doubt that after some wars the victors forcibly took away large
numbers of the defeated population; however, was it for the purpose of putting
them to work productively on surplus land in the possession of the victors? On
one nineteenth-century occasion witnessed by European diplomatic staff, the
brutal resettlement in 1876 of 6,000 Phuan from Lao to Thai territory, the death
toll suggests that the purpose was to weaken the defeated territory, not, first of
all, to acquire new workers.19
Other mantra treatments are in the works of Michael Aung-Thwin. In one context Aung-Thwin wrote:

One of the main themes in early Southeast Asian history has been the struggle for, and effective organization of, labour. Since land was plentiful, the key to economic growth and political power was the effective control of human resources. Much of the warfare of early Southeast Asia witnessed the victor carrying off half the population of the vanquished foe and later resettling them on his own soil. [Pagan was located in the dry belt of Burma, and:] depended mainly upon irrigated agriculture for its economic base. Land was plentiful but labor was extremely difficult to obtain.

There is a contradiction in economic logic here. Irrigation for agriculture is necessary when population outgrows land available to supply sufficient food using more primitive methods. Development of irrigation implies that the population is outgrowing land under given conditions. As Aung-Thwin continues: ‘In the eleventh century, Aniruddha provided the kingdom with additional labor from Thaton in lower Burma and began the process of centralization’. He brought the Buddhist sangha from Thaton and ‘aristocracy, artisans, and other miscellaneous persons’. Here, however, Aung-Thwin has misused his sources, which do not record large-scale population transfer, but only small groups of specialists, none of them agricultural.

According to this tale, Shin Arahan told Aniruddha that the Tripitaka, and many relics, were in Thaton. Aniruddha requested a set but the king of Thaton refused. After the conquest Aniruddha took the relics, the scriptures, King Manuha and his family; and ‘mighty men of valor’; and ‘thereafter he sent away separately, without mixing, such men as were skilled in carving, turning […]’. When Aniruddha reached Pagan he ‘made separate quarters for the mighty men of valour to dwell in, and the host of learned men whom he had brought’. The people he took were all sorts of craftsmen, skilled workers, with no mention of agriculturists.

In another work, Aung-Thwin wrote that many asaṇā [a population category] were Mon, explaining that ‘this relationship may have stemmed from Aniruddha’s conquest in the mid-eleventh century of the Mon kingdom of Thaton in Lower Burma, when he brought back with him the bulk of the Mon population, including large numbers of the artisan class’. Aung-Thwin fudges again. No source says he brought back ‘the bulk of the Mon population’. This exaggeration had already appeared in Aung-Thwin’s thesis, where he wrote that Pagan was in the dry belt, and ‘depended mainly upon irrigated land for its economic base. Land was plentiful at first, but labor was difficult to procure. In the 11th century, King Aniruddha […] provided the Kingdom with this needed additional labor by sacking coastal Thaton in Lower Burma and importing most of its productive classes – the artisans as well as the Buddhist...
clergy along with the whole royal family – into Pagan, precisely what Nanchao had done to the Pyus earlier’. Again, it is important to realize that need for irrigation implies a population running out of land, the reverse of Aung-Thwin’s argument.

As for what Aniruddha did or did not do in Thaton, the Mon chronicle, in Halliday’s translation, reports that ‘[…] Noratha […] came marching down from Pagan […] the design of digging up the relics’. He failed and he made gold and silver umbrellas to offer to the relics. Not only is Mon tradition contrary to the type of conquest related in the Burmese chronicles, but the story has a definitely legendary character. There is no date for this passage, and it follows a section about Asoka, ‘in the time of King Tatabong and Mancesu’.

Still another interpretation by Aung-Thwin is somewhat different from all of the above: ‘After securing his front – which bordered the kingdom of Nanchao [modern Yunnan] – with stockades he [Aniruddha] attacked his rear (Thaton), imported skilled and unskilled labor, and instituted a hierarchically structured Buddhist church’; but, ‘Justifying his attack as Dharmawijaya or righteous conquest, Aniruddha left Thaton more or less intact [sic, thus, no ‘sacking coastal Thaton’, as above], neither settling on it nor directly incorporating the port city into the Pagan administrative apparatus. Rather, Thaton was left as a neutral port with access to the outside world’.27

In his latest work Aung-Thwin’s thought has evolved still further in the direction of the position I maintain here. ‘The conquest of Thaton by Aniruddha in 1057 was an attempt by agrarian Upper Burma to exert its control over and acquire the revenues [emphasis added] of coastal Burma, not a Burmese conquest of Mon peoples. It was justified in religious terms, legitimized as dharmavijaya (righteous conquest) in order to obtain holy relics […]’.28 It must be emphasized that no chronicle records the importation of unskilled labour from Thaton to Pagan, only skilled artisans.

Of course, as usual, those obstreperous Vietnamese were different. Not only did they win wars they were not supposed to win, but their history, both in popular and academic treatments, required a different mantra. It was a constant movement of people southward (nam tiến) in search of fertile rice land. As Nayan Chanda quoted Paul Mus, they ‘flowed across Indochina like a flood carrying off other peoples wherever they occupied lowland rice field[s] or where it could be put under rice’. For many years Michael Cotter’s treatment of ‘the Vietnamese Southward Movement’ was the standard.29 Until very recently, when there has been progress among Vietnam specialists, no historian took up the challenge to resolve these conflicting mantra about the political economy of ancient Southeast Asia.

A careful look at a physical map should have inspired doubt about this special mantra for Vietnam, which illustrates even better than the general Southeast Asian mantra how a mantra may get a grip on even the best scholars, for Mus, at least, had not only seen the maps, but knew the terrain thoroughly
from personal investigation. South of the Red River plain, the area of land suitable for rice in former Champa is very limited, a narrow strip between sea and mountains, with small deltas at river mouths. The Vietnamese conquest of Champa was certainly not for the purpose of acquiring new rice land for a surplus population in the North.

Difficulty in overcoming the mantra is seen even in the work of new Vietnam specialists who go beyond Cotter’s simplistic treatment. Li Tana, for example, who has emphasized the strategic and non-agricultural economic reasons for the Vietnamese move southward, still felt constrained, perhaps under pressure of the academic environment in which she was working at the time, to write that ‘the later pattern of southern expansion was shaped by the physical objective of occupying land’, but ‘early episodes […] were aimed instead at seizing people and treasure, a typical pattern in Southeast Asia warfare’. For this, however, she provided only the examples of 100 Cham ladies seized in 982, and 360 Cham prisoners released in 992, hardly in line with the mantra about seizing populations to work empty land. This no doubt accounts for her almost surreptitious modification of the mantra to ‘seizing people and treasure’.

Obviously uncomfortable with this nod to conventional wisdom, Li Tana continued with the example of Hồ Quý Ly, ‘who pressed rich but landless Vietnamese to migrate’ to land conquered from the Cham, adding that when the Nguyễn forcibly moved people, they ‘were especially concerned to increase the number of their Vietnamese subjects […] the principal source of military conscripts’, which was ‘unorthodox behavior’ in terms of Southeast Asian warfare in which population was taken due to ‘low population and abundant land’.30

First, the very concept of a steady Vietnamese Drang nach Süden (nam tiến) requires rethinking. It was not steady, and its stages show that there was no continuing policy of southward expansion. Each move was ad hoc, in response to particular challenges, as Li Tana put it: a ‘series of different episodes responding to particular events or opportunities’.31 The first war between independent Vietnam and Champa broke out when the Cham king agreed to aid a Vietnamese rebel in an attempt to overthrow the reigning Vietnamese king.32 The plot failed, and Champa suffered. Many other conflicts were started by the Cham, and in the period 1360s–90, under a notable warrior-prince, Che [a Cham princely title] Bong Nga, the Cham ravaged the North for years, and nearly conquered Vietnam, but after their failure were forced to give several northern Cham provinces to Vietnam. The complexity of relations between the two peoples is seen in the appointment of Che Bong Nga’s son to govern those provinces for Vietnam, which he did forcefully, to the extent of fighting off other Cham from the South who tried to re-conquer them.33

Now one of the leading historians of Vietnam states bluntly that ‘I do not believe that such an event [nam tiến] ever took place’, and, like Li Tana, he writes in more detail of a series of episodes. Moreover, ‘rather than southward
expansion of the Vietnamese people, the archive [sic] suggests the formation of new ways to act Vietnamese in terrain previously inhabited by speakers of Cham and other languages’, where ‘some families who now identify themselves as Vietnamese trace their ancestry to Cham speakers’.34

Mus noted the high level of Cham rice technology, which had no doubt developed because of the scarcity of good land, and the fact that the Vietnamese ‘conquerors did not even put back into service all of the clever irrigation systems of the conquered’. And as Li Tana has noted, ‘the weak agricultural base […] could hardly sustain a desperate struggle with […] the Trinh north’; and ‘in Dang Trong the Vietnamese encountered land that was thick with grass and hard to farm’, which forced them to adapt the Cham plough, for which they still use some of the Cham terminology. Or perhaps they are Vietnamized Cham, as Taylor suggests.35

The nam tiến seems to be definitely out of favour. Nevertheless, the secular result of the episodes which, according to Li Tana and Keith Taylor, were mistaken for a nam tiến was the spread of Vietnamese language, rule by Vietnamese and to some extent a southward movement of one group of Vietnamese leaders with their supporting population. Neither of the mantra can account for it. Is there a materialist explanation? Taylor shies away from anything like that, but Li Tana states it emphatically and, I think, correctly.36

A close look at the map, and some attention to the history of pre-Vietnamese Champa, should have suggested that if there was something which the Vietnamese desired in Champa, apart from responding to Cham provocations, it was the Cham ports, important in the international trade of the time, and their access to upland areas with the valuable products supplying that trade.37

That was probably also the reason for the Cambodian conquests in Champa in the reigns of the Angkor kings Suryavarman II (1113?–1150?) and Jayavarman VII (1181–1220?) – conquest and occupation, which may have done more to destabilize Champa than the wars with Vietnam. The Angkor Cambodians, at least, were not searching for rice land, nor is there any sign that they tried to transport a Cham population to increase their own agricultural labour force. When, finally, the wars between Vietnam and the Cham polities had led to Vietnamese occupation of all of what is now central Vietnam, and the establishment of a new Vietnamese political centre there, the Nguyễn kingdom developed, as should be expected from the geography, as a centre of maritime trade, in conflict with the North.

As Li Tana put it, ‘Dang Trong’s difficult terrain meant that the navy was a vital component of the Nguyễn armed forces’; ‘Overseas trade was the engine driving Dang Trong’s spectacular development […] the crucial factor explaining how this thinly populated land was able to resist’; ‘Maritime trade was no doubt a most important stimulus to Nguyễn state formation’; ‘Economic factors played a decisive role’ in the formation of Nguyễn-Dang Trong, and ‘Perhaps the most important characteristic which made the new southern kingdom…'
Vietnamese different from Vietnamese in the north was their attitude towards overseas trade. Dang Trong was born in an age of “commerce”; Nguyên power ‘rested on this overseas trade […] by following the Cham example […].’

Taylor also, while trying, as noted above, to avoid a materialist explanation, could not avoid the facts. Nguyên Hoàng ‘established the direct presence of his family in Quang Nam in 1602, shortly after [emphasis added] his final fateful departure from the north’, and ‘he placed his most competent son in command’, which ‘reveals the importance he attached to the place […] more prosperous than Thuan Hoa’, and ‘surely the presence of foreign merchants was not unconnected with this’. The evidence forces Taylor to a conclusion which he finds ‘curious’: ‘the port of Faifo was a prosperous international entrepôt for half a century before Nguyên Hoàng established a direct administrative presence in its vicinity’, and even before he did that, he ‘surely took an interest in the place and sent officers to supervise it’, for the sake of ‘order, security, and profit [emphasis added]’. Taylor chooses to emphasize that Nguyên Hoàng did not go beyond [emphasis added] those concerns, that is, he did not reside there. However, I think there is ample evidence to conclude that that particular phase of a Vietnamese nam tiến was impelled, not by a search for agricultural land on which to settle surplus people, but by the attraction of a mercantile coast which had already prospered under the Cham.

Even when they came in contact with Cambodia, it was not Cambodia’s rice land which was the first attraction. The first Nguyên demand on Cambodia was neither land nor people, but war elephants. As in the territory already conquered from the Cham, the Nguyên, once they gained control of the potentially rich rice land of the Cambodian South (French colonial Cochinchina, Khmer Kampuchea krom) in the eighteenth century, they did little to develop it, a task which fell upon the French. It was only then that the Mekong Delta plain became a rice granary which could attract massive Vietnamese peasant immigration.

Whether mantra or not, and noting that political-economic relationships in different societies may have been different, the problem of labour in relation to land was not peculiar to Southeast Asia, but familiar in Western Europe as well. As Marc Bloch wrote of Europe:

At that time when land was more abundant than man, when, besides, economic conditions prevented the exploitation of too large areas with wage or domestic labor, it was worth more to dispose of a permanent supply of labor and dependents than to stitch together parcel after parcel of land. […] Certainly the seigneurs sought to keep their peasants. Without people, what value did land have? But it was difficult to prevent departures, because the dispersal of authority worked, more than ever, against any effective police constraint, and besides, since virgin land was still very plentiful, it was hardly worth while to
threaten the fugitive with confiscation, for he was almost certain to find another establishment elsewhere.42

Of course, Bloch was writing of political-economic conditions quite different from those prevailing in Southeast Asia. In feudal Europe the lords were private land owners who required extra labour beyond their own families to cultivate a surplus giving them a luxurious lifestyle, and eventually to sell on a growing market. It was not just impractical for the individual lord to try to ‘stitch together’ parcels of land, it would have meant encroaching on land [even though perhaps in fact ‘virgin land’] of another lord, or the sovereign.

Thus, the problem of land or people with which I opened this section was not peculiar to Southeast Asia or to its historiography. It arises in any agrarian mode of production in which the surplus desired by those who can claim it is to be produced by the application of labour to land. The Champa-Vietnam case may now be seen as outside both of the mantra, and I suspect that when the requisite close reading has been performed, some of the Thai cases may serve to explode their conventional mantra, as do the Lao documents discussed below.

THE LAO DOCUMENTS: A CONTRIBUTION TO DE-MANTRIFICATION

The two Lao documents presented here do not support the conventional wisdom concerning Southeast Asia exclusive of Vietnam. Both of them delimit boundaries in great detail, and give much more emphasis to descriptions of territory than to enumeration or control of the population within it. One of them, the Phu Khiao text, moreover, is outside of both mantra in the importance it gives to acquisition of that territory as a source of valuable natural products desired by the kings of Vientiane. The Xamneua document, in its very detailed geographic and administrative description, is closer to the conventional Vietnam mantra than to that imputed to Thai areas, and it seems to reflect the influence of Vietnamese cadastral and census practices.

What is offered here is a preliminary description and commentary to indicate the historical interest of these two texts. A full study will require more detailed comparison with the better-known histories of the Lao kingdoms, Bangkok, Thonburi and late Ayutthaya, perhaps a task which will attract someone among the new generation of Lao scholars and encourage investigation of the records extant within Laos, first of all in the library of Wat Phra Kaeo in Vientiane.

PHU KHIAO

The first of the two chronicles is a palm leaf manuscript entitled Phongsawadan Phu Khiao, which was catalogued as Palm leaf manuscript no.
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36, Hanoi Collection, indicating that it had been part of the collection of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient kept in Hanoi and returned to Laos in the 1950s. Neither its language nor script presents great difficulty, being nineteenth-century precursors of what is now standard Vientiane Lao. Its author, source and place of composition are unknown, but the incorporation of local folk tradition indicates composition in the Isan, probably in Phu Khiao itself, and internal evidence, discussed below, indicates a date after 1848 and before the reign of King Mongkut (1851–68).

Phu Khiao is at present a district in Chaiyaphum Province and on a direct east-west line between the provincial capitals of Khon Kaen and Phetchabun, 75 km from the former and 100 km from the latter. In the early nineteenth century it apparently had some political or administrative importance, even though few extant records give it much attention, for the French missionary Pallegoix had heard that Phu Khiao and Suwannaphum were the two most important among ‘five or six small [Isan] states governed by princes who pay tribute to Siam’.

Its story is as follows:

According to the story handed down from one generation to the next, Mueang Phu Khiao was for a long time a forest. It belonged to the king. There was a man named Nai Ma who lived in Ban Kaluem, Mueang Phan, Khwaeng Mueang Vientiane. He was a hunter. He always went looking for horns, tusks and forest products in the forest of Phu Khiao. Finally he saw that the forest of Phu Khiao had silver and gold and many valuable things, so he took his wife, children and relatives and settled around Phu Khiao and grew rice in Ban Hin. Then birds and wild chickens came and ate his rice. He made nets and caught the birds.

Nai Ma raised wild chickens to use as fighting cocks. Whenever he had a contest with the fowl from other forests he won. He defeated the whole forest. Then Nai Ma took this fighting cock to offer to the king of Vientiane, and he told the king the whole story concerning this cock.

The king’s son took this cock and went around fighting wild cocks and won and got 10,000 in gold.

Nai Ma told the whole story and the king of Vientiane before Anou ordered that Nai Ma be given the name Khun Kai and put in charge of the people who collected beeswax and white cloth for the *suai* tax.

COMMENT: It is uncertain which king ‘before Anou’ (1804–27) is intended, for a detail below would place these events in early or mid-eighteenth century; but chronology, particularly with respect to events in surrounding states, is not a strong point of this chronicle. It is apparent that the story of Nai Ma and his fighting cock developed as an origin myth to explain the element *kai* in the nineteenth-century titles of Phu Khiao governors. The true etymology of *kai* in this context is from *krai*, ‘valiant, powerful, large’, showing the regular loss of
liquid consonants as second elements of clusters in Lao. Confirmation of this appears in Toem Viphakphocanakit’s book on the history of Isan, where governors of Phu Khiao are recorded as holding the title Phraya Krai Sihanat (‘Lion’ + ‘power), without any story explaining its origins. Indeed that source says Phu Khiao was established as a mueang in the reign of King Rama I under a governor entitled Praya Kraiphakdi, which, as we shall see, is contrary to the chronicle under study here.

(Page 2r) Many years later people from Vientiane emigrated to stay with Khun Kai. According to the census list there were 30,000 people. Khun Kai led the young men to the south to find honey bees, and they found a flintlock gun in a cave where there was a stone lion (sing). Khun Kai made offerings and performed rituals, and took this gun (page 3o) and shot rhinoceros and elephants in the forest and defeated the forest spirits. He got a lot of horns, ivory and wax. Then he went to offer them to the king of Vientiane and the king promoted him to the rank of Pha Kai Sihanat Chao Mueang Phu Khiao.

COMMENT: Here we see the explanatory purpose of the story continuing. The stone lion accounts for the element siha (=sing) in his titles (see comment above), while the gun represents power, natha. This bears evidence on the historical value of such chronicles in general. Thus by 1848–50 local chroniclers in Phu Khiao had no records or knowledge of true titles of local leaders earlier than the first years of the nineteenth century.

Later on (page 3r) the King of Vientiane divided the realm and gave Pha Kai Sihanat the territory from the Menam Lamphong, from Phu Khi Thao at the source of Nam Phong river; from there down eastward to the Menam Lam Pasi; from there across to Khok Khuang and to Ban Kut Luang which is the border with Mueang Suwannaphum. From there to the foot of Khok Luang westward (page 4o) to Khok Nong Em Nam San Khok to the Ko rapids on the Nam Lam Si on the border of Mueang Nakhon Latsasima [Ratchasima]; then along the Lam Si westward to the mouth of Huai Lam Siang ThaTok; along the Lam Siang westward, across Mt Khok, then to the Huai Ruak which was the boundary of Mueang Visian and on the west was the boundary with Mueang Phetsabun; (page 4r) from the Phya Pho pass to the summit of Bo Thong Kholo following the ridge of the Phu Khiao mountains northward to the Hin Co pass; leave it along the Huai Duk to Phu Kading to the source of the stream, and on the west side is the boundary of Mueang Lomsak. On the east is Mueang Phu Khiao.

COMMENT: Note the assumption that Vientiane ruled over much of what is now the Thai Isan. These boundaries outline a large irregular triangle including most of central Isan. The Nam Phong river flows southeastward from a source
Map 1.1. Location of Phu Khiao
in Loei into Khon Kaen Province where it joins the Chi/Si river. Then the line continues, apparently along the Chi/Si to some place close to Suwannaphum, then westward to Nakhon Ratchasima, then northward to Phetchabun and Lomsak, close to the area where the source of the Nam Phong should be located. Although the places named between Suwannaphum and Nakhon Ratchasima are not found on available maps, the trace of Phu Khiao’s southern boundary north of the Mul/Mun River is suggested by the absence of any mention of the Mul, and by the location of the western end of that boundary near the upper reaches of the Chi to the north of Nakhon Ratchasima. See Map 1.1.53

Much later Burma destroyed Mueang Phu Khiao and broke it all up. (Page 50) This was when Chao Fa Dok Duea was ruling Siam, but the natives of Phu Khiao of the party of Phya Thep fled and took refuge in Roi Et; Saen Rom took refuge in Suwannaphum; Saen Huk’s party took refuge in Nakhon Latsasima; Pha Kai’s party took refuge in Phetsabun; Khun Phom and the party of Phaya Nai Namvongsa took refuge in Mueang Vientiane.

COMMENT: This is the detail which confuses the chronology suggested above. It appears to refer to the Burmese invasion which resulted in the destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767. Chao Fa Dok Duea, however, otherwise known as King Utumphorn, ruled only from mid-April to May 1758, whereas both Thai and Burmese sources seem to agree that Burmese campaigns against Ayutthaya, in which Laos was involved, did not begin until 1760.54 The officials who fled were apparently subordinate to Pha Kai Sihanat in Phu Khiao, but I have not found reference to them elsewhere.

From then on (page 5r) Phu Khiao was deserted until the reign of Pha Loetla Nophalai and Pha Not Fa Chunlalok went and stole Nang Khiao Khom, younger sister of the Uparat of Mueang Vientiane and made her his queen in Krung Thep. Vientiane and Krung Thep were allies.

COMMENT: Pha Loetla Nophalai was King Rama II of Bangkok (1809–24), and Pha Not Fa Chunlalok was King Rama I (1782–1809). These titles date the composition of this chronicle as not before 1848, when they were given by King Rama III to his father and grandfather. It is not clear how the writer of this chronicle understood the reign sequence.55 The incident to which reference is made here is the conquest of Vientiane in 1778 by Rama I when he was still a general in King Taksin’s army. At that time he took a large group of Lao elite to Bangkok, including two royal princes, Nandasen and Anuvong, and a daughter of the Lao king, the Nang Khiao Khom mentioned here. In Sila Viravong’s history she is called Phra Nang Kaeo Nhot Fa Kalyansikasatri; and in Thao Ukham Phomvongsa’s The Lao Past she is entitled Phra Nang Kaeo Not Fa (Chao Nhung Khiao Khom). She was sister of both the next kings in Vientiane,
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Nandasen and Anuvong. With respect to her becoming queen in Bangkok, there seems to be conflation with another event, the marriage of Rama I with a daughter of King Inthavong in 1795. At least the latter is recorded in Bangkok dynastic genealogy as mother of a chao fa princess; and Rama I did not appoint an official queen, although his descendants imputed that rank to his first wife from the time before he became king. After the Thai invasion, King Siribunyasan returned to reign in Vientiane until his death a year later. Then Prince Nandasen was sent back from Bangkok to succeed him. This explains the Lao-Thai alliance.

(Page 60) After that there was an elephant catcher who caught a female white elephant. Anou of Vientiane ordered Thao Nammakhot, son of the old Pha Kai Singhanat, to take this white elephant to Krung Thep and he made Thao Nammakhot the Phaya Kai Singhanat. When Anou fought with Siam and could not win (page 6r) he wanted Phaya Kai Singhanat, Chao Mueang Phu Khiao, to go and negotiate with Krung Thep. Phaya Kai Singhanat refused. Anou executed Phaya Kai Singhanat in Ban Pho, Khwaeng Mueang Vientiane.

COMMENT: This seems to be an event recorded in the Bangkok chronicles, but with some difference in detail. There, following his defeat in 1827, Chao Anou is said to have retreated to Phu Khiao. He ordered the local Chao Mueang to come to meet him, and when the latter refused Anou had him killed. Then Anou established a new base at Nong Bua Lamphu, about 80 km north of Khon Kaen. No title is given for the Chao Mueang, nor is there any reference to Ban Pho.

When Anou had been defeated by Krung Thep, Chao Bodindesa [Bodindecha] came to organize provincial governments. Phaya Thep was made Pha Lakhon Si Bolilak Chao Mueang Khon Kaen; Phaya Saen Rom was made Pha Chanthathet in Nong Kong Kao, renamed Mueang Sonlabot; Nai Lae of Saen Huk’s party was made Pha Phakdi Chumphon in Ban Nong Pa Thao, renamed Mueang Chaiyaphum; Namvongsa was appointed as (page 7r) Pha Sithongsaiya Chao Mueang of Phu Wiang in Long Phu Kati; from Phya Kai Ma’s party they appointed Thao Khanti as Pha Kai Singhanat Chao Mueang Phu Khiao thenceforth. The four Mueang, Khon Kaen, Sonlabot, Phu Wiang and Chaiyaphum, were established within the old boundaries of Phu Khiao.

COMMENT: The reference to this in the Bangkok chronicle seems to be at a date equivalent to 12 January 1837. Phraya Bodindecha was sent to carry out a census in 31 mueang in the northeast, including Khon Kaen, Chonbot (Sonlabot) and Phu Wiang, but with no mention of Phu Khiao. No record of local officials’ titles is included. The four chiefs of the new mueang mentioned here are the same as those recorded above as having fled from the Burmese in
Figure 1.1. The Phongsawadan Xamneua at Wat Phra Kaeo, Vientiane.

(Photograph by Michael Vickery)
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the 1760s, which means (1) that the chronology is totally confused, (2) the Burmese attack was a later one, such as the great invasion of 1785, although it is not recorded as reaching the Isan, (3) Bodindecha’s organizational trip was earlier, or (4) the two incidents concern successive generations of officials bearing the same titles. Perhaps the mention of Burmese in Phu Khiao is quite mythical, resulting from a later generation explaining a real or imagined decline of their area in terms of warfare which had destroyed adjoining regions and which had become a paradigm for externally caused political collapse.

The borders of Muang Phu Khiao ‘now’ are, on the east, Mt Phu Meng as the border with Khon Kaen and Sonlabot; in the south (hua non) (page 8o) take Phu Phasahong as the boundary with Mueang Chaiyaphum; in the west take the ridge of Mt Khiao from Phaya Phlo pass [and] Co pass [four syllables incomprehensible] as boundary with Mueang Phetsabun and Mueang Lomsak. The border of Phu Khiao and Phu Wiang is the Nam Soen.60

If any Chao Phaya or Pha Mahakasat [king] in this Sumphuthip (jambudvipa) receives this phongsawadan, let him arrange a festival for his children and grandchildren with full honours. If he does not … [last sentence incomprehensible].

XAMNEUA

The second document, catalogued as Phongsawadan Xamneua, was marked ‘701 Hanoi’, indicating that it also had been in the Lao collection of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient in Hanoi, although it is not included among the manuscripts catalogued by Louis Finot in 1917. It is written in black ink on a scroll of white cloth 22 inches wide and about 4 metres in length with 104 lines of text, and is a grant of authority from the King of Vientiane to the chief official of Xamneua (see Figure 1.1).61 Michel Lorillard has informed me that there are several more Lao documents of this type in the National Library in Bangkok.

Eventually this document deserves complete transcription and translation with detailed discussion of its linguistic and orthographic features, and geographical details, but that would exceed the purpose and limitations of the present context, and I shall merely indicate the main administrative features and list the locations which it records.

The document begins with ‘Royal decree (phra rasa achana) [of] His Majesty (somdet boromyanat boromya bophitra somdet phra pen chao) the king of Chanthaburi (ongkha pen phra yu hua nai maha nakhon chanthaburi)’.62 The date is at the end, ‘Cunlasakarat 1173, ruang mes year, third month, 13th of the waning moon’, or 1811, which means that the King of Vientiane in question was Chao Anou, who had succeeded his brother, Chao Inthavong, in 1804.
If it is true that Vientiane only gained control over Huaphanh in 1791, as some sources indicate, this document may represent the first attempt to reorganize the area under Vientiane.63

This decree was ‘placed on the head’ (sai hua) of Phya Sisattha, the hua phan (‘chief of a thousand’) of Xamneua, Phya Phomvisai, and ‘the 5 khun mueang and 3 khun phong, in order that they conjointly protect the Buddhist faith, the country (ban muang), population, water resources (nam nong), slaves and buildings in the territory of Taseng Mueang Xamneua’.

As is clear from another detail below, the taseng, then as now, was a subordinate division of a mueang, and Phya Sisattha was chief only of Taseng Xamneua, not a Chao Mueang.

The decree grants authority over a carefully delimited territory, with the population in it; but it is the territory which is outlined in detail. Its boundaries are described with reference to natural features, mostly water courses, and in terms of physically moving from one point to another, as ‘go along huai [stream] x’, ‘cross huai x’, ‘go up Mt x’, ‘go down to x’. There are 150 such names around an area approximately 75 km from east to west and the same distance north to south with the town of Xamneua in the centre.64 It is thus not the entire area known in Thai sources as Hua Mueang Ha Thang Hok, or the modern province of Huaphanh, but only one part of it.65 Within that area 50 population centres and work areas are listed, 28 ban, 5 mueang, 9 na (rice fields) and 7 communities of phai, people subject to conscript labour for the government; but there is no reference to numbers of people.66 Administrative centres are given more emphasis than manpower.

Although only 23 of the names of geographical features, and 4 of the names of population centres can be located on the 1:250,000 map of Xamneua, they are sufficient to show that the list circumscribes a roughly circular area. Most of the boundary features are water courses (huai, ‘stream’, nam, ‘river’, nong, ‘pond’, sop, ‘confluence’); some of the others are elevations (pha, phu), ‘forests’ (pa), ‘districts’ (kaeo) and one animal feeding place or salt lick (pung, no. 121 below).67 The list ends with the location at which it began, indicating with certainty that a closed boundary was intended. (Refer to the appendix for a list of the boundary features in the order they occur in the text.)

Following this is a list of population centres (ban), fields (na) and groups of people (phai) contained within the boundary which had been outlined.

Following this are instructions concerning persons who may attempt to flee from their obligations. The officials named in this document ‘should not let the people become confused, scatter and run away anywhere to the south or to the north […] if any do flee to any ban or mueang, the Phya Hua Phan Xamneua [and the other officials] should consult together and send a suitable and reliable thao phaya to bring them back’.

Attention is also given to disciplining minor officials. ‘If the Phya Hua Phan
Xamneua […] gives orders to the thao khun (ranks) sip (10) roi (100) noi (small) yai (big). [that is ‘officials (thao khun) in charge of 10, or 100, low and high (in rank)’] […] and any of them are refractory and do not obey, the Phya Hua Phan Xamneua, Phya Phomvisai […] should consult together and determine the appropriate punishment’. In the process the Xamneua officials are urged to be fair in their judgements, and not to extort bribes while conducting judicial affairs.

In such matters there was apparently an appeal procedure, for the text continues to the effect that if the parties to a case objected to the judgement of the local authorities, the latter were instructed to take them to the Uparat of the Hua Mueang, that is, the deputy of a Chao Mueang, which proves that Taseng Xamneua was only a division of a Muang. Then, if the Uparat could not render a suitable judgement, the litigants were to be taken to Phya Titsaras, the Chao Mueang of Mueang Sui [Souei], which may mean that Taseng Xamneua was within Mueang Souei. The final stage in the appeal process, if the governor of Mueang Souei was unsuccessful, lay with the Akha Maha Sena, a chief minister, in Vientiane.68

The relationship with Mueang Souei is intriguing, for it is now part of Xieng Khuang Province, as it was already in the reign of Rama III. This document suggests that in 1811 Muang Souei was part of Vientiane, or that Xieng Khuang itself was still in the subordinate relationship to Vientiane which had been established in 1787 by Chao Anou’s elder brother King Nandasen.69

The last set of instructions concerns products which were royal monopolies, forbidden to others, and which had to be delivered entirely to the royal treasury in Vientiane. These included poisonous plants, beeswax, a type of cloth (pha khaeo), rhinoceros horns, ivory, tusks of [male] elephants which had died and short female tusks [khnai] which had fallen out, logs for making pirogues, lac and various types of resins.70 All other products which were not reserved for the state could be kept and used locally.

This interesting document seems in fact to be a kind of constitution organizing Xamneua both politically and economically. It will repay further study, and should be published in full with a complete annotated translation and with all locations listed in Lao script and indicated on an adequate map.

With respect to the manta, it reflects neither a search for new land nor for new people to work surplus land, but an attempt at detailed organization by higher authorities of a delimited administrative area with its population in order to furnish special local products to central authorities.

According to another mantra, seen particularly in Cambodia studies, such detailed central government concern with the minutiae of local organization was foreign to the Khmer, Thai or Lao, but typically Vietnamese, and which the latter tried to force on their neighbors in times of Vietnamese expansion. In this view leanings toward Vietnam by Lao or Cambodian princes struggling against another hegemonist to the west represent betrayal of national interests.
As an example, see the treatment of King Ang Chan by David Chandler and Ian Mabbett, where there is an unfortunate projection of modern chauvinism back into the early nineteenth century in the attribution of ‘the monarchy’s loss of credit’ to ‘the unfortunate choice made by […] King Chan (r.1806–34) to resist Siam by seeking countervailing patronage of Vietnam’. It is bad history to treat Chan and the Cambodian aristocrats who preferred to seek patronage from Vietnam rather than from Thailand as less patriotic or less competent.\textsuperscript{71}

The Xamneua document, issuing from a ruler considered a Lao patriot \textit{par excellence}, suggests that some elements of ‘Vietnamization’ may have been attractive to Lao and Cambodian courts caught in a pincer between larger neighbours, and that this behaviour in no way signifies in itself a lack of national sentiment (assuming that such existed in those times).\textsuperscript{72}
APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION OF NAMES OF PEOPLE AND PLACES OCCURRING IN THE TWO CHRONICLES

Within the text the editors have chosen for the Lao terminology a type of ad hoc roughly approximate phonetic transcription similar to what has often been used for writing about Laos in the English-language academic milieu. For readers with some knowledge of Lao and/or Thai and some understanding of linguistics I attach below a list of the Lao terminology marked to enable them to restore the original Lao spellings. Since there has never been unity about transcription, even among specialists, I have arbitrarily adapted the most widely used systems in ways which I believe will be helpful.73

Thus I have underlined in transcription all low class consonants (˚, ˛, ˛, ˛, ˚, ˚) which need to be distinguished from phonetically identical high class (˚, ˚, ˚, ˚, ˚, ˚), thus: kh, s, th, ph, f, in contrast to kh, s th, ph, f. Historically, the Lao consonants ˚ (graph ˚) and ˚ (graph ˚) do not form a pair although they are respectively low and high class. Lao ˚/˚ corresponds to both standard Thai so so (˚) and cho chang (˚).74 In Lao there is no high-class /ch/ (Thai ˚). Double slashes around a letter, as /s/, mean phonetic transcription, either in normal or phonetic script. Italics in script indicates graphic/Indological transliteration of Lao script. The vowel ai represents mai muan (˚) and m represents final /m/ written as a small circle over a vowel symbol, as (˚), ām. Further conventions are e = e, ee = e, ō = a, ō = medial and final o (˚/˚). In open syllable final position this vowel is represented by a small circle above the consonant (˚/b). The graphs á and é indicate those short vowels respectively designated with the sign called mai han akat in Thai; short /a/ is also indicated with a following colon, corresponding to an identical sign in Lao (Thai visarrjani); å, i, u are the written long vowels; -ya = -ia, corresponding to the Lao orthography; and the velar and palatal nasals are respectively ng (˚, ˚/, ˚) and nh (˚, ˚/, ˚), illustrated successively in Lao script, phonetic script and graphic transliteration. Final /t/ written with a (-s) is transcribed -t(s). Note that written initial r is pronounced /h/ in Lao, and toponyms transcribed here with r may be written with h in other sources, such as maps.

These conventions, however, are not sufficient to indicate all of the obsolete or idiosyncratic spellings in the text, nor the use of conjunct/subscript consonants in ways different from modern Lao, which can only be shown by a rigorous transliteration. That would add to the difficulties of the general reader, and can wait for a full treatment on a later occasion.75
TWO HISTORICAL RECORDS OF THE KINGDOM OF VIENTiane

1) From Phongsawadan Phu Khiao

In the text

Phu Khiao
Nai Ma
Ban Kaluem
Mueang Phan
Khwaeng Mueang Vientiane
Ban Hin
Phraya Krai Sihanat
Praya Kraiphakdi
Pha Kai Sihanat Chao Mueang Phu Khiao
Natha
Phu Khi Thao
Nam Phong
Menam Lam Pasi
Khok Khuang
Ban Kut Luang
Khok Luang
Khok Nong Em Nam San Khok
Ko rapids
Huai Lam Siang Tha Tok
Nam Lam Siang
Mt Khok
Huai Ruak
Mueang Visian
Mueang Phetsabun
Phya Pho Pass
Bo Thong Kholo
Hin Cho Pass
Huai Duk
Phu Kading
Chao Fa Dok Duea
Phaya Thep
Saen Rom
Saen Huk
Khun Phom
Phaya Namvongsa
Pha Loetla Nophalai
Pha Not Fa Chunlalok
Nang Khiao Khom

Michael Vickery’s transcription

Phủ Khiau
Nây Mả
Bân Kaleum
Môang Phan
Khveeng Môang Vientiane
Bân Hin
Phraya Krai Sihanâth
Praya Kraiphakdi
Pha: Kai Sihanâth Cau Môang Phủ Khiau
Nâtha
Phủ Khi Thau
Nam Phông
Menam Lâm Pasí
Khôk Khuang
Bân Kut Hluong
Khôk Hluong
Khôk Nông Em Nâm Sán Khôk
Kô rapids
Huay Lamient Tha Tok
Nam Lament Siang
Mt Khôk
Huay Ruok
Môang Visien
Môang Phetsabun
Phya Pho Pass
Bo Thong Khôlô
Hin Co: Pass
Huay Duk
Phû Ka:ding
Cau Fâ Dôk Dôa
Phyâ Thep
Seen Rôm
Seen Huk
Khun Phôm
Phyâ Nâmvongsä
Pha: Lôthlâ Nophâlai
Pha: Nhôt Fâ Chunlâlôk
Nâng Khiau Khôm
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Phra Nang Kaeo Nhōt Fa
Kālyanāsrikasatī
Chao Nhing Khiao Khom
King Intavong
King Siribunyasan
Thao Nammakhōt
Ban Phō
Chao Bodindeśa/Phya Bodindecha
Pha Lakhon Si Bōlilāk Chao Mueang Khon Kaen
Pha Chanthathet
Nong Kong Kaeo
Nai Lāe
Pha Phakdi Chumphōn
Ban Nong Pa Phaophai
Namvongsā
Pha Sithongsaiya
Long Phu Kati
Thao Khantī
Mt Phu Meng
Phu Phasahong
Phya Phlō
Phya Cho
Nam Soen

2) From Phongsawadan Xamneua
phra rāsa āchnā
somdet boromyanāth boromya
bophitra somdet phra pen chao
ongkha pen phra yu hua nai maha
nakhon chanthaburi
Chanthaburi
Phaya Sisathha
Hua Phan
Phaya Phomvisai
Khun Phong
Nam Nong
Mueang Sui
Pung
Akha Maha Sena

Phra Nāng Keev Nhōt Fā
Kālyanāsrāka:satī
Cau Nhing Khiau Khōm
King Inthavong
King Siribunyasaːn
Thāv Nāmma:khot
Bān Phō
Chao Bōdindesā/Phra:yā Bodindechā
Phā: Lā:khōn Sī Bōːlīlāk Cau Mōːng Khonkaen
Pha: Chānthaːthet
Nōng Kōng Keev
Nāy Lee
Pha: Phā:kdi Chumphōn
Bān Nōng Pā Thau
Nāmvongsā
Pha: Sīthongsaiyaː
Lōːnɡ Phū Kati
Thāːu Khantī
Mt Phū Meng
Phū Phaːsāhōŋ
Phyā Phlō
Phyā Coː
Nam Sōn

phra rāsa āchnā
Somdec boromyanāth boromya
bophitra somdec phraː pēn cau
ongkhaː pēn phraː yu hua nai māːhā
nakhːaː rāː cáːnthaː būːrī
Cāndapūrī
Phyā Sisathā
Hua Phān
Phyā Phomvīːgāi
Khun Phōːng
Nam Hńːng
Mōːng Suy
Pūŋg
Ākhaː maːhāːsenā
3) The boundary features in the order they occur in Phongsawan Xamneua

keev râp hóm pôm ná dong (1), huay khua mu’n (2), hua phû khû (3), phâ sing (4), keev deen mûang fûng (5), phâ árong (6), phû 3 sau (7), phâ árin (8), cîk pâ peek (9), huay árin (10), huay tra:buân (11), huay sât (12), hîn phâ năng (13), thâm kô keev bô: hû (14), huay râv (15), phâ suak (16), cîk pâ peek (17), suan taï (18), phû teeng lây kây (19), keev phûk bong (20), cîk pâ ön (21), huay phâ thòng (22), huay ka:sâv (23), sop huay tra:khôn (24), huay kra:sâong (25), nam nhôy khoj (26), phû fûang (27), pâ kheek (28), pâ khoan (29), huay màs(t) (30), keev nhôm (31), pâ huay phûk muang (32), huay pâ Hàst(t) (33), keev phû hín tàng (34), huay câkô noy (35), huay thûm (36), näm eet (37), sop i (38), näm i (39), huay sa:mû: (40), pâ têt(s) (41), phû bêt(s) (42), keev hông (43), thông ta:du:n (44), pâ nâm sâi (45), hua phû hmûk fûang (46), hông hûy (47), phâ nok ngeek (48), huay yeen (49), phû lyam (50), keev dêt(s) dêng (51), phû ceeng (52), phû syang rai nâm moy khoj phû pênh khêt (53), phûk huay tai sán (54), nham(t)s ceeng pênh khêt (55), phû hûn kông (56), huay sguôn (57), nâm sa:neen (58), sop sngût(s) (60), dûn ngûak (61), nâm cêek (62), sop lûk (63), phû keng (64), nâm moy khoj phû pênh khêt (65), keev sîk hûa phû (66), huay 3 lûn (67), nâm tông (68), huay hûng nga huwa dûn pênh khêt (69), keev som bo long (70), nâm lûn (71), sop dêng (72), sán huang (73), phû deeng (74), mai khôn 3 sum (75), keev rahu (76), sop huay Hành dön (77), sop huay nâm tûen (78), keev hûn lúng (79), keev pâ khôm moy (80), huay phû thòng (81), phû hmûk (82), hông bôi hông bût (83), pâ hok (84), pâ ca (85), pâ re (86), hôm thâm dîn (87), phâ mûk phâ boy (88), pâ hûm hông (89), huay rûa (90), nâm pûn (91), huay kôa (92), keev kôa (93), huay sëy (94), huay ná sî (95), huay hûmûat(s) (96), sop huay sâlû (97), huay dîn deeng (98), ...khû’n sut nhût(s) (99), huay kû kho hûn (100), nhût(s) huay cá (101), nâm hûmûat(s) (102), nâm pûn (103), sop nâm pân nâm mûng pân keeng to kûn (104), keeng hût(s) (105), nû thyang fû (106), huay sût(s) (107), pâ kûng 3 ton (108), keev 3 pûm hûn thâm (109), nâm pûn (110), khoang fûang (111), phû deeng (112), hûn sà (113), keev thâm sûm (114), huwa khoang hûn nû fâm án (115), sop huay hûk (116), huay tông (117), nû rai (118), phû luang (119), huay sêy khû (120), pûng khyat (121), nâm âng (122), nâm sâm (123), huay sák (124), keev yân phûn (125), phû sleeng kueeng (126), huay tám (127), phû ngâm sâm (128), huay cá (129), nâm vên (130), sop sôy (131), sâm ko (132), then westward (133), phû bût (134), huay pû pong (135), huay dông (136), sop huay nû hûu (137), huay hûn deeng (138), huay pyat (139), huay phûk pên khût(s) (140), pâ sà:di (141), huay op (142), huay ôy (143), nâm pôn (144), huay mûn (145), keev hûn/hûn (146), keev cie (147), huay slông, (148) hông 3 thûng (149), huay sîda (150), ñi nhûv (151), keev rân hôm pôm ná dong (1).
The list ends with the location at which it began, indicating with certainty that a closed boundary was intended. The names found on the modern 1:250,000 map, and marked with their numbers on Map 1.2, are: huay sát (12), huay râv (15), marked on the map by Bàn Huei Hao and Phú Houei Hao, phâ suak (16), shown as Phou Souak on the map, huay mát (33), huay patât (33), huay ca:kô (35), assuming that this name on the map is the same stream, or a branch, as the huay ca:kô noy of the list, nâm eet (38), assuming that it is
the same as the Nam Het of the map, which fits the relative location in terms of other names, sop î (39), unmarked, but obviously the confluence of the Y River with the Het, nämlich (Y) (40), phu lyam (51), shown as Pha Liem, huay sön (58), marked by Bân Sanone, nämlich ga:neen (59), nämlich lôn (71), nämlich pôn (91), huay cä (101), marked by Bân Ca nämlich pân (103), sop (confluence) of the nämlich pân with the nämlich mông pà keeng (104), assuming that this is the confluence of the Nam Pan with the Nam Keng shown on the map, nämlich sâm (123), huay cä (129), nämlich veen (130), nämlich pôn (144), huay màn (145), huay slong (148).

4) Population centres, fields (na) and groups of people contained within the boundary outlined in Phongsawadan Xamneua

bân râm hluang (1), bân râm noy (2), bân râm käng (3), bân ko (4), bân yong tai (5), bân yong hnoa (6), bân ngi käng (7), bân sông tai (8), bân sông nôa (9), bân së neen (10), bân hyä (11), bân sai (12), bân hua siang (13), bân kôt(s) (14), bân käng (15), bân tông (16), mông kânt (17), bân yiat (18), bân liyan (19), bân tăm (20), bân sâ kânt (21), bân mông săng (22), bân yiat (23), bân tán (24), bân nă thông (25), bân dôn (26), bân lông khá nă yöng (27), bân muan tai (28), bân muan hnoa (29), mông veen (30), mông vâ (31), mông lân (32), moang su’n (33), phai seen khau thau mông nu’ng (34), phai hò kâng mông nu’ng (35), phai phâk (36), phai hluang sop phia (37), phai bân kôt(s) (38), phai phông (39), phai nă fák nă kâp hua phân sâmnoa (40), nă seen khau thau mông nu’ng (41), nă hluang (42), nă yöng hnoa (43), nă dôn (44), nă bân muan nă tai (45), nă muan hnoa (46), nă bân kông (47), nă phông noy (48), nă phông hluang (49), nă ho (50).

Among the seven groups of phai (nos. 33–39), no. 35 is ‘the mông of phai of the central palace (hò kâng), probably indicating the governor’s establishment in Xamneua town; no. 37 is also attached to central authority (phai hluang) and seems to be located at the confluence (sop) of a water course named phiai; and no. 40 refers to both people and fields (nă) attached to Hua Phan Xamneua. Among the list of fields (nă), no. 42, hluang (‘royal’), and no. 50, hò (‘palace’), belong to central authorities, while others are the fields of bân which have already been listed: nă yöng (43)/bân yöng (5–6), nă dôn (44)/bân dôn (26), nă muan (45–46)/bân muan (28–29). Numbers 34 and 41, the phai, and the nă of seen khau thau mông, are obviously linked too; and probably ‘seen khau thau mông’ (one hundred thousand/rice/elder/ [of] mông’) is the title of a local notable.77

Few of the population centres or fields can be located. Those identifiable, and marked on Map 2 with their numbers underlined, are bân yöng (5–6), about 15 km northwest of Xamneua Town, bân hua siang (13), 37 km southwest, bân nă thông (25), just to the east, and bân muan (28, 29), about 7 km to the north.
NOTES


2. I wish to take this occasion to acknowledge the help of my friend and teacher, Maha Khammay Singkietthiphong, then with the Lao Literature Committee, in my first readings of these documents in 1966–67.


8. For the name of the ancient capital of central Thailand, I prefer ‘Ayutthaya’; but when quoting other writers I have followed their usage, for example, ‘Ayudhya’.

9. Every element of those legends (several versions cited by Charnvit) of the founding of Ayuthaya is wrong, according to current historical and pre-historical evidence.


23. Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce (transl.), *Glass Palace Chronicle*, pp. 77–79. Note that this chronicle was compiled in 1829, ‘sifted and prepared in accordance with all credible records in the books’ (p. ix).

30. Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998, pp. 19, 21, 28. I wish to thank Paul Kratoska for bringing me up to date on some of the new work on Vietnam, which I had ignored during several years of exclusive preoccupation with Cambodia.


34. Keith W. Taylor, ‘Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, 1998, pp. 949–978 (pp. 951, 960 in particular). Taylor’s irritating use of ‘the archive’ in this article, and in fact the entire first six pages, seems to be part of an effort to adopt the mannerisms of postmodernist cultural studies, a tendency which does not inspire confidence in the resulting historical conclusions.


37. There seems to be little documentation on the ports of Champa until after they came under Vietnamese domination and began to be visited by Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, the Cham were one of the Austronesian-speaking peoples who spread from the Marquesas to Madagascar by sea, and themselves reached the mainland coast from Indonesia. Most of the extant Cham temple sites are near the mouths of large rivers; and the Portuguese testified to the importance of the ports, such as Tourane/ Đà Nẵng, known also to the Portuguese as *ke* [town] *cham*; Faifo/Hôi An, or *Pullu* [island] *Ciambello/Cu-lao Cham*; Quang Ngãi; Nhơn, formerly ‘the port of the Cham capital Vijaya’ and ‘the most commercially active port of Champa’; Nha Trang, ‘certainly an important Cham center’; Camranh, where, when it was described in a Portuguese routier in the sixteenth century, the ‘agglomeration of warships’ observed ‘could not have been anything but Cham’; Phan Rang or *Pandeirao* (Cham Pandaran, ancient Panduranga), also called *Port du Champa*, from which ebony was exported; and Phan Thiet. One of the most valuable products for which Champa was noted was ‘eaglewood’
or calambac, the procurement of which even into Nguyễn times was a prerogative of Cham and Roglai, with the best quality coming from the hinterland of Phan Rang. See Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Les Portugais sur les côtes du Viet-Nam et du Campa*, Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1972, pp. 163–168, 244–248; and Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, p. 124.


43. Louis Finot, ‘Recherches sur la littérature laotienne’, *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, vol. 17, no. 5, 1917, list of manuscripts, pp. 177–218. I have not been able to determine the exact date of their return.

44. Note that the term *phu* ‘mountain’ in the name Phu Khiao, and in other toponyms in this text, is consistently written with the initial consonant known in Thai as *pho* (*w*), rather than *pho samphao* (*v*) as in modern standard Thai. In fact, the Lao spelling is historically correct, and the Thai variant suggests a spurious etymology, or hypercorrection, perhaps influenced by Sanskrit ‘earth, world’.

45. These are straight line distances measured from maps. The road distance between Phetchabun and Khon Kaen is 235 km.


47. Pagination will be indicated by 1o, 1r, etc., for 1 obverse, 1 reverse, for as was usual the palm leaves were inscribed on both sides. The first page (page 0) was written on one side only, and unnumbered. Altogether it consists of 8 leaves.

48. *Suai* was a type of tax in kind imposed on outlying populations. For a concise explanation, see Hong Lysa, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984, p. 44.


51. Below he is also called Pha Kai Singhanat.

52. The Pasi apparently means the river Chi, pronounced /sii/ in Lao.

53. Many of the names are not found on the 1:250,000 maps available to me. A closer search should be made on the 1:50,000 series, which in Thailand is not available to the public.


60. Above the Phya Phlo pass was called Phya Pho. The variants may be simply Thai and Lao respectively. Some of these locations do not appear on available maps.

61. The measurements are not absolutely precise, but based on a reconstruction from photographs.

62. Chanthaburi was the ancient traditional name of Vientiane (Viang Can[dana], ‘City of Sandalwood’), or, according to another interpretation, named after a legendary hero, Burican. See Sila Viravong, ‘Vientiane [เวียงคาน]’, *Vannakhadi San*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1954, pp. 31–39. There is still a third, minor, tradition that the name means ‘City of the Moon’, Candra, also pronounced /ca:n/ in Lao.


64. The 150 names are in lines six to fifty four of the original text.

65. See *The Royal Chronicles of Ratanakosin*, Reign III, pp. 148–149, 160–161, for some description of the area at that time. The Mueang Soi listed there, for example, appears on the 1:250,000 map outside and to the southeast of the area delimited in the decree.

66. Lao phai corresponds to Thai phrai.


68. Note the spelling of the title phyá, with a final short /a/, rather than the etymologically correct /aa/, which was used regularly in the Phu Khiao chronicle, phayá. The origin of this title is Old Mon bañá, hypercorrected in standard Bangkok Thai to phraya.
69. ‘Now’ in this paragraph refers to the 1960s. According to Lao history, Nandasen had attacked Xieng Khuang because the latter was sending tribute to Vietnam; and he forced Xieng Khuang to send Vientiane half the amount of tribute which was being given to Vietnam. See Sila, *Phongsawadan Lao*, pp. 236–237.

70. It is interesting that for ‘rhinoceros’ this text uses the Khmer term *ramas* (romeh) whereas the Phu Khiao chronicle used the Tai term *leet* (reet, heet).


72. On Chao Anou, see the two books by Mayoury and Phuephanh Ngoosyathn, *Chao Anou 1767–1829* and *Paths to Conflagration*. Of course, raising the issues of patriotism and national sentiment immediately recalls other mantra, which cannot be discussed here.


74. In Finot, and in most ad hoc systems in use in Laos, dbh (graph g) is represented in Romanization by ‘x’.

75. In addition to the standard dictionaries of Lao, the Dr Preecha Phintong, *Isan-Thai-English Dictionary* [คำศัพท์ภาษาอีสาน-ไทย-อังกฤษ], Ubon Ratchathani: Siritham Press, 1989, has been of great help.

76. The map used and reproduced in part as Map 2 below is ‘Xamneua’, Edition 1-AMS, Sheet NF 48-14, printed by Service Géographique National, Vientiane, 2.1963.

77. For discussion of some confusions relating to *phai* and *ho*, consult Michael Vickery’s review of George Condominas’s work *From Lawa to Mon, from Saa to Thai* in *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*, no. 13, June 1991, pp. 3–9.
CHIANG KHAENG 1893–1896: A LUE PRINCIPALITY IN THE UPPER MEKONG VALLEY AT THE CENTRE OF FRANCO-BRITISH RIVALRY

VOLKER GRABOWSKY

This chapter deals with a region that is widely known as the ‘Golden Triangle’. There, three countries – Burma, Thailand and Laos – meet at the upper course of the Mekong. The Mekong, with a total length of roughly 4,500 km, is the second longest river in Asia. If the southern part of the Chinese province of Yunnan were included, we could even speak of a ‘Golden Quadrangle’. Illegal poppy cultivation and drug smuggling have contributed to the region’s dubious reputation. However, the opening of borders, the liberalization of national economies and increased political cooperation among the states of the Mekong basin could eventually help to develop the ‘Golden Quadrangle’ into a trade hub, a new ‘Economic Quadrangle’.¹ The former principality of Chiang Khaeng, whose political centre has been Mueang Sing, forms the core of this quadrangle. It will be the focus of this study.

Mueang Sing is located in the extreme northwest corner of Laos, in the province of Luang Nam Tha. It is a small town of less than 2,000 inhabitants, just 10 km away from the Chinese border and 30–40 km from Burma. According to the most recent population census (1995), the entire township of Mueang Sing has 23,532 inhabitants living in 4,600 households and 112 villages or hamlets. Mueang Sing is the only Lao district that shares common borders with both Burma and China. Its territory of 1,344 sq. km is 60 per cent forested. The mountainous zones, still densely forested, are populated mainly with so-called ‘hill tribes’, such as the Akha and the Hmong, and Tai speaking ethnic groups, such as the Lue and the Tai Nuea, inhabit the lowlands. Their villages are mostly clustered around the rice-growing plain of the Nam Sing and Nam Dai rivers, which has an area of about 25 km in length and 19 km in width. The plain is situated 700 m above sea level and surrounded by mountains reaching altitudes of 1,658 m to the east and 1,041 m to the north.² Three Lue villages are situated along the eastern bank of the Mekong River: Ban Sai, Ban
Bo and Ban Siang Khaeng. The last settlement was the old capital of the principality of Chiang (Lao: Siang) Khaeng, which once expanded her territories to both sides of the river. It is difficult to reach by land. The tiring trek from Mueang Sing to the old capital lasts at least two full days, traversing various Akha tribes.

Only slightly more than a century ago, the traditional Tai polities in the Upper Mekong valley, notably the principality of Chiang Khaeng, represented prototypes of so-called ‘principalities under three overlords’ (mueang sam fai fa). In his influential study, Siam Mapped, Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul characterizes Mueang Sing as ‘a small town at the junction of Laos, Burma, and China today’, where ‘the chief and his people belonged to three overlords at the same time. The first two, Chiang Mai and Nan, were Siam’s tributaries, but the last one, Chiang Tung or Kengtung, was a tributary of Burma’. Chiang Khaeng became a Siamese vassal state only by 1890, at a time when tributary relations between Bangkok, the political and ritual centre of the state, and the outer regions along the ‘borders’ of the kingdom were undergoing significant changes. Within a few years Siam changed her old concepts of ‘border’ and ‘sovereignty’ – shared by most precolonial Southeast Asian states – into new concepts that reflected the European notion of centralized nation-states with fixed borders and undivided sovereignties. This fundamental change gained momentum during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The Upper Mekong valley was the region where this change occurred most dramatically. Chiang Khaeng certainly belonged to those ‘margins of the phraratcha-anachak [the royal kingdom]’, the loss of which King Chulalongkorn once compared with ‘the loss of our fingertips’ as they were too ‘distant from our heart and torso’ (the Siamese core area) to be properly defended and ruled.

A common traveller who comes to Mueang Sing would hardly realize that this godforsaken part of the world was once at the centre of secret negotiations between France and Britain. For three years, between 1893 and 1895, the two main European colonial powers attempted to create a buffer state along the eastern and western banks of the Upper Mekong in order to separate the frontiers of their Southeast Asian domains by a few dozen miles. The core of this ‘buffer state’ or état tampon would have been the principality of Chiang Khaeng, the capital of which had been Mueang Sing since 1885. To come to the point: British and French designs on such a buffer state were incompatible and the secret negotiations failed. Subsequently, the principality of Chiang Khaeng was divided along the course of the Mekong. The western, more populous part of Chiang Khaeng (8,000 sq. km with 30,000 people) fell under British suzerainty, and the eastern part, including the capital Mueang Sing, came under French control (6,700 sq. km with 12,000 people). Within a few years the principality of Chiang Khaeng, which could not only survive but even prosper in the flexible framework of traditional patterns of tributary relations,
ceased to exist when the ‘geo-body’ of the colonial and postcolonial states had to be defined along clearly marked borderlines.

As Chaiyan Rajakool points out, Chiang Khaeng [Keng Cheng] was an important strip of land, notwithstanding its small population, as a contested sphere of influence for larger powers with increasing interests there, namely Britain, France and China. The rivalries between the two European colonial powers for the control of the Upper Mekong have been discussed by various scholars, who have mainly based their studies on the abundant documents in the British and French archives. Of all the publications, outstanding works worth mentioning are the studies of Philippe Preschez, Claire Hirshfield, Chandran Jeshurun and, most recently, Patrick Tuck.

All these studies, in spite of their merits, fail to take the indigenous elite of Chiang Khaeng into consideration. They have ignored their role both as victims and as actors in the political process. How did the ruler of Chiang Khaeng, the noblemen and the population of the principality react to the challenge posed by the colonial powers? Which position did they take in the British-French tug-of-war? Did Chiang Khaeng formulate alternative proposals, and what kind of strategies and tactics were developed to avert the imminent division of the petty principality. And finally: How did the Chiang Khaeng elite react to the fait accompli? The answers to the above questions focusing on the indigenous perspective will be at the heart of this chapter in an attempt to throw added light on an understudied aspect in Lao historiography in particular and Lao history in general. To do this, I would first like to acquaint the reader with the sources upon which my study is based, followed by an overview of the origins and historical development of Chiang Khaeng. Thereafter, I will discuss the negotiations between the British Foreign Office and the French Ministère des affaires étrangères. This foundation will then allow me to analyse better the local reactions ‘on the spot’ to the outcome of those negotiations.

THE SOURCES

In early 1998, a team of research workers of the Lao-German ‘Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme’ made a discovery in Ban Ta Pao, a small village in the vicinity of the town of Mueang Sing. Amid several palm-leaf manuscripts of religious provenance the researchers found also an untitled mulberry paper manuscript of seventy-eight pages. The manuscript of which the present writer has obtained a photocopy has been registered in the Programme’s inventory list under the code 03.02.12.14.001.00 and given the (artificial) title ‘History of Chiang Khaeng’. The document depicts the history of Chiang Khaeng from its mythical origins in the fifteenth century until the political turmoils of the late-nineteenth century.
The manuscript, dated C.S. 1266 [A.D. 1904/05], records not only the name of the scribe but mentions also the author of the chronicle. The colophon\textsuperscript{12} states:

\begin{quote}
[As to what has happened] from the events [described in] this book of 39 folios\textsuperscript{13} until now, I, Phanya Luang Phawadi, 60 years old, have tried to explain. I ordered Phanya Khaeck Cai San, 48 years old, to make an effort to make a copy in order to present it to Chao Mom Teppamani Kham, the apalaca kaem mueang, in the year C.S. 1266, on the full moon of the fifth month [20 March 1905].\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Thus the Wat Ta Pao manuscript is a copy of the ‘Chiang Khaeng Chronicle’ (hereafter CKC) which, like the original manuscript that so far has not turned up, dates back to the period immediately following the division of the principality into a British and a French zone. The Wat Ta Pao version of the CKC (hereafter: CKC-WTP) is the oldest but not the only surviving ‘witness’. In December 1955, Pierre-Bernard Lafont received a copy of the ‘Chiang Khaeng Chronicle’, which was made in Mueang Sing at his request. Lafont indicates that the original was in the possession of Chao Mai Nyawong, a district official whose father had served under the old Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng. Eighteen years earlier, in 1937, the Swedish anthropologist Karl Gustav Izikowitz had requested the production of another copy of the same chronicle. According to Lafont, both versions differ from each other only slightly. Mainly due to its easier legibility, Lafont finally decided to use Izikowitz’s copy (hereafter: CKC-Iz), and not his own, for his annotated French translation. CKC-Iz runs over seventy pages and is printed as a facsimile in Lafont’s recent publication.\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately, Lafont does not further elaborate on ‘the few, rare differences existing between them’. Therefore, his conclusion that ‘the text reported by K.G. Izikowitz and mine were apparently copied from the same original’ remains to be proven.\textsuperscript{16}

The CKC can be roughly divided into two main parts.\textsuperscript{17} The first part tells the early history of Chiang Khaeng from its earliest beginnings in the fifteenth century until 1884, when the capital of the principality was transferred to Mueang Sing. Although covering a period of more than four centuries, this part comprises only two-fifths of the whole text.\textsuperscript{18} However, it provides much valuable information that one hardly finds in other sources. In this connection, I would like to mention the nature of tributary relations of Chiang Khaeng with neighbouring states such as Sipsong Panna, Lan Na and Burma, as well as the political and social organization of the principality, though the chronology of historical events prior to the nineteenth century, in particular of those related to neighbouring Tai polities, is not always reliable. Therefore, this first part of the CKC has to be read and analysed by closely examining related sources, such as the chronicles of Nan, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rung, Chiang Tung and Mueang Yong (Nyong), as well as contemporary Siamese and Western archival material.
CHIANG KHAENG 1893–1896

The second part deals with the short period of just twenty years (1884–1904) during which Chiang Khaeng became the focus of rivalry between major powers: Siam, Britain and France. This part makes up the bulk of the text. Composed by an eye-witness of the dramatic events of the years 1893–96, the chronicle sheds light upon the indigenous perspective of those events. Special attention is given to British-French negotiations (1893–96) on the future status of Chiang Khaeng, which eventually resulted into the division of the principality. Shortly after the death in 1901 of Chao Fa Sali No, the old ruler of Chiang Khaeng, the political and social system of the traditional polity was transformed into a 'modern' administration that suited French colonial designs. There is little doubt that the demise of the traditional polity of Chiang Khaeng, the end of its political autonomy as well as significant changes of the long-established social order, motivated Phanya Luang Phawadi to write the CKC. The loss of sovereignty and the territorial division of the country stand in the centre of this unique historical document. But Chiang Khaeng is not only portrayed as a victim of colonial power politics; its historical legacy as a semi-independent tributary state that maintained flexible relations with more powerful neighbours stands against the new concept of sovereignty introduced by Britain and France. Thus the first part of the chronicle is not just a record of better days in a distant past, but also a reflection of an alternative model of power relations.

OTHER INDIGENOUS SOURCES

A short version of the CKC, written on modern paper, is in the possession of Nan Cai Saeng, deputy head of the small Historical Museum of Mueang Sing and a native from Ban Kaeo Luang, a Tai Nuea village situated at the outskirts of Mueang Sing. The copy, which is inscribed in Lue characters and language, runs over twelve pages. The text reports the events in Chiang Khaeng from the earliest beginnings until the year Cunlasakarat (C.S.) 1174 (A.D. 1812/1813). Parts of this chronicle resemble the first part of CKC-WTP and CKC-Iz – several sentences are identical – but there are significant differences, notably at the text’s beginning and end. Thus it appears likely that the author of this short version of the Chiang Khaeng Chronicle (hereafter: CKC-BKL) must have had access to sources unknown to Phanya Luang Phawadi, author of the ‘complete’ version. We do not know either the author’s name or the year when CKC-BKL was composed. Circumstantial evidence in the last sentences of the chronicle, however, suggests that the author was probably a person whose family had been deported from Mueang Sing to Nan in 1812/1813 and who returned together with other descendants of war captives to their places of origin at the end of the nineteenth century.

As regards traditional practices and rites, one should note the document
entitled ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No of Mueang Sing’. This is a mulberry paper manuscript written in Lue language and script. The manuscript is kept in private hands in the village of Ban Na Kham, 3 km away from the town of Mueang Sing on the way to the Chinese border, and has not yet been surveyed by the ‘Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme’. The manuscript comprises thirty-six pages. The text mentions neither the author’s nor the scribe’s names. As the final part of the text reports in considerable detail the submission of Chiang Khaeng to the Siamese king by bowing to the military and political pressure of Nan, one is tempted to suggest that the manuscript was written not long after that event, which is dated 25 January 1890. The main part of the text deals with various aspects of traditional practices, such as titles and ranks of the nobility as well as their insignia, religious rites, spirit worship, organization of manpower and levying of taxes. The more historical sections of the manuscript, however, provide important information directly relevant to the topic of this study.

THE FOUNDING MYTH

The origin of Chiang Khaeng can be traced back to the fifteenth century. The founding of the principality and its first capital are recorded in the legend of Chao Fa Dek Noi. Chao Fa is the traditional title of rulers in the polities of the Lue, Khuen, Shan and several other Tai peoples. It means literally ‘Lord of Heaven’. Dek noi means ‘little boy’. Chao Fa Dek Noi was the son of the ruler of Chiang Rung (Jinghong), capital of Sipsong Panna (literally, ‘12,000 paddyfields’), a present-day autonomous region of the Tai (Lue) in the Chinese province of Yunnan. I have been told the historical legend of Chao Fa Dek Noi several times by Lue elders, on one occasion read from a leporello manuscript. One finds a rather short version of this legend also in the various versions of the CKC. The core of the legend follows:

The rather intelligent and witty but cunning prince, always ready for a nasty joke, has been banned together with his young mates (dek noi) by his royal father and the council of ministers in order to avert damage from the country. Packed into a huge raft Chao Fa Dek Noi and his followers drift down the stream of the Mekong. One day they watch how on the bank of the river an albino tiger is hunting an albino deer. This is interpreted as an auspicious omen. The prince and his young followers summon up all their courage (khaeng cai), go on land and found near the landing place a fortified settlement (wiang) which they call Chiang Khaeng, ‘town of courage’.

One day a Chinese envoy arrived at Chiang Rung. The Chao Fa was asked to solve three riddles. If these riddles could be solved, Chiang Rung could maintain its independence; otherwise it had to submit to Chinese suzerainty. Unable to
find a person who could solve the riddles, the Chao Fa of Chiang Rung finally sent an envoy to Chiang Khaeng to ask his exiled son for help. Chao Fa Dek Noi, after some hesitation, returned to Chiang Rung and succeeded in solving all the riddles. Thereby he saved his former home country from Chinese yoke. The Chao Fa of Chiang Rung, full of joy, gave his son as a token of gratitude additional manpower which were to be used to strengthen the newly constructed mueang of Chiang Khaeng.

In a nearby forest Chao Fa Dek Noi has an encounter with a beautiful, charming girl that he desires to become his wife. The young girl is called Nang Hoi Sam Kon as she wears a golden hairpin that has the form of a three-pronged shell. She is the daughter of Phanya Memo, the ruler of the mountainous region of [Mueang] Bo Lek, ‘[Land of] Iron Mines’, not far away from Chiang Khaeng. Phanya Memo gives his consent to the marriage of his daughter with Chao Fa Dek Noi handing over this own realm to his son-in-law who is only now able to build up a viable mueang.26

The exile of a young prince by putting him on a raft so that he could float to another land or kingdom is a topos well-known in Southeast Asia.27 A structural analysis of the Chao Fa Dek Noi legend would be beyond the scope of this chapter. It is quite impossible to give a conclusive answer to the question whether Chao Fa Dek Noi represents a historical personality – and if yes, whom. The legend of Chao Fa Dek Noi is, however, also part of the legendary tradition of Chiang Rung.28

At this point, I would like to stress two main aspects that the legend reflects. First, the legend points to the close political and dynastic relations between Chiang Khaeng and Chiang Rung. Although Chiang Khaeng had never been an integral part of Sipsong Panna, there existed close tributary relations to Chiang Rung down to the first half of the sixteenth century. Second, the power structure of the Chiang Khaeng polity was determined by symbiotic relations between the politically dominant Lue, who settled in the valley of the Mekong and its tributaries, and the autochthonous hill tribes that provided valuable forest products and precious metals.29 There is even some evidence that hill-tribe manpower was in need for the rice harvest in the plain of Mueang Sing (late nineteenth century).30 The composition of Chao Fa Dek Noi’s young followers – five ‘Tai’ and seven ‘Kha’ – bears clear testimony of the multi-ethnic character of the Chiang Khaeng polity.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

It seems that trade was the basis of the modest wealth in Chiang Khaeng. The mueang’s exposed site on the eastern bank of the Mekong River made possible the control of a realm that stretched over both banks of the river and expanded
from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century. This was a period when the various Tai *mueang* of the Salween region and the Upper Mekong valley had fallen under Burmese supremacy. Situated in the centre of a military zone that extended to Chiang Saen in the south, Chiang Khaeng acquired considerable influence upon the region. The four stupas or *that*, now in ruins, in the vicinity of the present-day sub-district seat Ban Siang [Chiang] Khaeng, give testimony to the former splendour and power of *mueang* Chiang Khaeng.31

The decline of Chiang Khaeng began in the last third of the eighteenth century, when the general political situation in mainland Southeast Asia was changing. Burma, the dominant regional power, was gradually pushed back to the north and east by Siam. In 1804, Chiang Saen, the last Burmese bastion in the Upper Mekong region, was conquered by the Siamese and their Yuan and Lao allies. The Siamese vassal states of Chiang Mai and Nan then played a dominant role. Though Chiang Khaeng was situated within their ‘sphere of intervention’, no stable tributary relations between Chiang Khaeng and the Yuan principalities of Chiang Mai and Nan were cultivated. Chiang Khaeng was too close to the spheres of influence of China and of Burma, a power still to be taken seriously.

Therefore, under this constellation we should not be surprised that, time and again, military campaigns were carried out from present-day Thai territory into the region north of Chiang Saen with the aim to create an unpopulated buffer zone or no-man’s-land. The chronicles of Chiang Khaeng and Nan, for example, report several campaigns – in 1805, 1812 and 1838 – which led to the capture of large parts of the population of Mueang Sing and other places that were forced to resettle in the territory of Nan. After 1838, the plain of the Nam Sing remained almost unpopulated for several decades. Only the higher mountainous regions were populated by hill tribes who probably recognized the suzerainty of the Nan ruler and delivered forest products to him, who forwarded them as tribute to Bangkok.32

The CKC is virtually silent about events between 1833 and 1859; other historical sources, such as the chronicles of Chiang Tung, Mueang Yong and Nan, provide no clues to help reconstruct the history of Chiang Khaeng during that period. However, by 1860, the old capital of Chiang Khaeng had already been abandoned and a new residence built at Mueang Nyu (Yu) in the territory on the west bank of the Mekong, not far from the confluence of the Mekong and Luai. The Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng, seeing his own trouble, turned for help to Mahakhanan, the ruler of Chiang Tung with whom he was related by marriage. Chiang Tung, a relatively autonomous Burmese vassal state, had succeeded in repulsing three successive Siamese attacks between 1850 and 1854.33 Chiang Khaeng established tributary relations with Burma via Chiang Tung. The Burmese King recognized Kong Tai, the offspring of a marriage between Mahakhanan and a princess from Chiang Khaeng, as the new Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng, as well as the rule over Mueang Sing and the other
After a famine in Mueang Nyu, Kong Tai – at that time still ruler of Chiang Khaeng – ordered Tai Nuea subjects, who had been settling in the territory of Chiang Tung and Chiang Khaeng, to ‘go and establish settlements in Mueang Sing Luang [Mueang Sing]’. One of Kong Tai’s minor wives, Nang Bua Kham (literally, ‘Princess of the Golden Lotus Flower’), who allegedly was a princess from Mueang Phong, is said to have undertaken the preparatory work to construct the town of Mueang Sing in collaboration with the Tai Nuea settlers. The princess fled to Mueang Phong shortly before the arrival of Chao Fa Sali No in Mueang Sing, as she feared that her husband, the incumbent ruler of Chiang Tung, would punish her for having committed adultery. [Sa Mom] Nang Bua Kham is one of the four guardian spirits which protect the reliquary of Chiang Tung. Her shrine is located immediately west of the reliquary whose restoration she is said to have initiated. Presumably for that reason, Nang Bua Kham ‘was elevated after her death to the status of guardian spirit’. Apart from being a guardian spirit, Nang Bua Kham is undoubtedly a real historic personality. In the monastery of Ban Nam Dai, situated roughly 5 km southwest of Mueang Sing, we discovered a Buddha statue whose pedestal bears an interesting inscription written in Tham characters and in the Lue language. The inscription tells that Nang Bua Kham donated the statue to the monastery ‘in the year kot si, C.S. 1242, on the fifteenth waxing of the tenth month, a Monday [21 June 1880]’.

In 1881, Kong Tai ascended to the throne in Chiang Tung, where he had followed his elder half-brother. The government in Chiang Khaeng was handed over to Sali No, his maternal uncle, the son of a former ruler of Chiang Khaeng. As new Chao Fa, Sali No was assigned the difficult task to transfer the capital of his principality from Mueang Nyu across the Mekong into the plain of the Nam Sing and to give the resettlement movement there new impetus. In early 1887, the construction of the wiang of Mueang Sing was completed. More than 1,000 subjects were settled into the new capital. The CKC states:

In the year CS 1248, on the tenth waxing of the fourth month [Thursday, 3 February 1887], the whole population under the leadership of the Chao Fa moved from Wiang Nam Kaeo to settle down in Mahā Nag(g)ara Sinha Kuppasisajeyya Rājadhāni, which was also called Wiang Chaîñya Singha or Wiang Com Sing. The whole population moved into the new wiang of Com Sing in the year CS 1248, on the tenth waxing of the fourth month, the fifth day [according to] the Mon [tradition] (Thursday) or a kat kai day [according to] the Tai [tradition] – the roek fa was three –, at noon. The Chao Fa came to the new wiang and took up his residence in the new palace on that day. After the Chao Fa had taken up his residence in Wiang Com Sing he ruled according to the ten principles of a just king.
The official reason for the move to Mueang Sing was the shortage of land suitable for wet-rice cultivation at the old site. The real reason may have been geostrategic because Chiang Khaeng had ceased sending tribute to Burma after a bloody struggle of succession in Ava following the death of the Burmese King Mindon (1880). The transfer of the administrative centre and the evacuation of parts of the population should be seen as security measures in order to render, from that time on, better protection against Burmese reprisals.

Unlike events during a first but failed attempt to resettle Mueang Sing two decades previously (1866–67), this time Nan and Bangkok did not oppose the founding of Mueang Sing. Instead they decided to wait for further developments, since Burma was no longer a formidable power. The situation changed quite abruptly in 1885–86, following the conquest of Ava by the British. The latter, as new lords of Burma with unlimited powers, activated old Burmese claims to the Shan States, former tributaries of Ava. Chiang Tung was among them. Moreover, in 1886–87, a serious dispute broke out after a renewed change of sovereign in Chiang Tung. Kong Tai’s son fought with Chiang Khaeng over the control of several border districts, notably Chiang Lap, which was Chiang Khaeng’s main Mekong ferry landing. Chiang Lap possessed even more strategic importance since communications between Mueang Sing and Chiang Tung usually went via either Chiang Lap or Tha Sop Luai (the ferry landing at the mouth of the Luai River). The dispute was aggravated by the fact that the nobility in the disputed area sided with Chiang Tung. The authority of the Chao Fa in Mueang Sing was severely challenged and the rebellion, supported by Chiang Tung, had to be quelled by military force, as the CKC confirms:

[The Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng] mobilised military forces of Mueang Sing to attack Mueang Kang, Mueang Long and Chiang Lap. Many people were killed in that armed confrontation and many more were wounded. [The attacked side] lost against the Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng. All their [khun pong in Mueang Kang and Mueang Long] fled with their families, crossing the Mekong at the Chiang Lap ferry landing place, to [the territory of] Mueang Lin (Len) and Chiang Saen.

The instability in the region triggered security fears in Bangkok and Nan. By early 1889, the Siamese decided to launch an armed intervention for the sake of Chao Fa Sili No’s safety, according to official documents. However, the real motive for the intervention was apparently Bangkok’s territorial claims on Mueang Sing. The Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng recognized the ruler of Nan as his direct suzerain and King Chulalongkorn of Siam as his indirect supreme suzerain.
Siamese concerns proved to be justified sooner than expected. By 1890 Britain had extended her control over the whole Shan States. Headed by W.J. Archer, British vice-consul of Chiang Mai, a commission was formed in early 1891 to have on-the-spot negotiations with Siamese representatives on various border disputes and the future status of Chiang Khaeng. Although the Siamese side insisted that the Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng had taken an oath of allegiance on 18 November 1889 in Mueang Sing’s main monastery, Wat Luang, and had already paid tribute gifts to his suzerain, King Chulalongkorn, Archer nevertheless doubted the status of Chiang Khaeng as a Siamese vassal state. The British vice-consul stressed that the status of the principality was still pending and, therefore, all tribute missions to Bangkok via Nan should be halted until a final solution was obtained.

What were Britain’s particular interests in Chiang Khaeng? This question can hardly be answered without taking into consideration the strategic importance that the northern section of the Mekong valley meant to London. The British strived for the direct control of the trade routes linking Burma with southwestern China. To realize this goal it appeared logical for London to incorporate the Chinese tributary Sipsong Panna, including its capital Chiang Rung, into the British realm. Like a wedge, the territory of Chiang Khaeng slides between Chiang Rung and British-controlled Chiang Tung. On 24 February 1891, immediately after the conclusion of the Anglo-Siamese negotiations in Mueang Sing, Archer pointed out that in the end the future status of Chiang Khaeng would depend on whether Britain could take possession of the trans-Mekong region of Sipsong Panna. In case this proved infeasible, Chiang Khaeng should remain under Siamese influence. The districts on the west bank, however, should be handed over to Chiang Tung.

Several months later, on 9 June 1891, Archer reiterated his conviction. He maintained that although Mueang Sing, the capital of Chiang Khaeng, was situated in a fertile plain and possessed considerable potential for development into a future trade centre, it would be a fatal mistake to expand the border across the Mekong to a relatively small and isolated district: ‘Such an isolated acquisition could only put us into a position of weakness, and be a source of trouble to us’. Mueang Sing, Archer continued, was geographically speaking part of Sipsong Panna, and was not separated by any natural barriers. High mountains, however, separated Mueang Sing from the adjacent territory of Nan. Nevertheless, Britain should not in principal object to Siamese control of the east bank territories. Archer summarized his arguments as follows:

In short, I consider that the whole of Kyaing Chaing [Chiang Khaeng] should either be incorporated with British dominions, subject to the extension of British
influence over Trans-Mekong Kyaing Hung [Chiang Rung], and to the payment of a small indemnity to Siam; or that, in case we do not wish to assume any control over Trans-Mekong Kyaing Hung, the Chief of Kyaing Chaing should be allowed to retain his territory east of the Mekong under Siamese protection, while the territory west of the river should be incorporated with Kyaington [Chiang Tung].

A final decision about the future status of Chiang Khaeng was postponed as Britain and Siam clung to their respective positions. By early 1892, the rigid positions concerning Chiang Khaeng were set in motion. A third power took the initiative: France. Since the 1860s the ‘grande nation’ regarded the Mekong River as a potential route of communication that would link Cochinchina and Cambodia in the south with Annam and Tonkin in the north, and, beyond that, should open a possible trade route to southern China. Although the famous Mekong expedition of 1866–68 under Doudard de Lagrée and Francis Garnier cast doubt on the continued navigability of the Mekong, France persistently pursued her vision to define the Mekong as the western border of her colonial Southeast Asian empire. On 16 February 1892, the French government sent a proposal through the French ambassador in London that Britain and France should commit each other not to expand their respective colonial territories beyond the Mekong. In other words, the Mekong was for the first time envisaged as a potential border line between British and French possessions in Southeast Asia.

There were no strong objections in the British Foreign Office to expansion of the French possessions in ‘Indochina’ towards those southern and central Laotian territories that were situated on the east bank of the Mekong River. However, an expansion that comprised the Upper Mekong as well would certainly not be tolerated since a direct British-French border should be avoided under any circumstances. But not long thereafter, French pressure on Siam increased to such an extent that the scenario which the British tried to prevent became a reality. In May 1893, Siamese troops attacked an island in the Mekong, not far from the border of Cambodia, which the French had occupied only a month before. Several French and Vietnamese soldiers were killed. Siam rejected French demands for compensation as well as claims on all Lao territories situated on the east bank of the Mekong.

The military confrontation escalated. The so-called Pak Nam incident brought about the decision. On 10 July 1893, two French gunboats sailed up the Chao Phraya River, apparently to ‘rescue’ French citizens sojourning in the Siamese capital. The Siamese government bluntly rebuffed this ‘peaceful mission’ and ordered its troops to fire on the uninvited guests. This was a fatal mistake which the French used as a convenient pretext to deliver an ultimatum to the Siamese side to unconditionally accept all French demands. On 23 July 1893, France imposed a sea blockade on Siam. Six days later, the government
in Bangkok, recognizing the hopelessness of the situation given the British attitude of neutrality and non-intervention, finally accepted the ultimatum. On 3 October 1893, a peace treaty was concluded that obliged the Siamese to renounce all territories situated east of the Mekong. Furthermore, the treaty defined a 25-km-broad demilitarized zone on the west bank where no Siamese military and police personnel were allowed to be stationed.52

What implications had the Franco-Siamese agreement of October 1893 for the lot of Chiang Khaeng? If one regarded Chiang Khaeng as a Siamese vassal state, France could now justify her claims on the trans-Mekong districts of the principality that included its capital, Mueang Sing. Several cis-Mekong districts, such as Mueang Nyu and Chiang Lap, would have become a demilitarized Siamese enclave surrounded by French territory in the east and British territory in the west and south. If Siamese suzerainty over Chiang Khaeng was doubtful, Britain could claim the whole territory of that principality by arguing that older tributary relations between Chiang Khaeng and Chiang Tung were still valid.53

At the time of the ‘Pak Nam crisis’, a final treaty between Siam and Britain regarding Chiang Khaeng was not yet in sight. However, an agreement was reached that assured Siam the de facto control of the disputed territory, but stipulated that Bangkok could not cede it to a third power without prior British consent. ‘[...] English rights to it, as regards both sides of the Mekong, would revive, should Siam at any time abandon it’.54 In July 1893, the Foreign Office was full of hectic activity. In those days the idea of a ‘buffer state’ in the Upper Mekong valley was born. The idea would keep Anglo-French diplomacy busy for the next two years. On 28 July, just one day before the acceptance of the French ultimatum by the government in Bangkok, British Foreign Secretary Lord Rosebery and his French colleague Jules Develle signed a note that defined an ‘independent territory’ of ‘not less than 100 miles wide’ in the Upper Mekong region in order to fulfill a conditio sine qua none of British policy in Southeast Asia, namely to create a buffer between Tonkin and Burma.55 The exact borders of the buffer state were reserved for a future agreement. London and Paris developed different, mutually exclusive concepts. The British government was only willing to renounce its claims on the eastern part of Chiang Khaeng. Only the east bank territories should merge with parts of Luang Phrabang into a buffer state that would be positioned entirely east of the Mekong river. The cis-Mekong districts of Chiang Khaeng would remain under British control.

Paris saw this as an obvious manoeuvre to cut off French access to the Upper Mekong and to impede French trade with southern China. This was French public opinion as Patrick Tuck stresses in his study.56 After the signing of the Franco-Siamese treaty, the French government made a counter proposal to the British side: The buffer state should comprise both banks of the Mekong. As Chiang Khaeng had been Siamese territory in its entirety, the French could lay
VOLKER GRABOWSKY

claim to its east bank territories. Therefore, England should cede parts of Chiang Tung as her contribution to create a neutral state with Chiang Khaeng as its core. Thus the French expected to amalgamate territories from both banks of the Upper Mekong into the buffer state, ‘leaving the river in neutral hands’.57

In November 1893, Lord Rosebery made the following compromise: The buffer state should now comprise territories both on the west and the east bank of the Mekong extending 50 miles in each direction. Apart from Chiang Khaeng, smaller portions of Luang Phrabang would also belong to the buffer state. As a concession to the French, Rosebery offered to withdraw from seven villages on the east bank of the Mekong that belonged to Chiang Tung.58 Further talks between London and Paris ended on 25 November with the result that the geographical and political setting of the neutral state should be worked out by a commission of British and French experts in Southeast Asia itself. Claire Hirshfield draws the following conclusion: ‘The question of the upper Mekong banks thus had passed out of the hands of the diplomats in Europe and into those of the technical agents in Southeast Asia’.59

The Anglo-French border commission was lead by Sir J. George Scott, High Commissioner in the Shan States, and Auguste Pavie, Haut Commissaire of Indochina. The bilateral negotiations in Chiang Khong, situated within the 25-km demilitarized zone, dragged on without concrete results until April 1895. In that phase, which French military historian Luc Lacroze calls appropriately des pourparlers ambigus,60 several British and French delegations showed up personally on the scene in Mueang Sing to pursue Chao Fa Sali No to support their position. After the breakdown of the negotiations with the French in May 1895, the English made a fatal mistake. Two companies of Gurkha, Nepalese elite soldiers, and one detachment of Sikh cavalymen were sent under the leadership of G.C.B. Stirling, vice-commissioner in the Shan States, to Mueang Sing. ‘For a year the Union Jack flew at Mong Hsing’.61 Brötel argues that the decision to occupy Mueang Sing was prompted by a French note in February 1895 which stated that Paris no longer regarded the ‘buffer state project’ as negotiable.62

The principality of Chiang Khaeng should be forced to accept British suzerainty, but this attempt failed. The British occupation met with open resistance by the ruling Lue elite. Chao Fa Sali No fled with his family and close followers to Luang Nam Tha in French territory and urged the officials and nobles, as well as the whole population of Chiang Khaeng, to resist the British by boycotting any cooperation. The Englishmen were thus forced to resume negotiations with the French side. The conflict over Chiang Khaeng ended on 15 January 1896 with the ‘Declaration of London’ that determined the division of the principality along the course of the Mekong.63 On 10 May representatives of both European colonial powers reached an agreement in Mueang Sing regulating the modalities of the British withdrawal. On the following day, the British troops left Mueang Sing for Burma. A couple of days
later, Chao Fa Sali No returned to his rump state, which had got the status of a French protectorate.

It is hard to say what solid grounds ever existed for the realization of the buffer state project. The problem of where to draw the borders of a state whose raison d’être was to prevent England and France from becoming ‘limitrophe’ on the Southeast Asian frontier did not constitute the only obstacle to a viable and permanent agreement. Contemporary observers like Henry Norman questioned even before the final failure of the Anglo-French negotiations whether the ‘proposed arrangement’ would be realistic as long as ‘the crucial question of the government of the neutral zone’ remained unsolved. ‘No one has decided what available authority will be sufficient to prevent it from becoming a place of refuge for all the dacoits, escaped criminals, and insurrectionary elements, alike of China, of Burmah, and of Indo-China’.

CHANGING POWER RELATIONS IN MUEANG SING:
AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

The elite and population at large of Chiang Khaeng were by no means ignorant victims of Anglo-French negotiations. As Auguste Pavie observed, the people of Mueang Sing had a worry ‘under their calm’ which ‘they did not hide and which translated especially in the visible anxiety of the Prince and his vigilance in keeping himself informed of the smallest details on the views of the great countries of which we were the envoys in these regions’. And W.J. Archer arrived at the implicit hypothesis that a condominium and joint-occupation of Mueang Sing might have prevented Chao Fa Sali No from seeking French protection. Such a solution would have been preferred by the Chao Fa, but for the British government acceptable only under the provision ‘that this [condominium] might have been extended to the other portions of the proposed Buffer State now in French occupation, pending a final settlement’. Before discussing the British-French rivalry in Mueang Sing through the eyes of the local people, some general remarks about the internal structure of the Chiang Khaeng polity and its relations with neighbouring polities must be made. This is necessary to fully understand how and why the Chao Fa and his nobles responded to the Western challenge.

Compared to Chiang Tung and Chiang Rung (Sipsong Panna), Chiang Khaeng was a small polity with a limited population base. Our knowledge about the internal structure of Chiang Khaeng prior to the late nineteenth century is still poor. As mentioned earlier, Chiang Khaeng expanded its political influence and territorial control during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The extent of this control depended on the Chao Fa’s ability to maintain privileged relations with Burma and China, the two dominant powers in the Upper Mekong valley. The control of various outlying regions by the Chao Fa of
Chiang Khaeng was contested by neighboring Lue principalities, such as Mueang Phong (in the east) and Mueang Yong (in the west). The CKC mentions two different administrative zones. The first zone was Chiang Khaeng proper, comprising twenty village clusters or districts of eighty-five villages. The size of a district varied between two and eight villages. The second zone was made up of three so-called *tap pong*, namely Mueang Wa (seven villages), Mueang Nyu (eight villages) and Chiang Lap (ten villages).7 It seems that *tap pong* is a Burmese loanword65, which I am tempted to translate as 'military district'. All three *tap pong* mentioned above were situated on the west bank of the Mekong bordering the Burmese vassal states of Chiang Tung and Mueang Yong (itself once a *tap pong* of Chiang Khaeng). Thus one can speculate whether these districts were under Burmese military occupation forming the eastern defense line against China, whereas the non-occupied bulk of Chiang Khaeng, especially territories on the east bank, was exposed to Chinese influence.

Although the CKC does not explicitly mention tribute missions to China (via Chiang Rung) later than the sixteenth century, the Chinese no doubt continued to exercise a degree of influence. This is acknowledged by the saying: 'China is like the father and Burma like the mother of Chiang Khaeng,69 because it has always been [like] the child of both overlords, since ancient times'.70 In the late nineteenth century, it was still remembered that the Chao Fa had to pay homage to Burma as well as China:

The honorific appellation (*namma-nyot*) of the ruler of Chiang Khaeng was bestowed upon him by the Chinese emperor and the Burmese king. They gave the Chao Fa the rank ‘Samdec Serthā Paramabrahminda Janindanārīn-dādhipati Paramāṇāṭha Paramapābitt[ṛ]a Dasābiddha Dhammadhara’, the king who is the lord of the golden palace [and] the lord of victorious great capital of Mueang Chiang Khaeng-Ho Kham.71

The CKC reports in detail about various tribute missions to Burma. It was expected that a newly appointed Chao Fa pay his respects to the King of Ava to receive the five insignia of a Burmese vassal. Moreover, every three years gold and silver flowers had to be sent as a token of submission. Other tribute gifts included gilded swords and scabbards, silver cups and clothes made of silk and cotton. In this respect it is noteworthy that the three *tap pong* of Chiang Khaeng had to offer their own, though less expensive, tribute.72

The instability caused by Chiang Tung’s interference in the Chiang Khaeng polity triggered off concerns of security in both Bangkok and Nan. By early 1889, the Siamese decided to launch an armed intervention for the sake of Chao Fa Sali No’s safety, according to official documents. However, the real motive for the intervention was apparently Bangkok’s territorial claims on Mueang Sing. Chao Fa Sali No, who had hesitated to do so for many years, would finally recognize the suzerainty of King Chulalongkorn.73 Around 1889, Chao Sulinya,
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son of the ruler of Nan and a relative of Chao Fa Sali No, came to Mueang Sing with a following of over 1,000 men, ‘and induced the Chief of Kyaing Chaing [Chiang Khaeng] to submit to Siam by paying tribute, in the usual form, of silver and gold flowers, and by drinking the waters of allegiance’. In these words the action taken against Mueang Sing is described by W.J. Archer on 24 February 1891 during a short on-the-spot visit.74 A contemporary Siamese document reports the same event in an euphemistic undertone:

When Nan learned about the armed conflict along its borders, Chao Suriyawong received the order to recruit more than 1,000 troops to restore peace there. Of these troops 300 men were sent to Mueang Sing. The ruler of Mueang Sing was very happy to be at home again. He arranged the gold and silver trees as well as tribute gifts and handed them over to the King of Bangkok. He begged to become a vassal of Siam.75

This account does not adequately reflect the difficult negotiations which dragged on over several months between Chiang Khaeng and the envoy from Nan who negotiated on behalf of the Siamese government. The Siamese side threatened to deport the population of Mueang Sing and several other townships on the left bank of the Mekong River. The Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng did not dare to take a far-reaching decision, such as the submission to foreign suzerainty, by himself. He consulted with those nobles who were members of the administrative council, as well as with the provincial officials in the towns and villages which belonged to his sphere of control. But finally a decision was reached to bow to the military and political pressure:

They all insisted that if the gold and silver flowers were not delivered they would not be allowed to stay in the territory of [Mueang] Sing, [Mueang] Nang, [Mueang] Kang and [Mueang] Long. Thus the tao phanya who were the leaders of the whole population came to the conclusion that if they really fought they – as a small country – would certainly be defeated. They also feared that many people would be killed and they would really lose their country. They did not wish to lose it. Therefore, they arranged the gold and silver flowers.76

Siamese suzerainty was established at a time when Chinese troops invaded the Lue inhabited region of U Nuea and U Tai (in present-day Phongsaly province), pillaging the villages and ‘creating a difficult and painful situation for Mueang Sing’ as well.77 Moreover, Siamese overlordship was made more acceptable for the Lue (and Tai Nuea) elite of Chiang Khaeng, as the two highest ranking officials from Nan, the governors of Thoeng and Mueang Pukha, ‘ordered to build sim78 and kuti79 everywhere in the territory of Chiang Khaeng’. Thereafter, an elephant image was modelled and ‘erected as a witness [of the agreement] with the country (ban-mueang) [of Mueang Sing]’.80 The
material support for the local Buddhist sangha must have impressed the religious people; the Siamese flexibility concerning the terms and extent of tribute-sending missions\textsuperscript{81} helped convince the Chao Fa and his nobles to regard vassalage to Siam as a minor evil. Apart from the tribute missions, this did not impose any additional financial burdens on Chiang Khaeng. There was also no interference into the internal structure and the traditional customs and customary laws of the principality. This made a great difference to British and French behaviour just a few years later.

THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER

What kinds of reactions in Mueang Sing were provoked by the British-French bargaining? The CKC reports the events in much detail. The chronicler hardly reveals his anti-British sentiments. British actions and their impact on the political and social order of Chiang Khaeng are highlighted, whereas the French begin to appear as political actors only after the conclusion of the ‘Declaration of London’. In March 1894, Stirling arrived with an escort of fifty heavily armed soldiers in Mueang Sing. In the chronicle Stirling is known as ‘Chao Wuanthok’, the phonetical rendering of a high Burmese title in the Lue language. Stirling posed the following demand to the Chao Fa:

\begin{quote}
Chiang Khaeng was once Burmese territory, but now it belongs to Ayutthaya [here: Bangkok, VG]. The dependence on Ayutthaya has led to a total loss of your traditions. Now you have stipulated that you shall belong to Burma like in former times. Thus I would like you to arrange a tree [composed of] silver and golden flowers in order to present it [as a token of submission, VG] to Chao Achonya [i.e. Queen Victoria, VG].\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

The flattering and at the same time menacing statement of the British representative was countered by the Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng with the discreet argument that the sending of tribute to British Burma would cause intolerable financial strains for his people. The Chao Fa in 1892–93 had sent gold and silver flowers to Bangkok, which had to be delivered once every three years. Chao Fa Sali No stressed:

\begin{quote}
We would like to inform Chao Wuanthok that the sending of the golden and silver flowers would inflict considerable hardship on our population because we have just sent them to Bangkok and we cannot endure any additional burden. We have already informed Chao Wuanthok about this matter, but he refused to accept that and pressed us repeatedly to send the golden and silver flowers which is impossible.\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}
The chronicle reports how in the following days Mr Stirling reiterated his demands and the Chao Fa, simulating an illness, sent his ministers to talk with the British. The ministers, for their part, evaded any pledges, arguing that the Chao Fa had the definite right to take a decision. Stirling was unable to respond appropriately to the stalling tactics of his Lue counterparts. His menacing gestures and attitudes made him a ridiculous figure in the eyes of the Lue. When after four days Stirling finally succeeded in meeting with the ‘ill’ Chao Fa, he uttered the threatening remark that Britain would regard the refusal to deliver the tributary gifts as a hostile act that would have to be answered by military actions. Stirling is quoted with the following words:

Are you a *mit suai* or not?84 One who depends on Britain has to prepare the golden and silver flowers in order to be considered a *mit suai*. If one does not prepare the golden and silver flowers one is a *nyan su* (an enemy?). The Chao Fa Luang requested to stay until four o’clock in the morning. Chao Wuanthok and Cik (*cakkai*) Pua were engaged in negotiations when Cik Pua [suddenly] stood up and left the place. He went to give instructions to his soldiers, took his horse and swung himself onto the saddle. Then he incited his men to create fears. He asked the Chao Fa: ‘What do you think? Or don’t you think anything?’ His Majesty replied that he had no opinion. Chao Wuanthok said: ‘Bring tomorrow your soldiers, then we will have a military contest. The Chao Fa answered that he would not like to see it because both Ava and all the Chao Fa were defeated by the English.85

Chao Fa Sali No responded to this threat by posing two metaphoric questions which made the Englishman appear completely as ‘a bull in a china shop’ and, more than that, revealed the differences in the way of thinking of the two unequal partners, reflecting a ‘cultural clash’. The CKC quotes Chao Fa Sali No with the words:

The Chao Fa Luang (here: Sali No) would like to ask Chao Wuanthok the first metaphoric question: Suppose, Chao Aconya has given to Chao Wuanthok one *song* of silver with the permission to use it in good faith. One or two years later, there is another person who comes from Chao Aconya without bearing an official letter from Chao Aconya and whom Chao Wuanthok does not know. If this person claims that Chao Aconya has sent him to demand that Chao Wuanthok should return the *song* of silver, should Chao Wuanthok give that person [the money] or not?

As to the second metaphoric question: Suppose, there is a girl who is beautiful and one man comes to ask this girl to become his wife. This girl replies: ‘I cannot give you an answer now, let our parents decide’. Then the man’s parents and the girl’s parents negotiate and finally reach an agreement that their children
can become husband and wife. One or two years later, a handsome man arrives and sees that wife. He wants to have her as his wife and asks her. Seeing this handsome new man the woman does not ask her parents and abandons her old husband. She takes this new man without informing the parents of both sides. Is this woman still a good person or is she a bad person?87

Unable to respond to Chao Fa Sali No’s stalling tactics with intellectual sharpness, Sirling fell back on physical pressure. He ordered the Sikh cavalrymen into the town to occupy the Chao Fa’s palace. That was tantamount to committing a sacrilege. There was no longer a basis for British contacts with the leadership of Chiang Khaeng. The chronicler describes how terrified and scared the Chao Fa and his followers were in the face of the rude and menacing behaviour of the British. After the Chao Fa had closed his mind to all further talks with the British side, Sirling and his troops returned totally frustrated to the Burma side. When only a couple of years earlier envoy from Nan had pressured Chao Fa Sali No to accept Siamese suzerainty, the ruler of Mueang Sing had adopted similar stalling techniques, but had been confronted with a more flexible counterpart, as was demonstrated above.

It can be doubted whether the ruler of Chiang Khaeng realized that Sirling’s demands reflected the British desire to gain a better judicial position in ongoing negotiations with the French. The CKC gives no hint that by spring 1894 Chao Fa Sali No had acquired knowledge of the international dimension of the events he, no doubt, found so disgusting. On the contrary, the British mission is portrayed as a manoeuvre to simply replace Siamese overlordship by British suzerainty. It was not yet realized that London was not interested in Chiang Khaeng as a vassal state but as a pawn in negotiations with the French.

The episode of March–April 1894 marked a turning point in the conflict over Chiang Khaeng. Thereafter, British ambitions not only met French opposition, but also fierce resistance of the elite of the principality, the future of which was at stake. When several months after his return to Chiang Tung Sirling issued a letter demanding from the Chao Fa and his nobles the unconditional recognition of British rule over the whole territory of Chiang Khaeng, he received no reaction at all. The Chiang Khaeng elite simply ignored the letter. Finally, in early May 1895, Sirling appeared at Chiang Lap from where he sent an ultimatum to Chao Fa Sali No, who clearly realized what was at stake for his principality and for himself:

In the year CS 1257, on the sixth waning of the seventh month (Tuesday, 14 May 1895), a letter of [Chao] Wuanthok arrived at the [ho] sanam asking the Chao Fa to welcome Chao Wuanthok at the port of Chiang Lap. But the Chao Fa could not come personally and ordered the khun luang to welcome [Chao Wuanthok] instead. The nobles, who had come together at the ho sanam, received the letter and then went together to the Chao [Fa] to present the letter
to him. They discussed the matter, and the Chao [Fa] reminded a warning of Chao Wuanthok saying that if the Chao Fa does not listen to the royal decree/edict (aming [to]) of the high-ranking dignitary he would put himself in great danger. It would be better for the Chao Fa to flee.89

Chao Fa Sali No’s flight into French occupied territory in May 1895 had its roots in the traumatic experiences with a high-ranking representative of the British crown the year before. Contemporary British sources fail to give proper attention to this infamous incident, but acknowledge that the ‘Myoza of Kiang Cheng’ (i.e. Chao Fa Sali No) seemed ‘rather more attached to the French than to us’,90 thereby making the abandonment of the buffer state concept in favour of a direct Anglo-French border the more advisable solution.

Western scholarship has hitherto neglected the period of British occupation that followed (May 1895 to May 1896). Chao Fa Sali No had found political asylum in Luang Nam Tha, also called Mueang Luang Pukha, situated some 40 km southeast of Mueang Sing. There he asked for the support of the French who saw the Chao Fa as a pawn that could be used to get territorial concessions from the British side. At the same time the Chao Fa maintained contacts with his ministers, whom he strictly forbade to levy the poll tax of three hiang (3,000 rupees) per person as imposed by the British occupation forces. Consequently, commander Stirling put several Lue officials into jail and threatened to deport them to Burma should the civil disobedience continue.91

The CKC describes with empathy the inner conflict the nobility and the population of Chiang Khaeng was facing. They were in a dilemma in view of their loyalty to the Chao Fa and their deep concerns of the fate of their friends and relatives who were then in jail. Finally the imprisoned nobles decided to give in to the British demands:

The officials who were staying in prison feared that they would be banished to Toung-yi far away and thereby be separated from their children, their wives and their country. They met together in prison and agreed: ‘Now [Chao] Wuanthok wants to get the three hiang (3,000 rupees). We discussed this matter by sending a letter to the Chao [Fa] who asked us to remain unyielding and not to be afraid. Wait and see what they will do next. Now he (i.e. Chao Wuanthok) has put all of us into jail. That inflicts extreme hardships on us. When we sent a letter [to the Chao Fa] we were given the order to defy any pressure and to remain unfearful. There is an ancient proverb saying: Water is far, fire is near. It is impossible to bear this situation any longer’. They decided to go and pay their respect to [Chao] Wuanthok.92

The decision was not an easy one, the more so since the Chao Fa announced that collaboration with the British would be tantamount to treason.93 It was rationalized by the following saying, very popular among the Lue and Khuen:
This saying can be rendered as ‘water is far, fire is near’. It is a play on words as the syllables bearing the opposite meanings ‘far’ and ‘near’ are both pronounced kai but bear a different tone. The difference in spelling is only reflected by the tone marker mai tho for ‘near’, which is even sometimes omitted. The proverb describes a situation where danger (‘fire’) is imminent but support (‘water’) to thwart this danger is not available. In our example it seems obvious who is meant by ‘near fire’ and who is the ‘distant water’. A tactical arrangement with the British conquerors, not an unwavering loyalty to the Chao Fa in exile, appeared to be the most suitable strategy for survival.

The British behaved better than expected. Various documents from Mueang Sing, including the CKC, stress that Stirling and his staff used the head tax not for enriching themselves personally, but spent the money for public works such as the construction and repairs of streets, bridges and administrative buildings. Stirling obviously followed the general principle of British colonial policy that supported indirect rule. Local customs and traditions were not abolished. Even a ceremony in honour of the guardian spirit of the principality (phi mueang) was supported by the British: ‘The fact that [the poll tax of] three hiang (3,000 rupees) were used in a way that the country could take care of its traditions and customs, showed that the Englishmen had not come with bad intentions’. At this conclusion arrives Chao Mai Nyawong. Phanya Luang Phawadi gives a similar assessment of British intentions. Positively surprised by Stirling’s attitude, he notes that Stirling ‘did not use [the poll tax] in order to enrich himself but to construct and improve roads and to build communal halls in all villages and towns that belonged to Chiang Khaeng. The old customs to support the spirits of the villages and towns were followed’.

The relatively positive attitude towards the British occupation forces found an abrupt end on 21 February 1896, when bandits entered the town at night and burned down the ruler’s palace. Several days later, a renewed attack was launched. This time the main administrative building was set on fire by the bandits who could escape. Stirling ordered an investigation that concluded that the arsonists were not foreigners, but townpeople. The inhabitants of Mueang Sing, for their part, accused the British of having masterminded the arsons because they wanted to take revenge on Chao Fa Sali No for his ‘treason’. Chao Mai Nyawong argues that the arsonists belonged ‘to the great English personality’s side’ as they had come ‘to scorch the palace and the administrative building because the great English personality had a dispute with the Chao Fa’. On the other hand, Phanya Luang Phawadi, who cannot be accused of pro-British bias, states briefly that bandits burnt both the ruler’s palace and the administrative building without giving the slightest hint to a possible mastermind. What could be the reason for this silence? People other than the British could have had motives to use the arsons for political ends. French agents or even the Chao Fa himself might have hoped to destabilize British
rule through sabotage. Such a hypothesis was not (and could not be) taken into consideration by the chroniclers without exposing their own Chao Fa to harsh criticism.

Contemporary documents do not prove whether Chao Fa Sali No really had the illusion that the French would one day restore the Chao Fa’s rule over the whole territory of Chiang Khaeng. When on 22 May 1896, Chao Fa Sali No returned as a French vassal in the company of commissaire Sévenier and commandant Vacle to Mueang Sing, he was greeted with great joy by the local population. The Chao Fa, realizing that Chiang Khaeng was divided into two parts without his consent, expressed his deep disappointment, which is understandable considering the fact that the larger part of his principality, with three quarters of his subjects, had been lost. He spoke reproachfully to his French attendants:

I feel great joy with all three of you because you took care of me and helped me return to Mueang Sing. I am really very lucky. But I am also disappointed for these three reasons. First, bandits scorched my palace. Second, bandits scorched the [ho] sanam. Third, the great personalities of England and France divided my territory. Both high-ranking personalities divided my territory. That means the loss of many districts (hua mueang) of Mueang Sing. I lost Mueang Nyu, Mueang Luai, Mueang Wa, Mueang Chiang Khang, Mueang Palaeo, Mueang Un, Mueang Nam, Ban Lek, Ban Hua Tui and Mueang Khang. All these districts have been assigned to me by the ruler (Chao Fa Luang) of Chiang Tung, my elder brother. I, Chao Fa Sali No, moved from Wiang Com Tong-Mueang Nyu to found Mueang Sing. I, Chao Fa Sali No, wish to petition all three of you. I ask for the return of these districts to Mueang Sing. I ask you to support me in this matter. I am very sad about the things as they are.99

Vacle, the French representative responsible for implementation of the Anglo-French declaration of 9 May 1896, replied:

As to the first and second points you put forward, we can help you. As to the third point concerning the division of territory, this is a big issue. We have already signed a document and we made a treaty that is binding. I don’t have the means to negotiate the return [of the territory].100

AFTECMATH

In the end, the Chao Fa and his government had to accept the fait accompli, given the lack of any viable alternative. But this does not mean that the old links with the lost territories on the right bank were broken off overnight. On the contrary, the bonds between the people on both sides of the Mekong
remained close long after their principality had been parcelled out between Britain and France. This became obvious when in 1905 a dispute between the Mom Ong Kham, the new Chao Fa of the rump state of Chiang Khaeng, and his younger brother, Mom Teppamani Kham, the Uparat, escalated.101

Phanya Khaek Cai San, who supplemented this episode in CKC-WTP, was a close follower of the Uparat and therefore was probably biased against the Chao Fa. He attributes the dispute to the uncompromising and stubborn personality (*mana kadang khaeng*) of Chao Mom Ong Kham, a judgement that does not appear too harsh given the Chao Fa’s later rebellious and unconciliatory attitude towards the French. The new Chao Fa of Mueang Sing was accused of taking decisions ‘alone like a [supreme] emperor and like the lord of animals called Sihalat (King Lion)’ and – unable to control his temper – of humiliating his younger brother even in front of other people.102 Finally, Uparat Chao Mom Teppamani Kham found his personal situation unbearable and approached his relatives in Chiang Tung. In a letter the Uparat’s envoy took to the Chao Fa of Chiang Tung and the British vice-governor of the Shan states, G.C.B. Stirling, Chao Mom Teppamani Kham asked for political asylum, putting forward the following argument:

> I, the younger, come from Mueang Sing where I live under very difficult circumstances. This is what you, elder brother, must already know from the distance. If you, the elder brother, still regard me as your younger brother, could you give consideration to Chiang Khaeng? Its territory has been parcelled out by the great personalities of the two sides, i.e. France and England. But this indeed is a shame for all great countries. If the great personality, leader of the English side, does give his approval, he should allow all officials and commoners, who are ready to volunteer, to come and settle in Wiang Com Tong at Mueang Nyu. This is my wish.103

The Chao Fa of Chiang Tung gave his approval, emphasizing bonds of lineage and former tributary relations between the two *mueang*:

> If you, the younger brother, will come I, the elder brother, would not have any objections. [On the contrary,] I would be highly delighted. I would not refuse you. Welcome in Chiang Tung! Where you will settle down, we can discuss together.104

On 12 May 1905, Chao Mom Teppamani Kham secretly departed with more than twenty trusted followers from Mueang Sing. Pursued by French soldiers, the refugees finally reached British controlled territory, which until recently had been part of Chiang Khaeng. The chronicle notes that whatever *mueang* on the west bank Chao Mom Teppamani Kham and his entourage passed...
through on their way to Chiang Tung, they were enthusiastically cheered by the local population: ‘Wherever they passed through, villages and towns, they were greeted with a su khwan ceremony. [This happened] in all places such as Mueang Khan, Mueang Hae, Mueang Luai, and Mueang Nyu’.

Despite the destruction of Chiang Khaeng as an independent and united polity, the loyalty of the population to the ruling family across artificial political boundaries remained strong.

At the beginning of Chao Ong Kham’s rule in 1901, the French restructured the inflated local administration along functional lines. Departments of Agriculture, Finance, Justice, Military Affairs and Public Works were formed. Furthermore, the number of officials (tao khun) heading these departments was reduced from seventy to only twenty-five (including the eight members of the ho sanam). Along with these measures fiscal and judicial reforms were introduced to narrow the differences with the rest of French controlled Laos.

Thus French policy contributed to an increase in tensions in Mueang Sing, even more so since resentment against French rule was already simmering before the implementation of the most far-reaching reforms. The CKC reports how in November 1900 a group of Tai Lue from Mueang Phong (Sipsong Panna), sixty to seventy men who ‘were taking weapons under their bags’, arrived at the market of Mueang Sing and tried to stir up the local population against the hated ‘Kala’ (her Europeans). The secret plot was discovered and the French mastered the situation. However, local officials who obviously did not side with the rebels urged the Chao Fa to file their complaints to French commissioner Montpeyra:

All of us feel that we are in a very difficult situation. In the past you were the chief and all the officials could discuss everything together. The law of justice still prevailed in our country. Now, the French have organised the administration for us, they have destroyed our old customs and want [to create new institutions] that are [allegedly] much better than the old ones [of ours]. This can well precipitate the decay of our country. Now the law of justice has been violated.

Mueang Sing remained an autonomous principality under French protection, but in name only. In the end Chao Fa Mom Ong Kham tried to seek independence from France with the support of Chinese armed groups who, in 1914, had invaded and made insecure large parts of northern Laos. On 6 April 1916, the French toppled the Chao Fa. Chao Fa Ong Kham was accused of being ‘guilty of common law offences and political crimes’. The last ruler of Mueang Sing, who fled to Sipsong Panna, and his heirs lost all their privileges.
CONCLUSION

What can we learn from the conflict in and around Chiang Khaeng that occurred more than a century ago? First of all, the European colonial powers looked at the petty principality in the Upper Mekong region solely under the perspective of how to draw a clear dividing line between their respective spheres of influence. The negotiations about the founding of a buffer state were subordinated to this dominant interest. The historical tradition of the region was of importance to the British and French only in so far as it could be manipulated to justify their own territorial claims.

The Chiang Khaeng Chronicle demonstrates that the Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng and his nobles were by no means exclusively ignorant victims of British-French negotiations. Well aware of the outside threats to the integrity of their petty state, they tried hard to manipulate the contradictions between the two main European colonial powers to secure the very survival of that state.

The Mekong offered the colonial powers a border that could easily be defined and controlled. But this border created by foreign powers divided traditional polities possessing political and cultural identities that had developed over centuries. For the Lue in the Upper Mekong and the Lao in the Middle Mekong, the mighty river was never a border, but their most important lifeline (sai siwit). Their settlements extended to both banks of the river. The traditional pattern of tributary relations based on ‘multiple overlordships’, as Thongchai puts it, with overlapping margins of suzerainty, enabled the Tai polities of the region to survive. European notions of sovereignty brought an end to the erstwhile political autonomy. It was sacrificed for the new concept of uncontested sovereignty of nation-states which had to define internationally recognized borderlines.

Making use of indigenous sources, the historian gains a perspective which enables him to better understand the consequences of the ‘great colonial policy’ and its impact on the life of the population concerned. It is hoped that this chapter will contribute to an appreciation of that perspective.
CHIANG KHAENG 1893–1896

NOTES


11. ‘History of Chiang Khaeng [ชัยภูมิ]', Wat Ta Pao, Mueang Sing, Luang Nam Tha Province. In the following, this text will be quoted as ‘Chiang Khaeng Chronicle, Wat Ta Pao version’.

12. The colophon follows a sentence that intriguingly constitutes the last sentence of the version of the Chiang Khaeng Chronicle that was in the possession of K.G. Izikowitz and later published and translated by Lafont. See Pierre-Bernard Lafont, Le Royaume de jyi kben: Chronique d’un royaume tay la2 du haut Mékong (XVe – XXe siècles), Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998.

13. As each folio was written on both sides, the manuscript would originally have comprised 78 pages; of these the first two pages are missing. See discussion below.


15. Lafont, Le Royaume. The Lue original has been reproduced on pages 5–74.

16. Lafont, Le Royaume, p. x.

17. The CKC-WTP version has recently been transcribed into modern Thai and Lao scripts and analysed by the present writer in collaboration with Thai and Lao scholars, including Renoo Wichasilpa of Chiang Mai University and Dr Boualy Paphaphanh of the National University of Laos. An annotated English translation will be included in the
forthcoming publication, providing a more reliable rendering of the chronicle in a Western language than Lafont’s French translation. Our transcription of the CKC into modern Thai and Lao scripts and the English translation of the text are based on the Wat Ta Pao version. The Izikowitz version as well as Lafont’s French translation of it were also consulted, particularly in case of variant readings. Further, CKC-Iz was used to fill various lacunae that occur in the first ten pages of CKC-WTP. In the transcription, these ‘repaired lacunae’ were put in brackets. As already mentioned above, the first two pages of CKC-WTP have been lost. The manuscript starts with the following sentence: ‘Pha Mueang Kaeo appointed Chao Sulinta governor of [Chiang] Saen’. This sentence appears on f 2/13 of CKC-Iz. Assuming that ff 1/1–2/12 of CKC-Iz represents the lost starting part of CKC-WTP, we transcribed and transliterated these two folios separately in order to present the CKC in its complete form. CKC-Iz begins with the opening formula: ‘Sri svasti. This text will tell the chronicle of Chiang Khaeng since its earliest beginnings. […].’

18. CKC-WTP, ff 1/1–30/16; CKC-Iz, ff 1/1–28/15.
19. CKC-WTP, ff 30/7–74/3; CKC-Iz, ff 28/15–70/17.
20. CKC-WTP, ff 49/18–64/3; CKC-Iz, ff 46/2–60/3.
22. See ‘Chiang Khaeng Chronicle [tannan moeng ciang khaeng]’, Fond Nan Cai Saeng, Ban Nam Kaeo Luang, Mueang Sing, f 12/3–17. (CKC-BKL.) Other historical manuscripts found in Mueang Sing give valuable insights into myths, traditional practices, religious rites and forms of social organization of the Lue of Chiang Khaeng. I would like to mention in particular an abridged version of the CKC written by Chao Mai Nyawong, son of a nobleman directly involved in the events of the time. A copy of this abridged chronicle of Chiang Khaeng, which deals only with the post 1884–86 period, is kept in the above mentioned Historical Museum of Mueang Sing which was inaugurated in 1997. It is regarded by the provincial officials in Luang Nam Tha as the main ‘authoritative history’ of Mueang Sing. The title of this chronicle is ‘The Chronicle/ Story about how Chao Fa Sali No Moved from Wiang Com Thong to Construct the Town of Mueang Sing [pap nangsü pün moeng cao fa sali nò dai ñai cak wiang cóm tông ma sang paeng moeng sing]’. The chronicle has been transliterated into Thai and translated into English by the present writer. See Volker Grabowsky, ‘Introduction to the History of Müang Sing (Laos) Prior to French Rule: The Fate of a Lü Principality’, Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient, vol. 86, 1999, pp. 233–291.
23. ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No of Mueang Sing [paweni hit kong cao fa sali nò kham moeng sing]’, ff 3/10–30/9
25. See CKC-WTP, f 44/11–18; CKC-Iz, ff 1/1–2/7. CKC-BKL (ff 1/3–4/16) gives a relatively more detailed account of the legend. A very short but concise mention of the Chao Fa Dek Noi story is also in ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No Kham of Mueang Sing’, (f 2/2–7) stating: ‘The nobility (chao nai) of Chiang Khaeng is descended from the royal family of Chiang Khaeng which dates back to the generation of Chao Fa Dek Noi, the princely son of Chao Saen Wi Fa of Chiang Rung who was placed on a raft and floated down the stream of the Mekong. That prince had [acquired] plenty of merits and established himself as the ruler of Chiang Khaeng-Ho Kham. His fame spread to the Chinese emperor and to the Burmese king who were [both] fond of him and each of
them bestowed upon him the great and important honorific rank of Chao Fa Ho Kham, which has been passed down up to the present [days].

26. The CKC-WTP (f 44/16–17) states: ‘The ruler of Bo Lek handed the territory of his country over to his son-in-law, the Chao Fa of Chiang Khaeng. Since then [Chiang Khaeng] existed as a political entity through many generations’.

27. The Chronicle of Khan Borom states that in 1316 the later founder of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, Fa Ngum, was born in Mueang Swa (Luang Phrabang) with 33 teeth. The royal astrologers saw this as a bad omen and banished the little prince. Floating on a raft down the Mekong, Fa Ngum finally reached Cambodia where he found refuge at the royal court in Angkor. There he grew up getting a Buddhist education and later married a Khmer princess. With the support of his father-in-law, Fa Ngum mobilized a large army, conquered and united the Lao territories.

28. See ‘The Rulers of Sipsong Panna [cao phaendin sipsõng panna]’, ff 43/11–53–8. This chronicle, which is in the possession of Chao Maha Khanthawong (Chiang Rung), calls the young prince ‘Chao Noi Kham Lue’. He was the son of the Chao Fa of Chiang Rung, Chao Sam Lo, and a Chinese princess (Nang Ho). Chao Sam Lo exiled his son because his six other wives – one Burmese and five Tai – advised him to do so because the young ‘Chinese’ prince would do harmful acts if grown to the age of 15 or 16. See ‘The Rulers of Sipsong Panna’, f 44/8–11). Another lengthy account of the legend by a Chiang Rung source is ‘Chronicle of Chiang Rung – The Chronicle of the Royal Residence of Sipsong Panna-Chiang Rung [คำานามมหาราชฉลอง – พิมพ์ราชสิทธิบัตร ๙๓ บ้านเชียงรุ่ง ราชธานีเมืองป่านนา วิมานนาถเมือง]', ff 83/12–112/6.

29. Among the tribute gifts that Chiang Khaeng delivered to Chiang Rung were swords made of ‘khae iron’ that came from the iron mines of Chiang Khaeng. See CKC-Iz, f 2/4–6; Lafont, Le Royaume, p. 87. Compare also CKC-BKL, f 6/5–6.

30. ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No of Mueang Sing’, f 23/4–5 writes about the ethnic division of agricultural labour: ‘When the rice fields are ploughed, this falls into [the responsibility of] the tai moeng (i.e. the Tai commoners). When [the rice] is harvested, this falls into [the responsibility of] the Akha, Yao, Hmong (‘Meo’), Lanten, Kui and Musoe (i.e. Lahu) hill [tribal] people. Living on the hills they flock into the plain to harvest [the rice which they] send to the [Tai] commoners’.


32. The second invasion in 1812/13 was probably the most destructive in loss of manpower. The Nan Chronicle reports that ‘6,000 prisoners from Mueang La, Mueang Phong, Chiang Khaoeng, and Mueang Luang Pukha’ were brought to Nan. See David K. Wyatt (transl. and ed.), The Nan Chronicle, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994. The CKC reports that the military campaign was launched in 1814/15: ‘[...] the Chao Fa of Nan arrived with his troops, raided and deported the chao fa of Chiang Khaoeng and all the inhabitants [of Chiang Khaoeng] and of Mueang Luang Pukha. He arrived at Mueang Sing on the seventh waxing of the sixth month [28 March 1814] and returned to Nan on the third waxing of the fourth month [17 January 1815]’. See CKC-WTP, f 15/3–5.

33. Good summaries of the Chiang Tung wars in English are provided by William Melchers, ‘The Thai Invasion of Kengtung During the Reign of King Rama III’. In Ronald D. Renard (ed.), Anuson Walter Vella, Honolulu: Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1986, pp. 193–207; and Ratanaporn Sethakul,

34. The relations between Chiang Khang and Chiang Tung are extensively discussed in Grabowsky, ‘Introduction to the History of Mueang Sing’, pp. 233–234.


36. See Preschez, Les relations entre la France et la Birmanie, p. 407, who calls the princess ‘Sao Okham’.


39. CKC-WTP, f 32/9–16.

40. See CKC-WTP, ff 45/13–46/2. The fertility of Mueang Sing is testified by James McCarthy, Surveying and Exploring in Siam, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1994 [1900], p. 151, who visited the area in 1891, stressing: ‘[In] the plain of Mueang Sing there were thousands of acres of fertile land, well watered, and fit for rice-cultivation’.

41. See W.J. Archer, ‘Report on a Journey in the Mekong Valley’, Parliamentary Papers, vol. 79, 1891, p. 5. The conflict between Chiang Tung and Chiang Khang is confirmed by a contemporary British source in which it is stated: ‘After the death of the Sawbwa [Chao Fa] of Kyaington [Chiang Tung] in 1886, there was much friction between the Chief of Kyaing Chaing [Chiang Khaeng] and the younger Sawbwa of Kyaington, chiefly on account of Kyainglap [Chiang Lap], which had reverted to Kyaington, but was claimed by Kyaing Chaing as part of its original State’. See ‘Mr. Archer to the Government of India, Meung Sing (Kyaing Chaing), February 24, 1891’, Public Record Office [PRO], Foreign Office [FO], 422/34, p. 38.

42. CKC-WTP, f 32/5–8. Luang Sorasitthayanukan told W.J. Archer in February 1891: ‘Two to four years ago, Chiang Tung and Mueang Sing were engaged in a military conflict fighting against each other. Chiang Kok, Chiang Lap and Mueang Long sided with Chiang Tung. Although Chiang Tung was defeated the conflict is still continued until present’. Quoted from Nakhon Phannarong, ‘The Negotiations and Agreements between the Siamese and English Governments as regards to the Border Provinces of Lan Na and Burma during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn, A.D. 1885–1895 [ภาษาจารึกและข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับรัฐบาลสองฝ่ายต่อกรณียุทธการที่หวังด้วยถิ่นมหานครเชียงแสนและด้านاصة สมเด็จพระเจ้าพระยาulaçãoแจ่ยศ์รานั้นในระหว่างพระจุลจอมเกล้าจุฬาลงกรณ์, พระยาฯ พ.ศ. ๒๔๔๔–๒๔๔๙]’, MA thesis, Bangkok: Sinakharinthawiroth Prasarnmit University, 1973, p. 340.


44. According to a contemporary Siamese archival document, Chao Fa Sali No received an official letter from Chao Suriyawong urging him to bow to Siamese demands.
On 18 November 1889, at four o’clock in the afternoon, the oath-taking ceremony was carried out in Mueang Sing: ‘[...] The ruler of Chiang Khaeng [...] and the officials and noblemen of Mueang Sing [...] came together in Wat Luang situated in the centre of Mueang Sing. The ruler took four rifles, four spears and four swords with gilded scabbards, a gilded parasol, and a wooden tray [decorated with] flowers, candles and incense, and assigned the noblemen to receive the consecrated water [used in the ceremony of taking the oath of allegiance] at the resting place of Chao Mueang Pukha and Chao Mueang Thoen, take it into the vihan of Wat Luang, and invite four monks to offer it. After [the ruler] had finished [the drinking] the monks recited Buddhist sermons and read the oath of allegiance. Then [the ruler] turned his face [in the direction of] Bangkok paying homage to the King. Thereafter all the other persons joined in drinking the consecrated water. [...]’. Quoted from Somsak, ‘The Importance of Phrae and Nan’, p. 75.


46. ‘Mr. Archer to the Government of India’, Meung Sing (Kyaing Chaing), February 24, 1891, inclosure 4’, PRO, FO, 422/34, p. 39. An indigenous account of the Anglo-Siamese negotiations is found in CKC-WTP, ff 39/14–42/8. It notes how 300 guests (200 from the Siamese and 100 from the British side) had to be hosted by the relatively small royal court of Chiang Khaeng.

47. ‘Mr. Archer to the Government of India, Meung Sing (Kyaing Chaing), February 24, 1891, inclosure 5’, PRO, FO, 422/34, p. 41.

48. ‘Mr. Archer to the Government of India, Meung Sing (Kyaing Chaing), February 24, 1891’, p. 41.

49. Saimong notes that the French ‘for some sentimental reason insisted on dreaming about opening up commerce with Yunnan and southwest China over le fleuve which they affectionally regarded as theirs’. Quoted from Hirshfield, ‘The Struggle for the Mekong Banks’, p. 28.


53. The British side, however, claimed that Chiang Khaeng had never been formally ceded to Siam. Lord Rosebery remarked to the British ambassador at Paris, the Marquis of Dufferin, that ‘it was true that we had drawn up a Treaty by which we agreed to give Kiang Chang [Chiang Khaeng] to Siam, but the French were in such a hurry to attack Siam that they had not given us the time to sign it, and, even had it been signed, the province could not have been ceded to any other Power without our consent’. See ‘The Earl of Rosebery to the Marquis of Dufferin, October 25, 1893’, PRO, FO, 422/36, p. 302.


58. As Hirshfield observes, the ‘considerable British contribution’ had to ‘be balanced by the French appor of northern Luang Prabang’. While England was surrendering Keng Cheng, ‘a recognised state with a recognised capital’, France was giving up ‘wild, mountainous and worthless territory’. The British position was reconfirmed by Scott after the arrival of Pavie in Mueang Sing. Scott declared ‘that he would renounce to reclaim the seven villages dependent on Burmese Xieng Tong [Chiang Tung] that were situated on the right bank of the Mékong, south of Xieng Kheng [Chiang Khaeng]’. See Hirshfield, ‘The Struggle for the Mekong Banks’. Also see Preschez, Les relations entre la France et la Birmanie, p. 400.


60. Lacroze, ‘L’affaire de Muong Sing’, p. 8; see also Preschez, Les relations entre la France et la Birmanie, pp. 400–401.


66. ‘Report by Mr. Archer on a Tour to Chiengsén, Chieng Khong, and Mueang Nan, 12 February 1896’, PRO, FO, 422/45, p. 81.

67. CKC-WTP, ff 18/1–19/7.

68. As the noun tap signifies a fort, fortress or enclosure in Burmese, and the verb pong means ‘to be separate’ or ‘to be independent’. I am grateful to Dr Uta Gaernter (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) for this information, letter to the author, dated 28 November 1999. See also Volker Grabowsky, ‘Compte rendu Pierre-Bernard Lafont: Le Royaume de jyr khefn’, Aséanie, no. 5, 2000, pp. 179–181.

69. This is a formulaic political nostrum. ‘Ho pen pho, Man pen mae (Yunnanese [or Chinese] is father, Burmese is mother) is a phrase referring to the political status of Sipsong Panna …’, see Ratanaporn Sethakul, ‘The Lue of Sipsongpanna and Mueang Nan in the Nineteenth Century’. In Andrew Turton (ed.), Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000, p. 324. A similar metaphor was used by Siamese and Vietnamese rulers with regards to their Cambodian condominium in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Siamese king was seen as the Cambodian ruler’s ‘father’, the Vietnamese emperor as his ‘mother’. See David Chandler, A History of Cambodia, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1993, p. 116. Both Sipsong Panna and Cambodia were prototypes of states with multiple tributary relations.

70. ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No Kham of Mueang Sing’, ff 1/12–2/1.

71. ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No Kham of Mueang Sing’, ff 1/7–11.
72. See for example CKC-WTP, ff 21/12–22/9.
73. According to Somsak, ‘The Importance of Phrae and Nan’, pp. 73–75; McCarthy, Surveying and Exploring in Siam, p. 151; and H. Warrington Smyth reports the military intervention already for the year 1888, which seems too early; see H. Warrington Smyth, Five Years in Siam, 1891–1896, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1994 [1898]. Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis does not mention any intervention at all; see Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis, Voyages dans le Haut Laos et sur les frontières de Chine et de Birmanie (Mission Pavie Indochine 1879–1895, tome 5), Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1902. Finally, a contemporary Siamese document states: ‘The Chao Mueang of Chiang Khaeng, the officials of all hua mueang dependent [on Chiang Khaeng] and the whole population wish to live happily in the territory of the Kingdom of Siam and place themselves under the protection of the King. The Chao Mueang of Chiang Khaeng ordered his officials to send as tributes a gold tree of 10 bat (150 g) weight and a silver tree of 30 bat (450 g) weight as well as four horses’. Quoted from National Archives, Bangkok, R.5 M.58/194.
74. ‘Mr. Archer to the Government of India, Meung Sing (Kyaing Chaing), February 24, 1891, Inclusion 4’.
75. Quoted from Nakhon, ‘The Negotiations and Agreements between the Siamese and English Governments’, p. 340. The ruler of Nan ordered the construction of gold and silver trees for the ruler of Chiang Khaeng. These trees should be handed over to the Siamese king as a token of submission.
76. ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No Kham of Mueang Sing’, f 34/1–6.
77. CKC-WTP, f 34/13–14.
78. The main ordination hall for Buddhist monks and novices.
79. Dormitory for monks and novices.
80. ‘The Customs and Rules of Chao Fa Sali No Kham of Mueang Sing’, f 34/6–9.
81. The CKC reports a good example for such flexibility. ‘Chao Sulinya [of Nan] said: ‘Three bat of gold are insufficient. You should instead give 100 [bat] of gold and, if possible, four striped horses [in addition], that would be really sufficient. If you don’t have enough gold now at present, I can help you first, and you could pay it back [to me] step by step. [...]’, CKC-WTP, f 37/2–4.
82. CKC-WTP, f 48/3–6. Asoyja is the Burmese word for ‘government’ or ‘administration’. In this light ‘Chao Achonya’ simply means the ‘Head of State’ which, at that time, happened to be Queen Victoria.
83. CKC-WTP, f 50/7–10.
84. Mit suai derives from the Burmese word mit shway, meaning ‘friend’. The first component is a Pali loanword (<mitra>) meaning ‘friend’, whereas the second component is a genuine Burmese word of the same meaning.
85. CKC-WTP, f 51/11–17.
86. A utensil in the form of a tall basket with a narrow bottom.
87. CKC-WTP, ff 52/9–53/1.
88. This is a Burmese loan world. Armein means ‘utterance’, ‘order’ or ‘decree’; to is a suffix referring to royalty like the Tai word luang. Thus aming to means a ‘royal decree/edict’.
89. CKC-WTP, ff 55–6–11.
91. CKC-WTP, f 58/1–8. As to the English regime in Mueang Sing, see Preschez, Les relations entre la France et la Birmanie, p. 403.
92. CKC-WTP, f 59/7–13.
93. CKC-WTP, f 59/15–16.
94. CKC-WTP, f 59/12.
95. ‘The Chronicle/Story about how Chao Fa Sali No Moved from Wiang Com Tong to Construct the Town of Mueang Sing’, f 4/15.
96. CKC-WTP, f 60/8–9.
97. CKC-WTP, f 60/10. ‘The Chronicle/Story about how Chao Fa Sali No Moved from Wiang Com Tong to Construct the Town of Mueang Sing’ (f 4/16) dates this event at 22 February 1896.
98. CKC-WTP, f 5/2–3, see Grabowsky, ‘Introduction to the History of Mueang Sing’, p. 267.
99. ‘The Chronicle/Story about how Chao Fa Sali No Moved from Wiang Com Tong to Construct the Town of Mueang Sing’, f 6/17–7/5. Also see Grabowsky, ‘Introduction to the History of Mueang Sing’, p. 269. The CKC quotes the Chao Fa condemning the partition as ‘shameful’ (la-ai). The Chao Fa declared: ‘The great personalities of both sides have concluded their negotiations. Chiang Khaeng has been broken up into pieces and this constitutes a shame for the entire population. It is nothing but shameful. I feel now disheartened because the officials collected an enormous amount of money for the benefit of the country. All this is lost. You have divided the territory of Chiang Khaeng. [...]’. See CKC-WTP, f 61/10–14.
100. ‘The Chronicle/Story about how Chao Fa Sali No Moved from Wiang Com Tong to Construct the Town of Mueang Sing’, f 7/6–8.
101. The two princes were actually half-brothers, sons of Chao Fa Sali No born from different mothers. Chao Mom Ong Kham was the son of Nang Peng, the principal royal consort (nang tewi), whereas Chao Mom Teppamani Kham was Nang Kham Daeng, the Chao Fa’s second consort. See CKC-WTP, f 33/17–19. It is, however, a matter of speculation whether and to what descent from different mothers added to the personal dispute between the two princes.
102. CKC-WTP, f 74/9–10, f 75/3–4.
103. CKC-WTP, ff 75/16–76/3.
104. CKC-WTP, f 76/8–9.
105. CKC-WTP, f 78/4–5.
106. For details about the administrative and financial restructuring see CKC-WTP, f 72/1–73/9; CKC-Iz, ff 69/4–70/10, compare with Lafont, Le Royaume, pp. 250–253. See also ‘The Chronicle/Story about how Chao Fa Sali No Moved from Wiang Com Tong to Construct the Town of Mueang Sing’, f 7/13–17.
PART II

CONTESTING NEW LAO PASTS: FROM THE INSIDE
For all human communities, history constitutes ‘an intentional and organized process of identity formation that remembers the past in order to understand the present and anticipate the future’.\(^1\) How that identity is constructed, with what components in what relationships, determines both its inclusivity internally and its exclusivity in relation to other such communities. Language, material culture, art and religion all contribute to the same end, each with its own, if interrelated, historical dimension. Within communities, the historical meaning given to constructions of identity both reflects and serves to reinforce existing relations of social power. It is in the interest of social elites to dominate, and historiography has always been a powerful ideological weapon in the dialectics of domination.

History, identity and power may be categorically distinct, but they are inextricably related in the temporal trajectories of all communities through differentiations of gender and age, divisions of labour and class and the production and appropriation of knowledge. In those territorially defined, highly complex communities that constitute post-industrial nation states, constructions of identity have become vigorously contested, reflecting the splintering of social power that has marked the postmodern turn. Different historiographies both define alternative identities for each self-defined social group and suggest new syntheses that might draw them together, or at least take account of their multiple relationships.\(^2\) In Laos, while minority groups have constructed their own, for the most part oral, versions of the past, this process has hardly begun. Lao historiography has been, and continues to be, a construction of dominant elites.

In a paper published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, I argued for the continuity of Lao history on the basis of the political-social-cultural identity of the *mueang*, the core political organizational construct in Lao (and all Tai)
society. Yet within each mueang, whatever its variable extent, communities were differentiated and complex. Among the dominant Lao, gender relations were patriarchal, even if certain legal provisions were made for the rights of women with respect to marriage and property. Social status was defined by birth and descent, but for the single demanding avenue of monastic self-denial (reflecting the ancient Indian path to power through austerity). Only patronage could bridge the divide of birth between nobility and commoner, whether sexual (as when nobles took minor wives) or adoptive (as when promising children were brought up in aristocratic families or at court). In both these special cases, and more generally, patronage demanded loyalty, the vertical bonding of the mueang by contrast to the horizontal bonding of intermarriage, cooperative labour and common participation in annual religious festivities.

This was the structure of social relations within Lao communities, whose identity was initially defined through common descent and common worship of locally or regionally powerful spirits (phi). Entirely different social relations existed within the less hierarchically structured communities of the Lao Theung, as defined by their own distinct rules of descent and marriage, and forms of worship. Inter-communal relations rested on commerce, types of taxation/exploitation and dominant-subordinate status, reinforced on occasion by coercive repression. Only with the arrival of the Lao Soung (Hmong-Mien and Tibeto-Burman) were the Lao Loum forced to recognize and treat with similarly hierarchically structured communities within the mueang.

Mueang identity rested on mythic-historical descent and the marking out of territory, initially perhaps through force of arms, but subsequently justified as divinely determined. But relations between mueang rested on at least potentially equal claims to autonomy and inclusion, to legitimation through descent and to the potency of regional spirits. Smaller, less powerful mueang still reserved for themselves the right to autonomy, not just in their internal affairs, a right jealously guarded, but in relation to other mueang through tribute paid to more than one more powerful mueang. All Tai were free men: all mueang were autonomous polities – at least in theory.

In mueang dynamics lay both the strength and weakness of the traditional Lao world order. Its strength derived from the repetition of structures, any level of which might serve, by keeping Lao political culture alive, as the seed from which to rebuild a more extensive polity. Its weakness stemmed from its potential for fissiparous division and conflict. Mueang Lao was always in a state of tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, between the power resources of the centre and the regions.

In constructing the mandala (imperial kingdom) of Lan Xang in the mid-fourteenth century, its founder, Fa Ngum, had the benefit of a Khmer education at the court of Angkor, still the centre of a powerful kingdom. His ambition was to weld together a Lao mandala comprising all the Lao mueang; that is, all those communities which could claim descent from Khun Borom (believed to
be the divine ancestor of all Tai peoples) by blood, language and culture. But if we accept that the Lao culture area is approximately coextensive with glutinous rice cultivation, it was an ambition never fulfilled. Only fleetingly two centuries later under Setthatirath was Lan Na brought within the mandala of Lan Xang. The Sipsong Panna, the Sipsong Chu Thai, even Mueang Phuan (Xieng Khuang on the Plain of Jars), were always threatening to escape control of the centre.

The kingdom that Fa Ngum founded did, however, possess its own integrity, geographically in the Mekong basin, politically through conquest, marriage contracts and loyalty oaths. But military power alone would have been insufficient to hold it together. Legitimation came through a singular Lao fusion of the traditional legitimation of Tai mueang with the more universalistic legitimation provided by Theravada Buddhism. The attraction of the Lao centre rested on the degree to which it could concentrate power with respect to competing centres. Those sources of power were economic through trade and tribute, military through the coercive capacity to call on constituent mueang for the supply of troops, political through the processes whereby powerful regional leaders were drawn into the life of the court and ideological through the legitimation provided by myth and religion (actively propagated by the sangha), reinforced by historiography in the form of the Lao court chronicles.

For three and a half centuries, the centre held. Lan Xang was a powerful mandala, able to hold its own against neighbouring kingdoms. But over this period the balance of power was changing, most notably the balance of economic power through trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The greater wealth available to kingdoms with access to maritime trade translated into increased military and ideological power, through, respectively, the purchase and production of new military technology and increased royal patronage of the sangha. Along with political and administrative reforms, these swung the overall balance of power in favour of Burma and Ayutthaya at the expense of Lan Na and Lan Xang. The division in the eighteenth century of the greater Lao world, once the Burmese were expelled, into the seven principalities of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Nan, Phrae, Luang Phrabang, Vientiane and Champasak made Siamese domination that much easier. The last attempt by King Anouvong of Vientiane to reconstruct the Lao mandala was defeated through the superiority of Siamese power and the reality of greater Lao division. But the destruction of Vientiane eliminated only one contender to reconstruct Mueang Lao. The Lao mueang splintered apart, but each remained a potential centre, held in orbit only by the superior centripetal pull of Bangkok.

Had Siamese power been neutralized earlier by that of another contender – Burma or Vietnam, Britain or France – the possibility would again have existed for the reconstruction of Mueang Lao. As it was, that task was left to France, the colonial protectorate defining the extent of the independent state.
Traditional Lao historiography as we find it expressed in the court chronicles reached back into the mythical past to situate the Lao mandala in the context of two sets of divine intervention – one by the celestial spirits (thaen) in establishing both the line of Khun Borom and the mueang of Xieng Dong Xieng Thong (Luang Phrabang), the other by the Buddha in designating Mueang Lao as a centre for propagation of the dhamma.

In the Nithan Khun Borom, the Lao court chronicle that recounts the early mythology of the Lao people, Buddhist and animist elements are interwoven.9 Thus Laos was situated in a Buddhist cosmology as part of the continent of Jambudvipa. And the two hermits who marked out the extent of Lao territory (in the region of Luang Phrabang) and who obtained the support of naga (snake deities identified with particular geographical features) and theva (spirits, probably powerful phi) to protect it, reported to Indra, king of the gods, in a Buddhist heaven upon completion of their task.10

It was Indra too who sent Khun Borom to be reborn on earth as the first king of the Tai people – not in the Lao territory marked out by the two hermits, but at Na Noy Oy Nu, whose location is variously supposed to have been somewhere in southern China or in the region of Dien Bien Phu in north-western Vietnam. It was Khun Borom’s eldest son, Khun Lo, who migrated on his father’s instructions to Luang Phrabang (then called Mueang Sua, but renamed by the Lao Xieng Dong Xieng Thong). Thus did the Lao claim precedence over other Tai groups, whose ancestry back to Khun Borom was via one of Khun Lo’s six younger brothers. All Lao kings, with two exceptions in the sixteenth century, traced their ancestry back through Khun Lo to Khun Borom.

These two exceptions were Saen Soulintha and his son, Nakhon Noi.11 The former was the wily general of king Setthatirath who fought a succession of Burmese invasions. Though he was not of royal blood, he seized the throne when Setthatirath disappeared in southern Laos on an expedition against the Khmer. Evidently Saen Soulintha felt the need for some stronger legitimation, however, for he had himself proclaimed a bodhisattva, a Buddha-to-be. Even so, he was popularly known as ‘Aiyakarat’ (meaning ‘grandfather of the king’), because his daughter was the mother of Setthatirath’s son and legitimate heir. In other words, many saw him only as regent, not king. His hold on the throne was probably strengthened by his resistance to Burmese attempts to replace him with Setthatirath’s younger brother (until then held hostage in Burma). Saen Soulintha was eventually captured by the Burmese, but returned to the throne when his Burmese-imposed replacement (known only as Chao Uparat) was killed in an uprising by an impostor claiming to be the missing Setthatirath. When Saen Soulintha died, his son succeeded to the throne, only to be overthrown by those determined to restore the royal line. Thereafter all Lao
kings, even of the three kingdoms into which Lan Xang split in the early eighteenth century, were of the line of Khun Borom – or claimed to be.

Equally important in legitimating royal rule were Buddhist beliefs concerning the workings of karma, merit and rebirth, reinforced by the legend of a visit to Laos by the historical Buddha and the miraculous origins and powers of the Phra Bang Buddha image, that after the time of King Visun (early sixteenth century) became the palladium of the Lao ruling dynasty.12 To be reborn into the royal family required merit (bun) enough: To become king indicated an accumulation of good karma over several lifetimes. Thus a king was king by his own moral right, which was not to say that he was guaranteed a long or happy reign. When a king died through some accident, such as drowning, the chronicles attributed that too to karma.13 A king was, moreover, in a position to add considerably to his store of merit, by giving generously to the sangha to build and endow new monasteries and temples, financing elaborate ceremonies, demonstrating his piety and ruling in accordance with Buddhist moral precepts. So the relationship was a reciprocal one. The Buddhist worldview of which these notions formed a central part was propagated by the Buddhist sangha, which stood most to benefit from royal largesse.

Buddhism also provided the setting for ritual reiteration of elite legitimacy; for example, through commemorative worship of the founding guardians of the city at new year celebrations, with their accompanying ritual re-statement of ethnic Lao superiority over tribal minorities, celebrations presided over by the king during which the story of Khun Borom would once again be recited. And of course, Buddhism provided opportunities for publicly witnessed royal patronage of the sangha, and extolled the miraculous protective power attributed to the palladium of the ruling dynasty (the Phra Bang Buddha image) and thus of the kingdom.

History provided elite legitimation through demonstrating the actual basis of that legitimation. In so doing, chronicle history told the story not of the mandala of Lan Xang, but of the ruling dynasty. It recorded the descent of each ruler, and recounted the meritorious acts by which kings maintained their Buddhist credentials. Traditional Lao historiography was thus constructed to justify the monopoly of the sources of social and political power by a self-perpetuating ruling elite, whose fortunes were identified with those of Mueang Lao.

Just as history legitimized power, so it defined identity. Lao were Lao by virtue of their membership not of local mueang, but of Mueang Lao. The chronicles told how Khun Lo had to wrest control of the region of Luang Phrabang from Khun Sua (the Lord of Sua) and his descendents, that is, from the indigenous inhabitants (probably Khamu) who were there already.14 They told at length the story of Fa Ngum’s founding of the mandala of Lan Xang as constituting Mueang Lao. And even when the mandala divided into constituent kingdoms, the chronicles of each kept alive the ancient connection. What
remained ambivalent was the position of non-Lao minorities, who, both feared and despised as they were, remained not entirely outside the Mueang, but marginalized within it. Ritual which included certain minorities in coronation or new year ceremonies only reinforced this ambivalence, which historiography did nothing to resolve – and in the case of Champasak even exacerbated.15

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It is always instructive in history to consider the counter-factual. Had the British seized lower Siam instead of lower Burma, perhaps as a result of manufactured incidents involving British merchants in Bangkok, it is possible that the Lao kingdoms would have spun off into their own orbits. Certainly the map of mainland Southeast Asia would today be very different. Anglo-French rivalry spared Siam the traumas of colonialism if not those associated with the penetration of Western capitalism and forced modernization. With the British busy in Burma, only the French cast covetous eyes on the Lao territories, from the vantage point of Vietnam. The Lao mueang chosen as the fulcrum for French leverage was Luang Phrabang.

The colonial construct that was French Laos was a hybrid comprising both directly administered territories and the somewhat more indirectly administered protectorate of Luang Phrabang. Only the latter was permitted to maintain a slender link to the mandala of Lan Xang, but it was not the core around which the French set out to construct French Laos. Nor was it Champasak, where most of the royal family of that Lao principality preferred to give their allegiance to Siam. Instead the French chose Vientiane, the former capital of a line of kings that had come to an end with Chao Anouvong seventy years before. Vientiane was rebuilt not as the symbolic centre of a reunified Mueang Lao, but as a provincial French administrative town inhabited, it should be remembered, as much by Vietnamese representing French Indochina as by Lao. For Laos was a territory (pays) of French Indochina, not then a political entity in its own right destined to become a separate state in a French commonwealth of nations. Rather, Laos was seen as an extension of Vietnam, to be exploited by Vietnamese labour and French capital for the greater benefit of France.16 Despite this, it was the role of French colonial historiography to reinforce in the minds of those Lao induced to collaborate with France a view of their joint destiny (see Agathe Larcher-Goscha’s contribution).

A good example of French colonial historiography on Laos is provided by Roland Meyer’s Le Laos, published in Hanoi in 1930.17 The early history of the Indochinese peninsula (comprising Burma and Siam as well as French Indochina) was presented by Meyer as a series of ethnic struggles for domination, in which stronger and more dynamic peoples replaced the weaker and less able. The Montagnard population, supposedly ‘formerly masters of
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Indochina’, represented for Meyer ‘the vestiges of all the vanquished in these struggles’. And these struggles continued after formation of the mandala of Lan Xang.

It was in the face of these age-old wars that the feeblest states – Champa, Laos, Cambodia – were worn down and forced to succumb, while the soon-to-be-rival powers of Siam and Annam, the only ones standing at the moment of French intervention in Indochina, consolidated themselves to their detriment.

Thus was Vientiane mercilessly destroyed while all the Lao territories fell under the suzerainty of Siam.

But an amazing turn of history was about to occur, for ‘an imperative force […] was pushing Europe to discover and educate distant peoples’. Laos was about to be saved, even though King Setthatirath, builder of Vientiane, could never ‘have dreamed that the ruins of his capital would one day be rebuilt by France, of whose very name he was ignorant’. Yet it was only after much hesitation, and then in order to protect French missionaries, that France was induced ‘to establish in Indochina peace, order and prosperity’. If the first step saw Annam (colonial writers never used the inclusive term ‘Vietnam’) ‘enter into the great French family’, it could not be the last. For as Meyer exclaims:

So there was France, weighed down by her Asian burden, responsible from then on for the fate of the Annamese people and the autochthonous tribes confined to the mountains of the interior. In fact, how far did this unexplored hinterland without law or master extend, this no-man’s-land where Laos and Cambodia were on the point of final collapse?

It was France’s duty, Meyer told his readers, to take up what he proclaimed was the Vietnamese tradition of expansion westwards to establish a proper frontier, ‘that common aim pursued for a thousand years by all the peoples of Indochina, at the price of incessant war’.

Conflict with Siam seemed inevitable, but was avoided because both Laos and Cambodia ‘freely opted for French protection’ – in the case of Laos once Auguste Pavie had won the hearts of the Lao people and taught them ‘to love France, and to wish for her tutelage’. So the Pavie myth was repeated, of how as ‘sole defender’ of Luang Phrabang against ‘pirate’ attack, Pavie saved the king, who, ‘in touching recognition’ of what Pavie had done, requested the protection of France. (No mention here of the Lao defence that took the life of the Uparat Boun Khong, or of the Burmese royal guard who, according to an alternative account, bundled King Oun Kham into his boat.) Establishment of the French protectorate, Meyer tells his readers, ‘was welcomed by the Lao population as marking the end of their calamities and the rebirth of their
country’. Indeed from that point, though some hill tribes ‘of touchy and fanatical character’ attempted to oppose French administration, ‘no incident has thrown any doubt on the loyalty of our Lao protégés’.26

And then comes an innocent, but revealing, switch in terminology. Pavie’s wish is fulfilled, not simply to bring Laos under French protection, but ‘to constitute Indochinese unity through fastening the links of our coastal colonies [Meyer is referring to Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, plus Cambodia] on the central lock of the Lao hinterland’.27 So the destiny of Indochina (there is no further mention of Laos in this chapter on history) lies in its continued relationship with France, for even an ‘adult colony’ whose bonds of filial gratitude to the Mother Country may loosen over time must never attempt to repudiate them! There follows an account of the work of France in Laos, which was undertaken above all, so Meyer maintains,

to save the [Lao] race [already] on the way to disappearing, stem the exodus and dispersal of families, regroup and establish them in fertile regions, in the shadow of our flag and under the protection of our [military] posts, and so give this exhausted people courage to live and faith in the future.28

And that was what France had done, by putting in place a functioning administration, through education and health care, and through active preservation of Lao culture and even religion.29 It was a commendable achievement, held aloft for all Lao to acknowledge and be grateful.

Meyer’s argument draws together the principal strands of French colonial historiography on Laos. Only the presence of France had saved the weaker races from disappearing entirely as the pitiless ethnic warfare that had enveloped the Indochinese peninsula for a thousand years overwhelmed them. The benefits of French protection were thus evident. France had preserved Laos and the Lao from destruction, so it was in the best interests of the Lao themselves that the French presence should continue. Collaboration by the Lao elite was for the benefit of all Lao. Thus did French historiography empower French rule. What undermined it was the vision France held out for Laos as merely an extension of ‘Indochina’.

Chapter five of Meyer’s study is entitled ‘The Future of Laos’, a brief six pages that outlined the fate that awaited Laos under French protection. According to Meyer, future policy on Laos would have to address three problems: How to ‘unblock’ the country, increase population and exploit its resources. ‘Unblocking’ (déblocuement) entailed opening up communications routes with Vietnam, the favoured means being a railway across the Annamese Cordillera. This would allow the labour problem to be solved by flooding Laos with Vietnamese, a solution described as ‘inevitable’. The only problem was that ‘the hardy, entrepreneurial, combative Annamite would make no more than
a mouthful of the timid and resigned Laotian’.30 ‘Rural reserves’ and ‘ethnic quarters’ in the towns would have to be set aside for the Lao, who would become a protected minority in their own country – protected, that is, only by a continued French presence. Thus even as the French systematically dispossessed the Lao, they would still be needed, to protect them not from the Thai, but from the Vietnamese.

The necessity of French protection that colonial historiography instilled into two generations of Lao thus stands in stark contrast to the reality of French intentions for Laos. On the one hand, Laos remained administratively distinct from Vietnam; on the other hand, in French eyes, its destiny was to be ever more closely linked to Vietnam – to the point of eventual inclusion as a mere hinterland for Vietnamese settlement. French colonial historiography was designed to demonstrate the role of France in ‘saving’ the Lao (or some of them at least) from Siamese domination, not to reveal French intentions to reduce them to a more complete subservience to (French) Vietnam. French colonial historiography, by stressing the protective role of France in preserving a separate Lao identity, both justified and reinforced colonial domination. The Lao were taught that they needed France: any challenge to French authority would threaten the very existence of Laos and the Lao people. Similar justification was constantly reiterated in Cambodia.31 For their own good and that of their country, therefore, the Lao elite was encouraged to accept and collaborate with French colonial rule, even to the point of acquiescing in Vietnamese migration. The contradiction that lay at the heart of the French colonial relationship with Laos was that while French colonial historiography justified Lao subservience to France in the name of the preservation of a Lao political entity, French plans for economic exploitation were laying the basis for the destruction of Laos through its absorption into a French Indochina in which the dominant ethnic group was to be the Vietnamese.32

The ambiguities of French policy in Laos carried with it implications for Lao identity. The colonial regime established a racial hierarchy with the French at the top, followed by the Vietnamese (dynamic, expansionist, industrious), then the Lao (timid, lazy, in decline), then other ethnic groups whose chiefs were tributary to the Lao (such as the Lue, the Hmong, etc.) and finally the kha (the Lao Theung who had been slaves to the Lao). This hierarchy was given administrative form both in the famous case of the Lamet, whose taxes were collected by Lao district heads answerable to Vietnamese officials working for the French authorities.33 The same system applied to the Hmong. When the Hmong rebelled, grievances over taxation focused on intermediate levels in this administrative hierarchy, rather than on the French themselves.34 Identity thus came to be relativized. No common identity based on citizenship was possible among these diverse groups, for all were subjects, not citizens. Lao self-esteem was sapped by dependency. It would have to be reconstituted anew.
LAO NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE KINGDOM OF LAOS

The Lao elite, from the royal family of Luang Phrabang down to minor chao mueang, were led to collaborate with the French authorities – at first in opposition to Siam, subsequently in what they conceived to be their own interests in maintaining a continuing French presence. Opposition to the French administration came not from ethnic Lao, obedient to their own leaders, but from ethnic minorities, Lao Theung and Lao Soung, objecting to the imposition of taxes and corvée labour. Suppression of these uprisings, which to the French were madness, was in the interests of both the French authorities and the Lao elite. The construction and maintenance of the colonial state was thus a collaborative venture, reinforced by the ideology of colonial historiography and reinforcing in its turn hierarchical inter-communal relationships and identities.

This history of collaboration and its historiographical justification were difficult to overcome. The first to challenge it was Prince Phetsarath Rattanavong, who almost certainly would have read Meyer’s book when it first appeared in the same year Phetsarath was appointed Inspector of Political and Administrative Affairs (in other words, indigenous affairs) attached to the office of the Résident-Général in Vientiane. Meyer’s vision for the future of his country must have appalled Phetsarath and galvanized his single-minded determination to prevent such an outcome. Over the next decade, he made his opposition clear to French authorities, both in word and deed. As early as 1931, Phetsarath responded to an article that appeared in *France-Indochine* calling for closer integration of Laos into ‘Indochina’ by arguing vigorously for a separate Lao identity. He also actively promoted the appointment of Lao to replace Vietnamese in the colonial administration in Laos. I would thus argue that the origins of the Lao nationalist movement date not from the founding of the Lao Renovation movement in 1940, as most scholars have maintained, but to a decade earlier when the disturbing implications of continued French rule became fully apparent to the senior Lao administrator – if not to others. French distrust of Phetsarath, which became more marked in time, focused particularly on his nationalism, on the suspicion that he saw the French presence not so much as saving grace but as temporary necessity, which, when circumstances changed, could and must be rejected. And they were right. For Phetsarath, the colonial state was but an interlude in the long history of the Lao people, never the end in itself that the French proclaimed it to be.

One aspect of Phetsarath’s response was to encourage research into Lao history, especially by his faithful private secretary, Sila Viravong (see Chalong Soontravanich’s contribution). It was research conducted in the 1930s that found its way into *Lao Nhay*, the journal of the Lao Renovation movement, and later formed the basis for the historiography of the independent Kingdom of Laos.
of Laos.\textsuperscript{37} In particular, these researches into Lao history opened up a longer historical perspective linking Laos in the 1930s not with the domination of Siam in the nineteenth century, but with the greatness of Lan Xang two centuries earlier.

Sila’s best known work is \textit{Phongsawadan Lao}, published in Vientiane in 1957 and translated into English seven years later as \textit{A History of Laos}.\textsuperscript{38} From this work, two broad concerns are evident: to resuscitate the glories of earlier Lao mandala and to demonstrate the continuity of Lao history. Sila pushes the origins of the Lao people back more than 2,500 years to central China, and erroneously credits them with founding the kingdom of Nan Zhao. Moreover, he dates the arrival of Khun Lo, whom he accepts as a historical personage, in Mueang Sua precisely to the mid-eighth century.\textsuperscript{39} Twenty-two kings are said to have reigned from then until the advent of Fa Ngum, after which Sila is on firmer historical ground. But if the \textit{Phongsawadan Lao} is uncritical and methodologically unsatisfactory from a Western historiographical point of view (it makes no use of such important sources as reports of European visitors to Laos in the seventeenth century), it provided for Lao readers a proud account of Lao history which established Lan Xang as a powerful kingdom, able to hold its own against neighbouring states. There was no suggestion here of national exhaustion, or any need for France to ‘save’ the Lao from racial extinction.\textsuperscript{40}

The transition from dependent colonial to independent national state was an arduous one, both because of French reluctance to relinquish power and because of the weakness of Lao nationalism. The Lao state that emerged as a result of the agreements of 1946, 1949 and 1953 seized upon the continuity of Lao history as justification for its existence. In doing so it disregarded the periods of political division and decline. All the symbols of statehood harked back to Lan Xang – flag, anthem, palladium and political ritual, including the oath of office administered in Wat Sisaket, the royal temple of the last king who attempted to reconstruct Mueang Lao.\textsuperscript{41} The ancient roots claimed for the national identity of modern Laos were reinforced by a historiography that, while it concentrated almost entirely on the history of the mandala of Lan Xang at the time of its greatness, assumed two continuities – from myth to mandala and from united mandala (Mueang Lao) to independent modern state – both of which were at the very least problematic.

A good example of such historiography is provided by Katay Don Sasorith, at one time prime minister of Laos, in his contribution to a volume of \textit{France-Asie} entitled \textit{Le Royaume du Laos}, published in 1956.\textsuperscript{42} In his article Katay illustrates the Lao proclivity to slide easily from recounting early myth and legend to accepting their historicity.\textsuperscript{43} This leads to some confusion, which is passed over to arrive at Khun Lo’s conquest of Mueang Sua at the expense of ‘backward native chiefs’, an event which he, like Sila, takes to be a precisely datable historical event.
More significant for this study was the way Katay established the continuity of Lao history from mandala to independent state, and the identity he claimed for the Lao people. In summary Katay argued that

in Lan-Xang the Government was one of absolute monarchy [...] it was semi-hereditary and semi-elective, and at the same time limited to the male descendants of the sole and only Khun Lo Dynasty.44

The King of Laos, resident in Luang Phrabang, thus drew his legitimation from his genealogy. Continuity rested primarily on dynastic kingship, rather than on the socio-political institution of the mueang. Moreover, the political implication of Katay’s historiography was that the Pathet Lao, then challenging the authority of the Royal Lao government, could not but accept this royal legitimacy – which at the time they said they did.

Katay provided a second, more subtle argument for Lao historical continuity, however, based on popular perceptions of Mueang Lao. When Lan Xang shattered into three separate kingdoms in the early eighteenth century, Katay asks, were they ‘completely independent of each other’, and were the Lao people divided ‘into three quite different nations’? His answer is ‘no’ to both questions, on the grounds that Mueang Lao, meaning the entire former territory of Lan Xang, ‘never ceased to be unanimously considered, in the eyes at least of its populations, as forming in its entirety one single and same geographical and moral entity, if not a political one’.45 In other words, at all times up to French intervention, ‘Lan-Xang remained Lan-Xang, as present-day Laos remains Laos’,46 because none of the constituent kingdoms (Mueang Vientiane, Mueang Luang Phrabang, Mueang Champasak) could claim to be Mueang Lao. Mueang Lao remained the ideal Lao polity which constituent mueang could never repudiate or usurp because all were bound together by social and spiritual ties (about whose nature and function Katay says nothing more) that transcended their regionalism.47 Katay does mention ties ‘of vassalship and of suzerainty’, but here he is on shaky ground, for while these held each kingdom together internally, it could be argued that externally they tied each to the current suzerain power, which in the nineteenth century was Siam.

For Katay, therefore, it was the persistent reality of Mueang Lao as it existed in the hearts of all Lao that formed the basis for reconstitution of a unified Lao state. It was not French power that had unified ‘this polycephalous nation, this latent Confederacy of States’. In fact just the opposite. France had failed to create a unified Lao state because she had failed to unite the protectorate of Luang Phrabang with the rest of French-administered Laos.48 It was left to the Lao Issara immediately after World War II to restore Mueang Lao as a modern nation state.

In mounting this argument for the continuity of the Lao state on the continued existence of Mueang Lao in the hearts of the Lao people (rather than
on the mueang as a political institution), Katay does two things. He ignores all those Lao not included in the borders of the Kingdom of Laos (Katay is making no irredentist claims) and, more seriously, he claims a spurious homogeneity for the population that was included. Thus Katay can write:

If we leave out a few ethnological [sic] Minorities (Khas, Meos, etc..) that are scattered here and there, generally in the heights, the whole of Muong Lao spoke the same language, honoured the same genii, cultivated the same religion and had the same usages and customs.49

This is an extraordinary statement, for not only does it ignore substantial Lao Theung and Lao Soung minorities, it even denies any separate cultural identity to the upland Tai. More significantly for the future of Laos, moreover, such views (and they were widely shared by the Lao elite) effectively proclaimed assimilation as the basis for citizenship in the new Lao state: to be a citizen of Laos was to be or become ethnic Lao in culture and language. This might reinforce the pride and identity of the ethnic Lao, but it relegated all others to second-class status.

What Katay’s historiography did, therefore, was to justify a social and political order that reinforced elite domination and did nothing to bridge an ethnic divide that, in a state where ethnic minorities constituted almost half the population, had already taken on vital political dimensions. But leave them out was exactly what the French-educated aristocratic Lao political elite that inherited power in 1953 proceeded to do – with disastrous results, for it permitted the Pathet Lao to gain the loyalty of just those excluded groups by making room for them in a radically different political order legitimized by a radically different historiography.

LAO MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE PATHET LAO

If the historiography of the Royal Lao regime was partial in its selectivity and elitist and conservative in its thrust, the historiography of the Pathet Lao was both radical and revolutionary.50 Historical continuity for the Lao revolutionary movement rested not on a hereditary governing elite comprising monarchy and nobility, but on the emancipatory struggle of the Lao people of all ethnicities against a succession of elites – feudal, foreign and colonial. Though emphasis was placed on the more recent past – the anti-colonial struggle shading into the anti-imperialist war – the revolutionary movement was portrayed as having deep historical roots in popular resistance to foreign domination. Dissent replaced descent as the principle of continuity and legitimation.

Pathet Lao historiography played a powerful political role in the revolutionary struggle, in engendering an alternative, more inclusive
nationalism grounded in the unity and solidarity of all ethnic groups in opposition to the presence and impact of U.S. imperialism in Laos. Lao Theung and Lao Soung opposition to the imposition of French colonial rule was glorified as standing firmly in the tradition of radical rejection of all forms of elite exploitation, and of nationalist struggle to free the country of foreign domination. Pathet Lao historiography thus provided ethnic minorities with a role in the construction of a revolutionary Lao nationalism that was far more central than their marginal place in the neo-traditionalist historiography of the Royal Lao regime. By substituting the struggle against domination for ethnic exclusivity, Pathet Lao historiography created an historical basis for the inter-ethnic solidarity that was essential to the success of both the war and the political aspirations of the revolutionary movement.

Several publications from the war years illustrate this Pathet Lao historiography. The whole history of the Lao people is proclaimed to be ‘a secular struggle for independence and liberty’.51 Even during the period of ‘ancient Lao feudal society’, this struggle was not against Lao feudalism, however, but ‘against the exactions of Siamese and Burmese feudal lords, […] against foreign aggressors’.52 As Kaysone Phomvihane, founding Secretary-General of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party put it, ‘our people passed through continual struggle to defend the Fatherland and preserve national sovereignty against the aggression and domination of Siamese and Burmese feudalists’.53 Two omissions are glaringly evident in even the brief coverage given to the kingdom of Lan Xang in Pathet Lao historiography. The first reflects some ambivalence over how to write the history of those centuries to take account of Marxist categories as well as to encourage Lao nationalism, and the second reflects the political alliances of the Pathet Lao ‘thirty-year struggle’ (1945–75) and its aftermath. First, there is no mention during the Lan Xang period of class struggle (there are, admittedly, no records in the Lao chronicles of peasant revolts). Second, there is no mention of Vietnamese invasion, of the sack of Luang Phrabang by the armies of Lê Thanh Tong in 1479 and their subsequent crushing defeat.54 In Pathet Lao historiography, the Lao defend themselves against the Siamese and Burmese, not the Vietnamese. Only after the division of Lan Xang did weakened kings ‘fall into dependency on neighbouring countries, Siam and Vietnam’.55 While Vientiane and Champasak fell under the domination of Siam, the ‘feudal Nguyen of Vietnam’ invaded and annexed the principality of Mueang Phuan.56 As both of these omissions continue to bedevil contemporary Lao historiography, we shall return to them below.

No such ambivalence or reticence marks the colonial period. French domination is described as ‘colonialist and semi-feudal, an odious regime of oppression, exploitation and obscurantism’ when the Lao people not only lost their freedom and independence, but suffered ‘serious physical and moral degeneration’.57 Thus was the ‘decadence’ argument turned back upon the
French. Systematic exploitation of Lao national resources followed, accompanied by crushing taxes and corvée labour.

From the moment of their conquest of Laos, they [the French], while maintaining the system of draconian feudal domination, installed their own machinery of domination and repression with provincial residencies and superior residency, secret service, courts, prisons and brigades of police. They did their utmost to spread permanent terror among the population in order to impose their authority [...].

Moreover it was the French through their policy of ‘divide and rule’, who provoked hatred between lowland Lao and the hill tribes, and between Lao and Vietnamese.

Throughout this period, however, the Lao people are said to have engaged in ‘uninterrupted’ struggle against French authority. Then follows the usual list of insurrections – of the Lao Loum led by Pho Kaduat in the Savannakhet region (1901–03); of the Lao Theung under Ong Keo and Kommadam on the Boloven Plateau (1901–37); of Chao Fa Pachay and the Lao Soung in northern Laos (1918–22). So all three broad ethnic categories are included in this national resistance. Even after these insurrections were crushed, in the harshest and most brutal ways, the struggle continued, on the part of various ‘minorities’ and ‘the workers, students, civil servants and the urban population’. So was the myth of unified national resistance propagated, against the French imperialists and their feudalist Lao collaborators.

This national struggle reached its culmination in the ‘national revolution’ of 1945 when the defeat of Japanese fascism ‘by the USSR and the Allies’ enabled the Lao people to seize power and declare their independence. So began ‘the first period of national resistance: the struggle against the return of French colonialism (1945–54)’. This culminated in the great victory of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Agreements of 1954, only to be followed by ‘the second period of national resistance: the struggle against US neo-colonialism’. There is no need to take this analysis further. The Pathet Lao account of their ‘thirty-year struggle’ against ‘French colonialists and American interventionists’ was couched in orthodox, Cold War, Marxist terms and told in much greater detail than earlier periods. It was told as a story of heroic struggle against overwhelming odds in the course of which the valiant Lao people achieved numerous victories (with the occasional unmentioned help of Vietnamese ‘volunteers’) to bring about the first, or national democratic, phase of the Lao revolution. All this was due to ‘the correct line of the revolutionary party’ which referred in 1968, when Phoumi Vongvichit was writing, to the Lao Patriotic Front since the Lao People’s Party was still a secret organization.
HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE LAO PEOPLE’S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The seizure of power by the Pathet Lao in 1975, leading to elimination of the monarchy and declaration of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and its rejection of coalition government, signalled rejection of the existing class structure of Lao society and theoretically ushered in the second, or socialist, phase of the Lao revolution. The Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, as it was re-named, constituted the new ruling elite, which sought to establish its own legitimation for the exercise of power. This was provided by the history of its victorious leadership of the revolutionary struggle, as taught by the Party in innumerable seminars and recounted by Kaysone in his history of ‘The long drawn-out struggle and its triumph’.66 Particular importance was given to the Party’s foresight in embarking upon and pursuing the uniquely Lao ‘coalition struggle’ (lutte de coalition), which was portrayed as a tactical ‘legal and semi-legal’ dimension of the broader revolutionary struggle.67

Kaysone’s interpretation of the triumphant history of the Lao revolution was given detailed treatment in the third volume of a projected three volume official History of Laos.68 This volume, covering the period from 1893 to 1975, was published in 1989, fourteen years after the formation of the LPDR, with volumes one (from prehistory to the foundation of the mandala of Lan Xang) and two (from the founding of Lan Xang to 1893) to follow. This proved too ambitious. In 1995, History of Laos, volume 1 was published, covering the entire period from prehistory to 1893.69

It would appear that this combined volume proved more difficult and contentious to write than did volume three. Resistance to French colonialism and U.S. imperialism could more easily be written in Marxist terms than could prehistory or the age of Lao ‘feudalism’, for which little evidence exists of class struggle between peasants and nobility. But this is only part of the reason why it took so long to produce an official history. Part of the problem also lay in the fact that, even at a time when ‘proletarian internationalism’ was the order of the day, the LPDR saw itself, as had the Royal Lao regime, as heir to the legacy of Lan Xang, with all that implied about deep historical roots and national identity. How should problems of ethnicity and migration be dealt with? In what sense could early kingdoms (Mueang Sua, Sikkottabong) be said to have been Lao (as opposed to Khamu or Mon)? Who counted as Lao, and when? Who therefore had prior historical rights to call themselves Lao? A third problem was overtly political and had to do with changing relations between Laos and neighbouring states.

In the decade after the founding of the LPDR, when the team of historians assembled in the now defunct National Institute for Artistic and Literary Research to work on the official history, political considerations were paramount. Nothing could be published without careful scrutiny at the highest
levels of the Party, for as Nikita Khrushchev once said, history is far too important to be left to historians. Phoumi Vongvichit in particular, as minister in charge of all matters cultural, took a close interest in history.70 Nothing could appear in print unless it was politically acceptable. To make matters more difficult, Vietnamese historians were at first attached to the Institute to ‘assist’ their Lao colleagues, and to conduct their own research into Lao history. Dissension arose between Lao and Vietnamese particularly over how to handle Lao-Vietnamese relations (see Christopher Goscha’s contribution). For example, while the Lao wanted to include an account of the Vietnamese invasion of 1479, the Vietnamese urged them to leave out any reference – which is what was done in the history of Laos published in Hanoi in 1982.71 Later, when relations began to improve between Laos and Thailand, Lao authorities became almost as sensitive to historical accounts of Thai-Lao conflict.72

In 1996 a new attempt was made to come to grips with the history of Lan Xang. Two conferences of ‘experts’ were organized by the Ministry of Information and Culture, bringing together not only qualified historians and geographers, but also a number of interested ideologues from the Lao Front for National Construction. What was agreed was that history prior to the founding of the Indochina Communist Party in 1930 should as far as possible reflect the state of current knowledge; that is, it need not be written from an explicitly Marxist theoretical perspective. It was also agreed that four kings would be singled out for their contribution to ‘the two strategic tasks of the country: economic development and national defence’. The four chosen were Fa Ngum (for both reasons), Setthatirath (defence against the Burmese), Souligna Vongsavane (economic development) and Chao Anou (defence against the Thai).73

This decision bore fruit in the erection of a statue of Fa Ngum to mark the 650th anniversary of the founding of the Kingdom of Lan Xang in 1353. The accompanying kilometre-long procession was on a scale seldom seen in Laos. At its head came the sacred Phra Bang Buddha image, former palladium of the kingdom, followed by the ‘king’ on a white elephant and his Cambodian queen, accompanied by hundreds of attendants and warriors in period dress. The symbolism could hardly have been more pointed. History and religion were celebrated in a frank display of Lao nationalism unconceivable in the early years of the regime. The only danger in such a shift, however, was that it might again legitimize a narrow and exclusive ethnic Lao nationalism that leaves little room for minority participation.74

In all its twists and turns, the writing of history under the LPDR has become a highly ideologically and politically contested process. Even before an official Marxist historiography could be consolidated in the late 1980s, its ideological justification was already breaking down under the impact of international political and economic forces that were opening Laos to modernizing currents it was ill prepared to negotiate. The change in the balance of external powers from the ‘special relationship’ with Vietnam to the opening to Thailand,
ASEAN and the West, and the development of warm relations with China, forced a political rethinking of Lao historiography. The writing of an officially endorsed Marxist history of Laos was not abandoned altogether, though it tended to be confined to the country’s colonial and revolutionary past. In its place has begun to appear a more nationalist historiography. At the same time, official control over the research and writing of history began to be challenged by historians whose more scholarly and critical approach called into question the methodological assumptions on which an official Party-endorsed historiography was based. This influence was exerted by both Lao historians who have studied in Western universities and by the increasing number of foreign historians writing about Laos. A modern, more methodologically grounded Lao historiography thus began to appear, implicitly challenging relations of power linking history and the Party – but not yet in Lao.

As Laos became ever more inextricably integrated into the region of mainland Southeast Asia through membership of ASEAN and as a result of new capital flows, commerce and communications, it faced increasing challenges to its very identity. Lao nationalism and even the national unity of the Lao state are weakly based. Any Lao regime, whether one-party Marxist or multi-party democratic, must face the need to reinforce a sense of national identity, of what it is to be Lao. At the same time, it must promote the inclusive historical consciousness of minority groups, acknowledging their roots in and their contribution to the history of Mueang Lao. Lao historiography must therefore shoulder the dual social and political responsibility of strengthening both an ethnically inclusive Lao national identity, while conducting a pluralistic investigation of the diverse strands that go to make up that identity. Some tension between the two will be inevitable, especially given the monopolization of political power under the present, nominally Marxist, but in fact authoritarian military/party regime. The future for Lao historiography lies, I suggest, in developing the creative tension between a pluralistic investigation of the multiplicity of Lao historical experience, and a synthetic drawing together of those experiences in such a way as to reinforce a more inclusive national identity. The outcome will be a new, specifically Lao historiography, for which the need is urgent given the economic and social pressures already alluded to above. Only thus, I believe, can Laos meet the threat which regional integration poses to construction of a uniquely Lao identity that can withstand the encroaching influences of powerful neighbouring states as the Lao people face the twentieth-first century.
NOTES


9. I am referring here to the 1503 version edited by Sila Viravong published in Vientiane in 1967. Another version of the chronicles, the *Pheun Khun Borom* (a manuscript of which was copied by Kham Champakaeomani and is held in the Ministry of Education, Vientiane) identifies the earliest rulers of Lao territory as semi-monstrous beings who gave rise to an incestuous dynasty in which brother married sister, which clearly owes nothing to Buddhism and is viewed with some embarrassment by modern Lao. (This version is almost identical with the *Lan Xang Chronicle*, published in Thai in Bangkok in 1956 as *Collected Chronicles*, Part 1, Bangkok: Khurusapha, without year, pp. 387–432.) For a translation, see Souneth Phothisane, ‘The Nidan Khun Borom: Annotated Translation and Analysis’, PhD thesis, Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1998, p. 110, n. 47.


14. The *Nithan Khun Borom* says that Khun Lo seized Mueang Sua from the Kha Kan Hang, while the *Pheun Khun Borom* tells of a line of earlier rulers who were clearly not Lao. See Souneth, ‘The Nidan Khun Borom’, pp. 145–147.


17. Other examples could be taken, but Meyer is particularly interesting because of the future he envisages for Laos (see below). His work was accessible, of course, only to a tiny Francophone elite, but a similar, if less blatant, interpretation was incorporated, as Søren Ivarsson has shown, into a history reader in Lao, written ironically by a Vietnamese and a Frenchman: Lé-Duy-Lương and S. Blanchard de la Brosse, *A Lao History/Chronicle [ประวัติ](Chronique)*, Vientiane: Imprimerie Gouvernemental, 1934. See Søren Ivarsson, ‘Bringing Laos into Existence: Laos between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945’, PhD thesis, Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1999, pp. 73–77.


19. Meyer, *Le Laos*, pp. 21–22. Nguyễn Văn Quē in his *Histoire des Pays de l’Union Indochinoise*, Saigon: no publisher, 1932 dates the ‘decadence of Lan Xang’ from the division of the kingdom in the early eighteenth century (p. 324), but, as his purpose was to encourage ‘Indochinese solidarity’, avoided repeating Meyer’s extreme Social Darwinist account. A similar view creeps in, however, when he says: ‘Gallo-Roman genius, French peace and western science must restore vigour and fecundity to Lao civilization, to the Thai race, tired and saddened by set-backs and decadence’ (p. 361).


28. Meyer, *Le Laos*, p. 51. Nguyễn Văn Quē gives much greater detail. In his view, the expansion of both Siam and Annam in the nineteenth century initially preserved Laos and Cambodia through a ‘double protectorate’, which could only, however, have led eventually to annexation by one or the other. It was this fate which the arrival of France enabled both Laos and Cambodia to escape; see Nguyễn Văn Quē, *Histoire des Pays*, p. 331.

29. Meyer makes much of the symbolic choice of the site of Vientiane, ‘the dead city’, as the capital of French Laos, but less of the French support for Buddhism, *Le Laos*, pp. 47–48. This is hardly surprising since the establishment of the Vientiane branch of the Buddhist Institute in February 1931 postdated publication of Meyer’s text. Reconstruction of Buddhist monuments, such as the That Luang and Wat Sisaket, counted more for their historical symbolism than for their religious significance. For the political reasons for establishment of the Buddhist Institute, see Ivarsson, ‘Bringing Laos into Existence’, pp. 81–84.


36. By 1937, however, still only 54 per cent of the 286 upper and middle level positions in the French administration in Laos were held by Lao. See Geoffrey Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, 1930–1954, Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988, p. 32.
40. Sila blamed lack of Lao unity, or in other words, regionalism, for the weakness of the Lao kingdoms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
44. Katay, ‘Historical Aspects of Laos’, p. 28.
50. The most extensive historical survey published by the Pathet Lao during the ‘thirty-year struggle’ was Phoumi Vongvichit, Le Laos et la lutte victorieuse du people lao contre le néo-colonialisme américain, no place: Éditions du Neo Lao Haksat, 1968.
52. Un quart de siècle, p. 53.
54. Even Nguyễn Văn Quē, so keen to stress the ‘close and trusting solidarity’ between Lao and Vietnamese, included an account of the Vietnamese invasion, though he was quick to add that the next Lao king ‘maintained excellent relations with the Annamites, their relatives, their “brothers” in race […]’, Nguyễn Văn Quē, Histoire des Pays, pp. 316, 362.
56. Phoumi, Le Laos, p. 30. Phoumi Vongvichit was himself Phuan.
61. *Un quart de siècle*, p. 54.
70. Phoumi Vongvichit, *History of Mueang Phuan* [*** stalled หลวง เอฟ***], Vientiane: State Printing House, 1994, which reverts to what is little more than a traditional chronology of the principality of Xieng Khuang.
73. Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, personal communication. A statue of Setthathirat already stands – or rather sits – before the That Luang. Statues of the other three kings will be set up at places in Vientiane associated with their deeds – when finance permits.
74. The Ministry of Education has produced textbooks for teaching early Lao history to senior high school students on the premodern period. One is entitled *History for Senior High School* [*** stalled***]. I have not seen this, but I am reliably informed that it privileges ethnic Lao culture and identity over minorities. In other words, it reverts to an ethnic Lao nationalism closer to that of the Royal Lao regime than to more inclusive nationalism of the Pathet Lao.
75. Notably Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, whose work has re-examined the whole basis of Lao-Thai relations since the late eighteenth century from a Lao nationalist perspective. See in particular their *Paths to Conflagration*. 

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76. Among the most perceptive is Grant Evans, who in *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998, pp. 188–189, has also pointed to the difficulties the LPDR has encountered in writing its history.

77. It should be remembered that the LPRP still wields a monopoly of power, and historians working in Laos in an official capacity are still subject to political interference. Souneth Phothisane’s massive (1,310 pages) *History of Laos* includes an account of the Vietnamese invasion of 1479, but sticks pretty much to the official line. His bibliography includes, among foreign publications, 31 in Vietnamese, 17 in Russian, 44 in French and 15 in English, which include no studies of Lao history written in the last twenty years. See Souneth Phothisane, *History of Laos* (لاوس تاریخ), Vientiane: Ministry of Information and Culture, 2000.
4. DIFFERENT PATHS: LAO HISTORIOGRAPHY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In his 1995 survey of Thai historiography, Thongchai Winichakul identifies the ‘1973 revolution’ as a watershed for Thai history writing. The revolt against autocracy and military dictatorship heralded a ‘new age’. ‘There was,’ he said, ‘a need to understand what had gone wrong, and why’. He went on:

It is not surprising that under these circumstances history was called into service. To know is to restore and assure some sense of certainty. But the conventional history was the spirit and soul of the ancien regime, and could not but be implicated in its now discredited agenda.1

The demand for new histories was, he argued, a product of profound social and economic changes that had occurred in Thailand since the late 1950s, and among other things, these circumstances ‘provided an opportunity for a revival of the Thai Marxist literature of the 1950s’.2 The publication of Jit Phumisak’s The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today is described as a ‘historic event’ because it ‘offered a new past, an oppressive and exploitative past, entirely opposed to the royal/national one’. Subsequent years witnessed a diversification and maturation of Thai historiography. Thongchai’s own pathbreaking book, Siam Mapped, is evidence of this.3

Laos in 1973 provides an instructive contrast with the same period in Thailand. At that time a negotiated settlement was reached between the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and the communist Pathet Lao, and two years later this agreement was discarded and a communist regime came to power in Vientiane. Here, however, Marxism did not lead to the opening up of new questions about Lao history, but rather the closing down of genuine intellectual inquiry. Furthermore, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) set about destroying the very social forces, the middle classes, that had led to the changes...
witnessed in Thailand – albeit those social forces were not nearly as developed in Laos as in Thailand. Thus Laos witnessed a double regression, an intellectual one, and a social one. Only in the 1990s did we begin to see some recuperation both intellectually and socially. But the stark fact remains that Lao historiography in the 1990s is even further behind the intellectual progress of the Thai intelligentsia than it was in the early 1970s.

This is what makes *Paths to Conflagration* by Pheuiphanh and Mayoury Ngaosyvathn so important; it is an attempt by Lao to re-engage with serious historical discourse. Sadly, the book has not been published inside Laos itself. *Paths to Conflagration*, I know, has been a personal odyssey for the two authors, not only in the sense that they have travelled the world in search of documents, but also in the same sense that Thongchai identifies for the Thai in 1973 with their ‘need to understand what had gone wrong, and why’. Behind Mayoury and Pheuiphanh’s detailed excavation of the events surrounding the 1827–28 Chao Anou revolt lies another question: How come Laos finds itself in such a parlous state in the late twentieth century? They believe, however, that to understand the situation of the modern Lao state one has to understand the history of Thai-Lao relations and in this respect the Chao Anou revolt is, as Pheuiphanh explained to me in an interview in 1996, a ‘watershed’ event. But, as he also explained, ‘the outcome of the book is that Chao Anou does not emerge as the hero the Lao fantasize about. He is just a man with his grandeur and his frailty’.

Before I look at how this text is implicated in contemporary Lao history, it is important first to track the history of the state of historiography in the LPDR today and formerly under the RLG.

**REGIMES OF HISTORY**

From 2 December 1975 until the mid-1980s, the only histories available in Laos were those that conformed to orthodox Marxist-Leninist canons – mediated via Vietnam – which purported to show how the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party was the true and final bearer of Lao nationalism against the various ‘traitors’, and so on, who had allegedly thwarted the nation’s destiny (see Christopher Goscha’s chapter in this volume). Such histories continue to be the main ones produced in Laos today. They are theoretically crude, empirically extremely selective and at times they peddle outright lies. Unlike the Marxist historiography in Thailand referred to by Thongchai, it is uninfluenced by the theoretically sophisticated ‘Western Marxism’ of historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, for example. Therefore, unlike Thailand, we find no detailed explorations or discussions of Lao ‘feudalism’, ‘colonialism’ or indeed of ‘capitalism’. The new regime has produced very little of value for historians of Lao society.
Around the mid-1980s, we can observe a growing need by the party to anchor more securely its nationalist credentials by leaning on Buddhism. There was also a felt need by the people for more satisfying accounts of their society’s past. We therefore begin to see the production of short, somewhat amateurish, histories of temples or stupas; histories of That Luang (Vientiane), for example, or That Inhang (Savannakhet) are increasingly common. These, however, conform to an older genre that freely mixes fact with legend. Rarely do they tell us much about social structure. At best they provide documents for historians of religious thought.

In the 1990s, as orthodox communist ideology weakened and the state set off in search of more purely nationalist sources of legitimation, we have begun to see the writing of booklets which lean on older traditions of historical writing in Laos, and indeed plagiarize these works: for example, booklets on famous kings of the past by Duangsai Luangphasi, including Chao Anou’s revamped versions of phongsawadan, such as with Phoumi Vongvichit’s history of Mueang Phuan; and the appearance of some non-Marxist-Leninist historical excursions in the journal Lane Xang Heritage, which began publication in 1994.

I have in mind here the articles by Amphay Doré which are rather idiosyncratic attempts to discover the origins of the Lao ‘race’, a project spurred on by the problématique of nationalist history. Paths to Conflagration itself emerges from an earlier text published in Lao in the late 1980s, which was more stridently nationalist in tone and which accounts for its publication in Laos itself. Yet if Paths to Conflagration is published only in English and outside of Laos, it is largely conceived within the country and certainly in a continuous dialogue with Lao inside Laos.

The best known historians of the RLG, namely Sila Viravong, History of Laos, and Khamman Vongkotrattana, History of the Lao Nation, conform to what Thongchai describes as ‘royalist national history’ in the Thai context. That is, for premodern history they rely heavily on the various phongsawadan, and therefore they are largely dynastic histories. However, the crucial innovation is that they are conceived of as national histories (see Chalong Soontravanich’s chapter on Sila Viravong’s nationalist shift). This style of national history, which became the standard model globally in the twentieth century, was taught to the Lao by the French and pioneered by Le Boulanger’s Histoire du Laos Français in 1931. The most dynamic history of Laos by a Lao is Katay Sasorith’s Le Laos, whose first incarnation was a small and less well-known edition in Lao in 1949. Katay’s text has the virtue of trying to deal with contemporary history. Sila’s History of Laos does not venture into the modern period, although in other works he does, while Khamman’s history does encompass the modern period. However, both these writers, when dealing with the premodern period, ignore modern historical standards of evidence and select from the various phongsawadan and oral histories at
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will. As for theory, it is entirely absent. By comparison, Katay’s _Le Laos_ is a mature, modern nationalist text.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s young Lao, most of whom had studied in France and some in the United States, began to produce theses and books that reflected a modern academic training. Pheuiphanh and Mayoury were among this group. Some of the thesis work done by these Lao remains hidden away in libraries, while some others began to publish their analyses. The revolution of 1975, however, brought this emerging intellectual maturity to a sudden halt. Many intellectually trained Lao fled the country after the communist victory, while some, like Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, were encouraged to return through appeals to their ‘patriotism’. They, like other students overseas at the time, were influenced by the radicalism coursing through the universities of the West. The reality they encountered back home came as a shock, and the intellectual restrictions of the orthodox Marxist-Leninist state were a far cry from the hopes of those who had supported the Pathet Lao from afar. Serious intellectual life inside Laos stopped, and those who wished to continue serious research had to do so privately and surreptitiously, at least until the beginning of the 1990s.

Of course, conventional national histories of Laos can be found in the non-communist world. There are the self-consciously nationalist histories by Martin Stuart-Fox, and the less self-conscious nationalist discourses of Saveng Phinith and Norindr. The work of these historians, however, hardly impinges on the writing of history inside Laos, although they have been a source of dialogue for Mayoury and Pheuiphanh.

**PATHS TO A NEW HISTORY?**

_Paths to Conflagration_ is a product of these complex political conditions, and I was compelled to reflect on this when reading the book because within it one encounters several different and discordant discourses, which are not simply a result of it having two authors. Indeed, the architecture of the book is often confusing and confused. The main reason for this is because the authors need to make premodern Laos conform to a nationalist configuration. This is most obvious in the way they simply assume that something called ‘Laos’ can be projected un-problematically back into the past. It also accounts for the way that they do not investigate the assumed ‘Lao-ness’ of Chiang Mai, or indeed that of northeast of Thailand today, or for the way that the authors at one point use the modern category ‘Lao Theung’ to describe collectively the uplanders who revolted against the lowland states in the early nineteenth century. In fact, the whole discussion of ‘diplomatic history’, the book’s major innovation, is unfortunately posed in terms of the modern state system, and not the traditional one. It is not that the authors are ignorant of modern debates, however, it just seems that they do not understand them. For example, citing among others the
work of Thongchai, they write about the period of the Siamese King Taksin in the late eighteenth century: ‘[T]he region’s old, dynastic, Indianized international order, with its stable sacred frontiers, had passed away’.15 The argument of Thongchai and modern historians is that the old order did not have ‘stable sacred frontiers’. Indeed, the history of the region was one of ever-fluctuating frontiers. The authors of *Paths to Conflagration* confuse things even more when they follow the above sentence with the observation: ‘Taksin’s conception of “borders” was much closer to the Chinese conception, which defined borders as constantly moving and elastic’.16 To the contrary, many historians think that the traditional Chinese state had a strong conception of defined borders compared to those in Southeast Asia. Leaving this aside, the consensus among modern historians is that whatever the traditional conceptions of frontiers held by these states, they do not necessarily conform to the modern idea of scientifically defined and demarcated national borders. Naturally, when one applies concepts appropriate for the analysis of modern states and the modern state system to premodern states, confusions and contradictions are bound to occur.

But this nationalist discourse varies considerably throughout the text. At some points it is stridently partisan towards Chao Anou, presenting him as brave, honest, valiant and farsighted. At these times it reads like the historical propaganda one commonly finds in Laos today. Yet, at other points, Chao Anou is shown to be ruthless, oppressive and indeed incompetent, demonstrating an objectivity that is rare in texts from contemporary Laos. For instance, they write a scathing portrait of Chao Anou at the height of his campaign:

> In the meantime, Anou lost impetus and direction. In Khorat, a capital famous for its hospitality to soldiers, Anou saddled himself with eight concubines. He became so infatuated with the daughter of the governor of Khorat that he arranged to have her at the center of the knot-cutting ceremony in his camp and made her the page who carried his ceremonial sword. As the Lao army wallowed in this oriental Capoue, its preparation for combat faltered: discipline completely broke down. After their first test of strength, which they failed, Anou punished his soldiers according to an ancient, brutal policy, in which approximately one of every ten soldiers and officers was killed. By this time, however, nothing, least of all this self-defeating policy, could save Anou’s campaign.17

Unfortunately, such sharp observations tend to get lost in the text’s overall confusion.

As for the Thai, they are at times caricatured as ‘wily’, ‘untrustworthy’ and ‘vicious’ (see Chalong Soontravanich’s analysis of Sila Viravong’s writing on the Thai). But at other times the authors show clearly that they understand the larger international and internal context that compelled the Thai to act in one way rather than another. At these times their scholarship conquers the knee-
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jerk judgements of the nationalist. Fundamentally, however, *Paths to Conflagration* is a Lao nationalist response to an older Thai nationalist historiography, rather than being a response to modern Thai historians. In other words, it is constrained by a nationalistic *problématique* to pose a series of false problems concerning the Chao Anou revolt. For example, Thai nationalist historiography, which was prevalent until recently, assumed that the Lao tributary kingdoms were ‘naturally’ part of Thailand, and that the Chao Anou revolt was an act of divisive insubordination. The counter-argument of Mayoury and Pheuiphanh is that the Lao kingdoms were part of a ‘natural’ unit called Lan Xang, and that it was Thai pressure that caused Chao Anou to revolt in defence of this ‘natural’ political unit. The arguments, in fact, mirror one another and simply produce a kind of historiographical stand-off. If, however, the historical discussion is phrased in terms of the international pressure on the Siamese state to centralize and modernize, indeed to create the nation we now know as Thailand, and seen through an optic of Chao Anou’s revolt as simply the most explosive response to this, then an entirely different set of questions and research strategies follow – ones which allow for genuine dialogue between modern Thai and Lao historians.

But one also finds the authors suspended between different historiographical traditions. At times they place excessive faith in certain historical documents or verbal accounts – much like the traditionalist work of Sila or Khamman – while at other times they carefully sift through a range of comparative historical evidence in order to judge the reliability of a document. Indeed, their scholarship often leads them to doubt the writings of people they had previously respected unreservedly. But their practice as historians is very uneven, swayed at times by political emotion and rhetoric, at other times by the demands of the discipline. In all, they reflect the dilemmas of the modernizing middle class that was sidelined by the revolution. They attempt to move Lao historical scholarship forward, but in doing so find themselves looping back to the pre-LPDR past in order to find their bearings. In doing so they have been destined to reproduce some of the weaknesses of that earlier scholarship. As modernizers they also look to their Thai middle-class brethren for concepts, such as when they attempt to discuss some of the economic changes occurring in the region in the early nineteenth century, but such conceptual awareness is only deployed unevenly.

Conceived in the intellectual vacuum of post-1975 Laos, this text and its authors are an attempt to bridge the historical hiatus caused by the revolution, and for this alone they should be applauded. But why do it through an analysis of Chao Anou? This brings me to the second part of my discussion – the myth of Chao Anou.
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THE MYTH OF CHAO ANOU

While the authors in their introduction wish to inflate the importance of Chao Anou’s revolt against Bangkok by saying that it ‘spawned a conflagration that spread through mainland Southeast Asia’,\(^\text{18}\) in fact it remained a localized revolt. Of course, it was the most spectacular of the revolts against the creation of the Siamese absolutist state in the nineteenth century, and its suppression confirmed the ascendancy of the Bangkok dynasty over all other principalities in the Siamese sphere of influence. But in retrospect its repercussions were largely local, albeit disastrous for many Lao. Indeed, *Paths to Conflagration* has confirmed for me how ill-prepared, chaotic and suicidal Chao Anou’s revolt against the Siamese was. As I argue in my short history of Laos,\(^\text{19}\) Chao Anou was the last of the ‘warrior kings’ whose actions were motivated by a state system that was passing into history, and he was not some precursor of the modern Lao nation.

So why has this revolt loomed so large in the modern Lao imagination? As Peter Koret argues in his chapter in this book on the poem *Luep Phasun*, the revolt has become part of Lao folklore and peasant millennial mythology. Pheuiphanh and Mayoury themselves cite Chatthip’s study of *phu mi bun* movements in Northeast Thailand: ‘Vientiane was used as a symbol for unity, and the city could exist anywhere: a “new Jerusalem” to use the idiom of some millenarian movements’.\(^\text{20}\) In Northeast Thailand, it became for a while a symbol of resistance to the social, political and cultural centralization initiated by the modernizing state in Bangkok. By contrast, across the Mekong in Laos, this millennial dreaming would come to refer to a real state, modern Laos, and become part of the latter’s legitimating myths.

The interesting paradox for the modern historian is that the myth of Chao Anou is equally important to French colonialism, the modern Lao and to the Thai as well. It is hard to resist the conclusion that it is this convergence of interests that has accounted for the myth’s historical potency. As noted earlier, it was a Frenchman who wrote the first conventional national history of Laos. He was, of course, crucially assisted in this endeavour by the French-trained bureaucratic modernizer, Prince Phetsarath. In this rendering, the Chao Anou revolt became a war of national resistance to Thai national domination. The Lao are presented as too weak to resist their neighbour; therefore only French colonialism saved and could save Laos from national extinction (see Agathe Larcher-Goscha’s contribution in this volume). The carnage that followed Anou’s revolt stood as the symbol of what would occur in the absence of French protection. Thus was the benevolence of French colonialism extolled.

The collapse of this legitimating myth during World War II, when French inability to protect the Lao was demonstrated, set the stage for the emergence of Lao nationalism. Chao Anou in this optic symbolized the courage of the Lao in defence of their nation, and Chao Anou’s failure was variously attributed to
traitors, or dastardly Thai or other foreign manoeuvres. All Lao attention was focussed on the blood sacrifice of the event, a blood sacrifice that the nation would continue to demand from true patriots. Furthermore, the failure of Chao Anou is assumed to be the reason why a weak Laos was easy prey for the French colonialists later in the century – an assumption which is in fact never argued. Laos is not alone in having a major defeat as a foundation stone in its national mythologizing – my own country, Australia, does too in its celebration of the military defeat at Gallipoli during World War I. Out of such sacrifice renewal is assumed to be born. And, because Chao Anou is such a symbol in Laos, it is not surprising that a text dealing with him should be one of the first to appear in the search for renewal at the close of the twentieth century.

For the Thai, the Chao Anou revolt and its crushing for many years justified the harsh centralizing measures of, initially, the absolutist state, and then the militaristic modern Thai state. It was further manipulated (as the authors of Paths to Conflagration show clearly) as a story of foreign intervention and its consequences, while the French creation of modern Laos could be easily fitted into rhetoric criticizing colonial strategies of so-called ‘divide and rule’, further justifying internal repression against any centrifugal forces. Only now, after Thai culture and society have undergone dramatic changes, and following the emergence of a self-confident modern state, do we see a growing tolerance of regional histories and a more complex excavation of the past. Thus, the stage has been set for a more balanced appraisal of the Chao Anou revolt by Thai scholars.

One of the discourses in Paths to Conflagration parallels this desire for a more objective appraisal of the Chao Anou revolt and consequently any future Thai scholarship will have to deal with its arguments. But Lao historiography has a long way to go compared with the Thai. If we only speak of the nineteenth century, we need detailed examinations of social and political structure of the Lao principalities, and economic histories too. There is an enormous amount to be done, and Paths to Conflagration, however flawed, is a benchmark from which scholarship can move forward.

However, Lao historiography remains constrained by the political straightjacket imposed by the LPRP. The discarding of communist ideology in favour of nationalism has not seen any diminution of dogmatic analysis. This dogmatism was manifest in a symposium held on the Chao Anou revolt in Vientiane in 1997, during which the Thais were continually denounced for hiding ‘the truth’ about the revolt. In 2001 a rancorous dispute broke out, at least on the Lao side, over a proposal by Thai director Phisal Akaraseni to make a movie about the mythical Thai heroine, Thao Suranaree, who allegedly defended Korat against Chao Anou. Ironically, the main evidence against her so-called heroic deeds was in fact gathered together by a Thai academic, Saphin Keo-Ngaam-Prasert and presented in the book, The Politics of the Thao Suranaree Monument. Lao researchers have in fact done little to expose the
myth of her exploits in the Siamese war with Chao Anou. Articles in the Lao media have insisted that Phisal should look to the ‘facts’, but they themselves relied entirely on the facts supplied by Saphin. Without the work of this Thai academic, the Lao would have had little to say factually. This is because history writing in Laos is paralyzed by politics.23

Given that Laos came so close to being absorbed by a modern Thai state, it is not surprising that Lao nationalism often defines itself firstly by contrast with the Thai. In some respects, the Chao Anou revolt is a perfect vehicle for national mythologizing. However, such mythologizing does demand the suppression of many of the uncomfortable truths about the revolt revealed in Paths to Conflagration: Chao Anou’s ruthlessness with his men, the multi-ethnic nature of the armies involved and so on. Thus it is here that the parallel I drew earlier with Gallipoli falters, for the ‘blood sacrifice’ made by Australians in World War I was by a national army made up of young citizen soldiers who could be seen as representatives of a democratic nationalism. It was not an army of press-ganged subjects in the manner of Chao Anou’s army. Only the suppression of these facts about the revolt by Lao communist historiography enables the Chao Anou story to be rolled into a general myth of ‘national resistance’ against the Thai and then against the Americans by the Pathet Lao. In both cases, historical truth is sacrificed to political diktat, and of course a resounding silence hangs over Vietnamese intervention in Laos (see also Christopher Goscha’s chapter in this volume).

The RLG also manipulated the Chao Anou story for its own ends, but in some respects its approach was more benign and less chauvinistic. The following cartoon is taken from The Most Important Kings of Laos, published in 1970.24 It shows Chao Anou contemplating the wisdom of ‘neutrality’ during

The text reads: ‘Chao Anou said that the Viet and Thai continually have been fighting. His Highness thought that the neutrality and independence of Laos between the Thai and Viet would bring peace. Therefore he returned from Vietnam to begin peace talks with the Thai’.

Figure 4.1. The Royal Lao Government’s use of the Chao Anou story to legitimate a policy of neutrality. (Cartoon from The Most Important Kings of Laos)
his brief period of exile in Vietnam following his defeat at the hands of the Siamese. Of course, ‘neutrality’ was the main political slogan of the RLG, led by Prince Souvanna Phouma at the time.

Currently, a statue of Chao Anou is being planned for Vientiane and will be incorporated into the myth of ‘national resistance’; historiography in Laos remains frozen in the mould set for it by the LPRP.

POSTSCRIPT: WHAT IF CHAO ANOU HAD WON?

Niall Ferguson in *Virtual History*, a book of essays devoted to trying to think counterfactually about history, suggests that we are always asking ‘what if …?’ questions about the past as a form of mental experimentation. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh’s book continually poses just such questions, although only at one point do they openly speculate that: ‘It is difficult to forecast what really would have happened if 1827 had brought success instead of defeat’. For historians who wish to carry out this type of mental exercise, there is a caveat, which demands that they should take account of plausibility and possibility and not indulge in wishful fantasy: ‘The most historians can do is to make tentative statements about causation with reference to plausible counterfactuals, constructed on the basis of judgments about probability. Finally, the probability of alternative scenarios can be inferred only from such statements, by contemporaries, about the future that have survived’. The intellectual charter for such thought experiments is that history is not teleological: ‘The past – like real-life chess, or indeed any other game – is different; it does not have a predetermined end. There is no author, divine of otherwise; only characters, and (unlike in a game) a great deal too many of them’.

Politicians and ordinary people rarely respect the historian’s caveat when they too speculate about the past. In the case of most Lao the intentions of Chao Anou were unjustly thwarted, and their speculations about ‘what if he had won?’ are often couched, although implicitly, in a vague assertion that had he won then Laos would not have fallen under the control of French colonialism. As I have written elsewhere, Katay Don Sasorith in his history of the Lao Issara, written in the late 1940s, found himself invoking the crushing of Chao Anou, and the subsequent resentment of the Siamese that it supposedly caused, as the explanation for Auguste Pavie’s easy ‘conquest of the hearts’ of the Lao for the French empire; in other words, for the failure of any mass resistance by the Lao towards French colonialism (see also Agathe Larcher-Goscha’s chapter on the myth of Pavie).

First, however, let us ask what could have been the possible extent of a reconstituted Lan Xang? At its height this kingdom did not spread over the whole of the Khorat Plateau, but was confined to its northern reaches down along the Mekong as far as Nakhon Phanom. Most of the plateau was a no-
man’s-land, lightly populated by diverse ethnic groups, including a significant number of Khmers left behind by the former Angkorean empire. With his son Yo as lord of Mueang Champasak, Chao Anou’s kingdom would have spread beyond the former boundary of Lan Xang to take in what is now southern Laos, and probably towns such as Ubon in Isan today. Here we have to assume that Siam, in say 1828, chose to establish its main frontier outpost at Nakhon Ratchasima, thus leaving most of the plateau a no-man’s-land to be contested in the future. Let us also assume that Mueang Luang Phrabang also chose to join with Chao Anou, although rather reluctantly because of the harsh treatment they had formerly received at the hands of Chao Anou’s brother, Nanthasen, who had previously ruled Vientiane.

Up to this time there is no evidence that Chao Anou attempted to change the structure of the Lao state in the way the kingdoms of first Ayutthaya and then Bangkok had done in order to centralize power. In other words, the system still rested on personal allegiances to the central king. Perhaps Chao Anou would have begun to initiate such reforms, but these would have encountered local resistance, just as they had when initiated by the Siamese in their domain. Luang Phrabang, for instance, would have resisted further subordination to Chao Anou and this would have delayed reforms. Furthermore, Chao Anou in the 1830s would have already been an old man and sometime in that decade he probably would have died, thereby precipitating a struggle for succession. Chao Anou’s son, Chao Yo, would probably have gone north to claim the throne of Vientiane, at which point the political structure would have unravelled again, with groups in Champasak appealing to the Siamese to back them in succession for the control of that mueang. The Siamese would have been more than happy to oblige. Indeed, the Siamese had originally supported the appointment of Chao Anou’s son to Champasak in 1821, because they wanted a secure bulwark against Vietnamese encroachments on the Khmer kingdom. A faction beholden to the Siamese would reassure them in this regard. Luang Phrabang too would have reasserted its autonomy as Chao Anou’s son would have little claim on the allegiance of Luang Phrabang.

These weaknesses in the state structure were paralleled by a feeble economy, which meant that Vientiane could not finance a centralized dynasty either. Thus a resurgent Lan Xang’s autonomy from Siam would have always been fragile. Meanwhile, throughout the nineteenth century, the Siamese state was growing stronger politically and economically. This would make it a natural pole of attraction for the various centres of power in the Lao territories. An equally important outcome of Chao Anou’s initial success, however, would have been that the Siamese state would have had to maintain relations with a kingdom based in Vientiane, rather than turning the region back into forest and more or less forgetting about it. Thus, when the French finally began to make claims on the Lao regions they would have encountered small, but intact states in the main lowland centres. Under pressure from the French, the latter would have
increasingly turned to Siam for assistance, and probably they would have been peacefully absorbed into the Siamese state, like Chiang Mai and others were in northern Siam. Meanwhile, the French would have been able to claim at most Huaphan and Xieng Khuang in the name of the Vietnamese kingdom.

Thus the most probable long-term outcome of a Chao Anou victory would have been the peaceful absorption of the Lao states by Siam, and the loss to Vietnam of a considerable amount of what is today Lao territory. Ironically, the devastation of Vientiane by the Siamese was the precondition for the French creation of modern Laos. So, in this way only can Chao Anou’s revolt be conceived of as a precursor of Lao nationalism.
DIFFERENT PATHS: LAO HISTORIOGRAPHY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

NOTES

6. The histories produced by the Lao communist movement itself are, however, of use to historians of that movement.
15. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, Paths to Conflagration, p. 36.
16. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, Paths to Conflagration, p. 36. The authors suggest, but do not argue, that Taksin’s Chinese ancestry led him to follow this alleged Chinese conception of borders.

23. After the book appeared Saphin was in fact harassed by angry Thai nationalists, joined by many ordinary people in Khorat who idolize Thao Suranaree. Saphin withstood these attacks on the freedom to publish and research.


27. Ferguson, *Virtual History*, p. 89.

28. Ferguson, *Virtual History*, p. 68.

Sila Viravong (1905–87) is widely recognized as a pioneer in the study of Lao culture and as one of the greatest modern Lao scholars. During his sixty-year-long literary career, starting from 1927 until his death at the age of eighty-two, no less than forty-eight volumes were published under his name, a few of which were reprinted several times. In addition, there were at least two other works, which remained unpublished at the time of his death. One, his biography of Prince Phetsarath, is officially listed as ‘unpublished’ in a commemorative volume dedicated to his life and works. The other, unlisted, was published posthumously in Bangkok in 1996 (see below).

Although his main literary contributions to the study of Lao culture were in the fields of Lao language and literature, which include, among others, his works on Lao grammar, a Lao dictionary and his ‘discovery’ and classic study of the epic story of Thao Hung/Thao Cheung, he was, and still is, regarded by many, foreigners and locals alike, as a great modern Lao historian. At least one contemporary Lao scholar has proposed that Sila Viravong should be honoured as the true ‘Father of the Study of Lao History’.

His Phongsawadan Lao (A Lao Chronicle or as the later English translation is known, History of Laos), undoubtedly his major historical work, traced Lao history from its earliest ‘town’ settlements at Mueang Lung and Mueang Pa (before 843 BC) down to the period before the French occupation in the late nineteenth century. It is perhaps the best known history of Laos written by a Lao historian, inside and outside Laos. Completed in 1953 and published as a school textbook by the Lao Ministry of Education in 1957, Phongsawadan Lao became a standard textbook of Lao history for most Lao students to at least 1975 and has become, besides Le Boulanger’s Histoire du Laos français, a standard reference of Lao history for many foreign students since its first
publication. Its first edition was translated into English and published in the U.S. in 1959, followed by a reprint in 1964. In 1972, the second edition of *Phongsawadan Lao*, revised with new materials and an additional new chapter, was published in Vientiane, again as a school textbook. In Thailand, during the past two decades or so, Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* has become popular among students of Thai-Lao history and culture, as well as among the general public. It has been translated into Thai and published in three different editions since 1985. The last edition, translated and published posthumously in Bangkok in 1996, is the revised and updated version of *Phongsawadan Lao*, completed in 1985, two years before his death, covering the history of Laos to 1946. The popularity of *Phongsawadan Lao* among the Thai is probably due to their strong cultural affinity and their desire to know more about Laos, politically and historically, after the end of the conflicts in former French Indochina.

This chapter seeks to explain how Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* represents a first step in the writing of a national history of Laos and how Sila Viravong’s work is ‘modern’, representing a break with the *Phongsawadan/chronicle* tradition. The importance of Thailand as a model in writing modern Lao nationalistic history will also be discussed.

**A NATIONALIST HISTORY IN THE MAKING: BEYOND THE *PHONGSAWADAN***

Judged by the standards of modern historical scholarship, Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* (1957) is less than satisfactory. At first glance, it seems like a royal chronicle *par excellence* as its title suggests, similar in the style and treatment of its subject matter to the tradition of the Thai and Khmer chronicles. It is the story of kings and their reigns in chronological order, their successes and failures, their glories and declines and their political alliances and wars. The limitation of the linear, dynastical *Phongsawadan* tradition is obvious. Socio-economic and, with certain exceptions, cultural development of Lao society on the one hand and the active cultural exchanges between ethnic Lao and other ethnic groups on the other are rarely mentioned. Narrative space is reserved almost exclusively to political events concerning the Lan Xang Kingdom and its direct successors, such as Vientiane, Luang Phrabang and Champasak. The principality of Xieng Khuan and the histories of other ethnic communities within Laos are nonexistent in its narrative. This chronicle limitation perhaps explains why *Phongsawadan Lao* in its first edition ends its narrative just before the arrival of the French in 1893 and, as remarked in a recent study of Lao historiography, fails to offer a general history of Laos.

Further, in other studies of Lao historiography, Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* (1957) is criticized for its ready acceptance and repetition
of the standard Thai interpretation of the so-called ‘Anou Revolt’, as put forward by Chao Phya Thiphakorawong in his renowned *The Bangkok Dynastic Chronicle*, in particular the underlying cause which led to Anou’s doomed action. One other obvious, perhaps most unjustifiable shortcoming found in the last, posthumous edition of *Phongsawadan Lao* is the absence of the Lao Issara liberation movement and other Lao nationalist politico-cultural activities during the pre 1946 period, of which his life was a part, in the chapter on Laos under French rule (see Bruce Lockhart’s contribution to this volume).

It is perhaps too harsh to judge Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* only in terms of its historical shortcomings according to the standards of modern scholarship. Due credit should also be given to the fact that when it was first written and published in the 1950s, his was the only complete history of Laos available to the Lao public. Until recently, Lao chronicles and literature preserved on palm-leaf manuscripts may have been widely distributed in Laos and oral traditions actively transmitted, but during the 1950s and throughout the next two decades at least, it was only in Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* that these seemingly autonomous, disconnected and fragmentary local episodes were put together in one piece and linked as one under a relatively clear and well-defined framework, however simple.

It is true that in certain respects *Phongsawadan Lao* follows too closely the *Phongsawadan* tradition, focusing largely on the successive reigns of the Lan Xang Kingdom and its successors. But at least in one area it has departed significantly from the typical *Phongsawadan* model. The history of Laos as advanced in *Phongsawadan Lao* has gone far beyond the ‘historical’ foundation of the great kingdom of Lan Xang in the mid-fourteenth century to the origin of the Lao as a people in the mythical distant past. The actual history, or rather the royal chronicle, of the Lan Xang Kingdom is preceded by the first four chapters which discuss, among others, the origin of the Lao people, the origin of the term ‘Lao’, ancient Lao kingdoms and the story of Khun Borom. In other words, a totally different historical past of Laos was being offered to the Lao public for the first time. Its entire history, covering a period of 3,000 years or so, was unified.

Another significant departure from the earlier Lao chronicles is the moral lessons drawn from the past events it offers. This is a break with the earlier chronicles, which give mostly factual, brief and fragmentary accounts. *Phongsawadan Lao* comes closer to the ‘new’ Thai historical tradition of the post-Ayutthaya period, best exemplified by Sangkhitiyawong of Somdet Phra Wannarat and other Ayutthaya chronicles collected and revised during the early years of Bangkok. One of the morals is given at the beginning in Sila’s ‘Foreword’ to the first edition of *Phongsawadan Lao*. In part, it says that the ‘decline of our Lao nation in the past was due to our disunity […]. If we are aware of this truth, we can prevent it being repeated both now and in the future’. This ‘unity’ lesson appears in several other places throughout the
Thus, unlike the old Lao chronicles, Phongsawadan Lao is not simply a factual account of the ups and downs of the old kingdoms.

Moreover, since the political role and power of the monarchy in the emerging independent Laos in the early 1950s was limited and, perhaps, even doubtful, Phongsawadan Lao is therefore not intended to be a manual of administration or a guide to state ceremonies for the king in power in the day to day running of his government. These functions of manual and guide had been the main function of the Bangkok Phongsawadan perceived by King Chulalongkorn when he commanded Chao Phya Thiphakorawong to compose The Bangkok Dynastic Chronicle on his accession to the throne in 1868. Nor is Phongsawadan Lao a text written to provide political and moral legitimacy for the king or the royal house in power, like most of the Thai chronicles composed during the early Bangkok period.

Taking into account all the departures from the typical Phongsawadan tradition and the older local Lao chronicles discussed above, it is perhaps more useful to regard Phongsawadan Lao as the first, however imperfect, ‘national history’ of Laos, written by a Lao historian. For in this work, the concept of Laos as ‘a nation’, as understood by Sila Viravong, has been defined. It begins with a discussion of the ancient history of the region of Suwannaphum, of which Laos is a part (on this concept in Thai nationalist historiography and Laos, see Soren Ivarsson’s contribution). The region was originally populated by the Khom and the Lawa, the latter a proto-Lao people, long before the Buddhist era. The Lao themselves have their original homeland to the north, in the river valleys of China. The term ‘Lao’ denoting the Lao people is as old as the people themselves and means ‘great’. More than 2,800 years ago, Mueang Lung and Mueang Pa were two major settlement-towns of the Lao people in western China. Following repeated Chinese invasions around 780 B.C. and after, the southward migration of the Lao people gradually took momentum. This eventually led to the founding of the Lao kingdom at Nongsae or Talifu around the late first century A.D. The Lao kingdom at Nongsae lasted for some eleven centuries until it was conquered by the Mongols and subsequently abandoned by the Lao in the mid-thirteenth century. During more than 1000 years, the two greatest kings of the Lao were Khun Borom and Sinulo.

Meanwhile, in the eighth century during the reign of Khun Lo of Nongsae, son of Khun Borom, the Lao army defeated the Khom under Khun Cheung and occupied Chawa (later known as Xieng Thong and eventually Luang Phrabang), which became the southern centre of the Lao and the capital of the southern Lao kingdom. For around 500 years until the time of Fa Ngum, twenty-two kings reigned at Xieng Thong, during which this northern part of present day Laos virtually became, at least politically, ‘the’ Lao country. In the centuries after Fa Ngum, the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang flourished and expanded over the river valley on both sides of the Middle Mekong.
It is quite clear that in his discussion of Lao history summarized above, Sila Viravong makes an attempt to define Laos as a nation, rightly or wrongly, in terms of people, that is all those who call themselves Lao and are descended from common ancestors, and in terms of territory, that is all the land under the rule of the Lan Xang Kingdom and its successors. \textit{Phongsawadan Lao} is therefore the history of the Lao nation and not simply the royal chronicle of the old kingdom of Lan Xang. Laos is a nation with a common identity formed basically by a people of common stock who have settled on this land.

However, as proposed by Sila Viravong in his \textit{Phongsawadan Lao}, there is more to the Lao national identity than the people and the land. Theravada Buddhism and Lao literature are also offered as key national components in the chapters on Lan Xang and its successors. Theravada Buddhism as practiced in most parts of Laos today was introduced during the reign of Fa Ngum, legendary founder of Lan Xang.\textsuperscript{27} The period before Lan Xang was the formative phase of the present day Lao nation. The nation itself emerged only with the founding of the Lan Xang Kingdom and thanks to the introduction of Theravada Buddhism from Cambodia upon the request of Fa Ngum’s Khmer princess wife. For without Theravada Buddhism, Fa Ngum would have failed to gain power and build his kingdom and the Lao people would have been deprived of a ‘civilized’ culture based on Buddhist moral teachings. Phra Bang, the most sacred Buddha image and a national emblem representing Lao Buddhism and culture ever since, was also brought to Laos during his reign.\textsuperscript{28} Theravada Buddhism is therefore an integral element of Lao culture and, hence, its ‘national’ identity.

The significance of Theravada Buddhism in the Lao ‘national’ culture is further emphasized by the narrative space given to the contributions to Buddhism and the Buddhist sangha made by Lao kings. Besides Fa Ngum, most Lao kings were also ardent patrons of Buddhism and supporters of the sangha, such as La Saen Thai, Visun, Phothisarat, Setthathirat, Soulingna Vongsa and Anou. They sponsored the building and restoration of temples and stupas, supported the teaching of Buddhist scriptures and Pali language, financed the translation and copying of the scriptures, appointed learned monks to the sangha administration and so on.\textsuperscript{29} Here Buddhism has played an important role in giving unity to Lao culture.

To a lesser extent, Lao literature also forms part of Lao ‘national’ identity. While the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang waxed, declined and eventually disintegrated, Lao culture, Buddhism and literature in particular, flourished and have become sources of national pride. The epic story of Khun Borom, the first ‘great king’ of Laos, was composed during the reign of Visun. So was the creation of the Visummalie verse form.\textsuperscript{30} But the ‘golden age’ of Lao literature was the reign of Soulingna Vongsa in the seventeenth century, during which many ‘great’ and best known works of Lao literature were composed, including \textit{Sinsai, Pu Son Lan} and \textit{Lan Son Pu}.

\textit{SILA VIRAVONG’S PHONGSAWADAN LAO: A REAPPRAISAL}
According to Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao*, therefore, the kingdom of Lan Xang represents Laos’s most glorious past, its golden age. Besides the flourishing of Buddhism, Lao language and Lao literature combine to make up the three pillars of Lao national culture. It was during this very period, under Fa Ngum and his successors, that the present ‘homeland’ of Laos took shape. Territorial space of Laos constantly expanded until it became Laos as it is today. At times, Lao political power even reached across the Mekong to cover the entire Khorat Plateau on the right bank, now Northeast Thailand, as well as the old Lan Na Kingdom in Northern Thailand. Along the way, there were also foreign invasions and temporary occupations of Laos; but each time the Vietnamese or Burmese invading forces were eventually driven out. This was accomplished through Laos’s superior military power, the audacity of Lao commanders and soldiers and the leadership of Lao kings.

The Lan Xang Kingdom was also Laos’s golden age in the sense that most of its kings were ‘ideal’ Buddhist kings. Unlike most Lao kings after the kingdom disintegrated into the three principalities of Vientiane, Luang Phrabang and Champasak, the religious activities of Lan Xang kings in support of Buddhism and the sangha are well documented in *Phongsawadan Lao*. This was a unified Laos and obviously a source of national pride. In addition, in Buddhist cultural terms, the disintegration of Laos after the reign of Soulligna Vongsa was brought about by the mistreatment effected upon Phra Khru Yodkeo, one of the most respected senior monks of Vientiane, by Phya Chan the usurper, which caused a mass emigration of Phra Khru Yodkeo’s followers and eventually led to the founding of the principality of Champasak to the south.32

The disintegration of Laos into three principalities and the decline that followed, after Laos was defeated by the Thai army and consequently brought under Thai suzerainty, formed the stage on which the moral lessons drawn from Lao history are presented in *Phongsawadan Lao*. Indeed, the period of Thai domination, from 1779 to the arrival of French imperialism in 1893, takes up about one-fourth of *Phongsawadan Lao*, against the 3,000 years of the rest of Lao history. In other words, the decline during the ‘Thai’ period is purposefully set against the glory of ancient Lao history and of the more recent Lan Xang Kingdom.

In his ‘Foreword’ to the first edition, Sila Viravong states his purpose in composing this history and his understanding of the role and contribution of a national history to nation building in the following fashion:

The purpose of writing a history [pawattat] or chronicle [phongsawadan] of Laos is to inspire [its readers] with a deep love of their nation. Because when we learn that during certain period in the past, our nation was prosperous and powerful, able to drive out all our enemies or evil forces, we are proud [of our nation]. On the contrary, if we learn that in a certain period, our nation was
weak or on the decline because of this or that, we feel sad and want to rectify it. And generally the fate of the nation has always repeated itself. For example, the decline of our Lao nation in the past was due to our own disunity. Our people and the princes were separated into various groups and gangs. There was no unity. If we are aware of this fact, we can prevent it being repeated both now and in the future.

We are now restoring our nation so that we can exist as a nation and prosper like other nations. Therefore, to know the chronicle of the nation is essential and very important because a deep love of the nation arises only out of an understanding of its national history or chronicle. To know our own national chronicle will strengthen our determination and effort to build a prosperous nation.33

Indeed, the most important moral lesson for the resurgent Lao nation, the key for a unified and prosperous Laos, in the view of Sila Viravong as emphasized in his Phongsawadan Lao, was the unity/disunity lesson. Disunity was a recurrent theme in Lao political history even during its golden age of the Lan Xang Kingdom. Disunity disrupted its progress, leading to political upheavals, turmoil and civil wars. The last reign of the Lan Xang Kingdom, the reign of Souligna Vongsana, one of Laos’s most illustrious periods, was preceded by a civil war caused by disunity among the descendants of Tonkham and other princes.34 But the most far-reaching and disastrous effect of the disunity of the Lao people, commoners and aristocrats alike, was the disintegration of the Lan Xang Kingdom and subsequent tributary status imposed on Laos by Bangkok. In the words of Sila Viravong,

The three Lao principalities, namely (1) Champasak of Chao Sayakuman, (2) Vientiane of Chao Siribunyasan, (3) Luang Phrabang of Chao Surinyavong, all lost their independence to the Thai at the same time in 1779 because of their disunity, [and] mutual hatred. In summary, the Lao people had earlier migrated to settle down in the valley of the Mekong. For more than 1,000 years, from the reign of Khun Lo in 1290 B.E. to the reign of Siribunyasan, they had their own [autonomous] government before they lost their independence in 2322 B.E.35

In subsequent episodes as recounted in Phongsawadan Lao, disunity among the Lao elites also accounted for the failure of the Lao people in their struggle for an independent Laos. Anou and his second in command, Uparat Tissa, were in a serious conflict over their different policies towards the Thai kingdom, leading first to half-hearted cooperation on the part of Tissa and later to an outright break from Anou. It was partly due to this apparent ‘disunity’ that Anou was eventually defeated by the Thai expeditionary forces, leading to his capture and tragic death in Bangkok and, most importantly, the total destruction of Vientiane, the old capital city of the great Lan Xang Kingdom.
The period of Thai domination and the subsequent ‘liberation war’ launched by Anou also provided a space for Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* to illustrate how the Lao nation during its disintegration and decline was unfairly and brutally treated by its enemy – the Thai. According to *Phongsawadan Lao*, the latter were ‘cunning’, ‘rapacious’, ‘merciless’, ‘brutal’ and ‘oppressive’ (on the French representation of the Thai, see Agathe Larcher-Goscha’s contribution). One of the best examples of this Thai ‘deceitfulness’ is given in the case of Phya Palat of Khorat and his wife, Mo, who together with other male and female Thai captives from Khorat, staged an escape, successfully trapped the Lao soldiers and killed most of them.36 Those Lao who went with Anou to Bangkok in 1825 for the funeral of Rama II were forced into hard labour by the Thai.37 When Vientiane was captured, the city was destroyed and its entire population forcibly resettled on the Khorat Plateau and in the Thai central plains. Lao royal treasures, all of the sacred Buddha images, including Phra Bang, were carried off to Bangkok.38 On his refusal to take an oath of allegiance to the Thai, Phya Narin, the Lao commander hero, who had been captured and brought before the Thai commander in chief, was mercilessly and brutally executed. A war elephant was commanded to drive its tusks into his body.39 An ungrateful Lao from the ‘Kingdom of the One Million Elephants’ was put to death by an elephant, a Thai elephant. Phya Ratchasuphavadi, who was later promoted to Chao Phya Bodindecha, then the second in command of the Thai expeditionary forces, was well known for his mercilessness in battle. In one episode during the ‘Lao liberation war’, according to *Phongsawadan Lao*, when the brother of the Uparat of Yasothon was found hiding Lao captives from Vientiane for his personal interest, he and all members of his family as well as his retinue, more than 100 men and women, old and young, were brutally executed at the command of Ratchasuphavadi. They were put into a wooden cage, on top of which was a big pile of dry straw, and then burnt to death.40

Finally, according to *Phongsawadan Lao*, one more moral lesson to be learnt from this period of Lao history is that the failure of the Lao in their ‘liberation war’ against the Thai was caused in part by their own naivety. They fell easily into the trap set up by the ‘cunning’ Thai, as evidenced in the mutual distrust, instigated by the Thai, which developed between Anou and Tissa.41

**HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PARALLELS? LAO AND THAI NATIONALISM**

*Phongsawadan Lao*, when first published in 1957 by the Lao Ministry of Education, only four years after independence, was more than a history textbook for school children and a popular reference for Lao history. For most new nations emerging during the twentieth century, a national history was the
product of nationalism, as was Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao*. A national history emphasizing a common past was essential for post-independence Laos as a socio-cultural tool to create a national identity during its critical nation building process.

Lao nationalism first emerged during the early part of the twentieth century. As early as 1918, a consciousness of a distinct Lao cultural identity, in this case the Lao writing system, language and literature, was increasingly present among the handful of western educated Lao elites. This assertion of Lao cultural identity was further intensified during the 1930s through the Buddhist Institute in Vientiane, whose main cultural activities were the promotion of the study of Buddhism and Pali language and the standardization of the Lao writing system. It was, however, in the 1940s that the consciousness of a distinct Lao identity was intensely politicized and an active nationalist struggle took shape.

On the one hand, this was a reaction to the growing irredentism in neighbouring Thailand. It resulted in an active political campaign in Laos, sponsored by French colonial authorities and with anti-Thai overtones, for a national ‘re-awakening’ and a unified Laos, through the publication of *Lao Nhay* during 1941–45. Already in the pages of the *Lao Nhay* of 1941–42, the idea of a Lao national history was proposed, emphasizing, among other things, a historically unified Laos. On the other hand, the political disruption following the outbreak of World War II in Europe, in particular the defeat of France by the German armed forces and the consequently weakened French administration in Indochina, brought forward a nationalist movement against the French, under the leadership of Prince Phetsarath, for an independent Laos. Eventually Laos became an independent nation in 1953.

The ‘national’ history in *Phongsawadan Lao* was therefore developed in the context of Lao nationalist struggle in order to provide the nation recently emerged with a common historical/cultural identity, as well as national pride and moral lessons drawn from its own history. Written by one who committed himself to the nationalist cause throughout his adult life and in the context of the national struggle for an independent and unified Laos, *Phongsawadan Lao* is full of episodes of heroic struggles of the Lao people against foreign invasions and occupations as well moral lessons derived from this struggle for liberation.

Starting his professional career in Vientiane in 1930 as a Buddhist and Pali scholar, Sila Viravong soon turned his attention more to the study of Lao language and ‘national’ literature. Through this appreciation of Lao culture and under the patronage of Prince Phetsarath, he became a Lao nationalist. His nationalist-cultural activities during the 1930s and 1940s, represented by his works on Lao grammar and literature, were to search out a distinct, unified Lao cultural identity and to standardize the Lao language. With the advent of World War II, Sila Viravong joined the Lao national struggle for independence headed by Phetsarath. When the French moved in to crush the movement, he
and Phetsarath and others fled across the Mekong, seeking refuge in Thailand. Between 1941–44, he was employed in the northern and northeastern literature section of the Thai National Library. During this time, he ‘discovered’ many long lost and forgotten literary gems of Laos, including the epic story of Thao Hung/Thao Cheung which was soon transcribed into Thai, edited and prefaced by himself and published in Bangkok in 1943.

In 1945, Sila Viravong returned to Vientiane to join the Lao Issara movement of Phetsarath for the liberation of Laos. He was on the committee responsible for the drafting of a constitution for an independent Laos, the design of the national colours and the search for an auspicious date and time for the proclamation of national independence. He was later appointed to the advisory council of the Lao Issara government. Following the return of the French in 1945, he had to flee Vientiane before taking asylum in Thailand once again in 1946. He remained in Thailand for three years before going back to Laos for good in 1948. He spent most of his remaining life there as a scholar of Lao culture under the Lao Ministry of Education.

The attention and relatively detailed narrative that Sila Viravong in his *Phongsawadan Lao* gives to the Lao-Thai war during the late 1770s, the period of Thai domination that followed and the Lao struggle under Anou to free Laos from the Thai, may have been in part due to the availability of related Thai historical sources, published and unpublished, in the Thai National Library where he worked for three years during World War II. But his own political experience as a Lao nationalist participating in the national liberation struggle during the 1940s may well have been one of his most powerful inspirations. Viewed in this context, Anou’s determination and unwavering commitment to the ‘liberation’ cause at all costs were obviously not only ‘heroic’ in their own right; but for a resurgent unified nation like post independence Laos, Anou was also an exemplary model of a patriot and martyr that his countrymen of later generations should follow.

Other tragic ‘heroes’ emerging from the revolt against Thai domination, with strong commitment to the Lao ‘national’ cause, include Phya Narin and Chao Ratsavong. In one incident, during which the Lao army was overwhelmed, they remained fighting almost to the last man. In retrospect, there was no other period in recent Lao history, still fresh in people’s collective memory, which could provide more colourful and inspiring heroic struggles and individual audacity than the period of Thai domination. The Lan Xang Kingdom was too remote in time, and the period of French imperialism, even during the most intense years of national liberation in the 1940s, so far did not reveal a single tragic sacrifice for the Lao national cause worthy of note. With about one-fourth of its pages devoted to the period of Laos under Thai domination, this section (which only covers a little over one century of Lao history) is undeniably the most dramatic, full of heroism and tragedy. As a national history written by a nationalist for the national cause, the episodes
contained therein are the most powerful and most effective. It is essentially a Lao nationalist’s response to the tragic and painful experiences of his country during the almost two centuries of Thai and French rule.

Viewed in a larger, region-wide, historical context, however, Sila Viravong’s Phongsawadan Lao, of which the plot of Lao national history relies very much on the liberation war against Thai oppression and brutality, was ironically also conceived within the context of popular Thai nationalism, so pervasive between the 1910s and 1940s. It had affected all facets of Thai social life, especially politics and culture. It was during this period that, first, the ‘national’ history and, later, the ‘nationalist’ historiography emerged in ‘Thailand’ and became the major trends of historical writing for some time. Notable among these new genres are the works of Prince Damrong Rachanuphab, Wichitmatra, Wichit Wathakan and Anuman Rajadhon. These and many others were widely read and enthusiastically discussed by the new generation of Thai elites and intellectuals during that time. 

Viewed more closely, there are several remarkable similarities in treatment between Sila Viravong’s Phongsawadan Lao and the new Thai historiography which developed from the 1910s to the 1940s.

To date, there remains a controversy as to how to treat Prince Damrong’s large corpus of historical writings. On the one hand, to some historians, he was the first and most important Thai historian who introduced the concept of a nation state into his historical writings, and thus his history became the first Thai national history. On the other hand, it has been argued that, though ‘modern’ in a sense, the main historical approach in Prince Damrong’s works was linear, hierarchical and dynastic rather than national. Further, the analytical nature and conservative overtone of this ‘Chakri historiography’, as Prince Damrong’s historical corpus is labelled by Somkiat Wanthana, were based upon aristocratic and paternalistic viewpoints.

Prince Damrong’s historical writings may not have suggested that old Thailand was a nation state, nor did he present Thai history as the history of a nation state. However, his writings departed from the traditional Phongsawadan in many ways and the shape of the Thai nation was there. In his long ‘introduction’ to the royal autograph edition of the royal Thai chronicle, which he edited, Prince Damrong in 1914 discussed in detail pre-Ayutthaya Thai history, the history of the land which had become the home of the Thai people, present-day Thailand, the people who had settled in this land before the arrival of the Thai, the original homeland of the Thai in China, the southward migration and the founding of the Thai kingdoms on this land. In other words, Thai history was extended by Prince Damrong far beyond the founding of Ayutthaya in the mid-fourteenth century to the pre-Buddhist era. Such an approach to the history of Thailand was repeated and elaborated in greater details in his famous lectures given at Chulalongkorn University in 1924. The first lecture, devoted to the period before the founding of Ayutthaya, discussed the ‘land of Siam’...
before the arrival of the Thai, the Thai original homeland and their subsequent occupation of ‘Siam’, the rise of the Sukhothai Kingdom and the decline of Sukhothai. In addition to the main focus – the kings and royal houses that ruled this land – his history of Thailand, however limited and imperfect, encompasses the history of the Thai people and their country. By this very argument, therefore, his history is, if not a genuine national history, at least a proto national history.

This model of a ‘national’ history of Prince Damrong was more or less followed by Wichitmatra in his national prize-winning *The Roots of the Thai*, written in 1928, which divides Thai history into three periods, namely the ancient (the Thai before Nanchao), the middle (Nanchao and the pre-Ayutthaya kingdoms) and the contemporary (Ayutthaya and Bangkok). In his treatment of Buddhism in Thailand and its development in Thai history, it is obvious that to Wichitmatra, Buddhism, in addition to the monarchy, was a common cultural characteristic shared by all Thai, thus an integral part of Thai culture and a distinct Thai identity.

This genre of ‘national’ history was further developed into the ‘nationalist historiography’ by Wichit Watakan, the dean of this particular genre, in, among others, the sections on Thai history in his twelve-volume *A Universal History*, completed during 1929–31. Although the sections on Thai history in *A Universal History* betray the influence of the Phongsawadan tradition, focusing in part on dynastic history, they nonetheless devote their pages to the discussion of Thai legal history, administration, ‘citizenship’ and ‘human rights’, including a subsection on the ‘heroism’ of the villagers of Bang Rachan not long before the second fall of Ayutthaya.

Featured quite prominently in *A Universal History* is the history of Thai-Burmese wars during Ayutthaya and the early Bangkok periods. This part, as acknowledged by the author himself, was taken almost entirely from *Wars Between Thai and Burmese*, another masterpiece of Prince Damrong. Particular attention is given to the fall of the Thai kingdom and its liberations by Naresuan and Taksin. Heroism and moral lessons for a nascent nation abound in this account of wars and liberation.

Perhaps more candid in its intention as a national/nationalist history is *Story of the Thai Nation*, written by Sathiankoset (alias Anuman Rajadhon) and published in 1940. In the context of Thai nationalism of the 1940s, this is one of the most emotional, dramatic, inspiring and moving historical accounts of the Thai people thus far. In the ‘Preface’, written as a letter to his writer friend, Sathiankoset recounts how deeply moved he was when he visited Sobruak on the Mekong near the old northern capital city of Chiang Saen, where the borders of Laos, Burma and Thailand met. At that moment he ‘saw’ in all directions the settlements and countries of the Thai people, their migration to settle in this land and their glorious past. He lamented the fact that now they were separated from each other, many had been ruled by foreign people for so long
that they simply could no longer communicate in their original language with their kin folk in other countries.68

_Story of the Thai Nation_ gives the most detailed account of pre-Sukhothai Thai history. Its 390 pages are divided into two parts. Part one is about the Thai in China, their original homeland some 4,000 years ago, the Ta Mung, the Ai Lao and Nanchao. Part two, called the Thai in the Indochinese Peninsula, recounts the history of Sipsong Chuthai and Lan Xang, Lan Na Thai and Haripunchai. The book ends with an invitation to the readers to find for themselves from the history of the Thai people the Thai cultural characteristics.69 Indeed, it is this politico-cultural environment so pervasive in certain parts of Thai society during the 1910s–40s, especially among the educated class (lay and ecclesiastic alike) that provided an inspiration and a narrative model for Sila Viravong’s _Phongsawadan Lao._

Born in Roi-et, Northeast Thailand, in 1905 to an ethnic Lao peasant family, educated in the Thai _sangha_ as a novice and later as a scholar-monk, Sila Viravong spent most of the first twenty-five years of his life in Bangkok and at his home province.70 Qualified both as a member of the ‘Thai’ elite through his monastic career and as a ‘Thai’ intellectual through his educational background, Sila Viravong was obviously familiar with the new semantics of modern Thai society of the early twentieth century in general and of Thai nationalism and Thai national history and nationalist historiography in particular. In addition, it was first during these formative years and later during his brief sojourns in Thailand as a political exile during World War II that he was exposed to the richness of Lao culture, well hidden in long lost manuscripts of Lao folk and classical literature in the Thai National Library.

It is not surprising therefore that his discussion of customs and ways of life of the Lao of Nongsae in _Phongsawadan Lao_ is apparently based on the discussion of the same subject in Sathiankoset’s work. In fact, it can be safely said that the history of the pre-Lan Xang Kingdom as presented in Sila Viravong’s _Phongsawadan Lao_ is essentially the same as the pre-Sukhothai Thai history as given in the works of Prince Damrong, Wichitmatra, Wichit Wathakan and Sathiankoset. The only difference is the term Lao/Thai in its respective context.

Although a committed Lao nationalist, Sila Viravong as he reveals himself in his _Phongsawadan Lao_ and other literary works was to a certain extent influenced in his intellectual orientation by Thai scholarship during his formative years under the Thai _sangha_ and Thai education system. Regarding his contributions to the study of Lao literature, Peter Koret comments:

> A major weakness of Sila [Viravong]’s literary scholarship is his uncritical acceptance of previous Thai scholarship on Thai court poetry as a basis from which to analyse Lao literature. Sila influenced both the modern composition of traditional poetic forms and the interpretation of traditional works of poetry...
by his insistence that Lao literature conform to Thai standards of poetic composition, and his evaluation of their literary worth in proportion to their fulfilment of such standards.\textsuperscript{71}

Likewise, in his study of \textit{Lao Nhay}, Søren Ivarsson has this to say with regard to Sila Viravong’s role in the standardization of the Lao language during the 1930s:

\begin{quote}
It must be noted that the model for the Lao language envisioned by Maha Sila was very close indeed to the spelling in use in Siam, and the later reform proposed by Maha Sila was interpreted as an outright attempt to adopt the Siamese etymological spelling system.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

In the case of his \textit{Phongsawadan Lao}, Thai historical scholarship during the first half of the twentieth century provided not only the idea of a national history and/or nationalist historiography, namely the continuity of the national history, the cultural identity of the nation, wars, heroism, failure and liberation, as well as the much needed historical sources as discussed above, but also the interpretation of relevant historical events. However, it is only Sila Viravong’s ‘uncritical’ acceptance of biased historical interpretations of the Thai, in particular the cause of the liberation war led by Anou, which is unacceptable to the more nationalistic minded Lao of later generations.
NOTES

1. The author would like to thank the Conference’s organizing committee for their generous financial support. Helpful suggestions from Christopher Goscha, Søren Ivarsson and Dhiravat na Pombejr for this revised version have made it more readable, and are deeply appreciated.

2. His contributions to the study of Lao culture have been officially recognized by the government in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) on at least two occasions, in particular in the commemorative publication of Sila Viravong’s life and works by the National Committee of Social Sciences of LPDR in 1990. See Uthin Bunyavong et al., Maha Sila Viravong: His Life and Work [มาหาศิลาวิรุณ ชีวประวัติ], Vientiane: Social Science Committee, 1990. The second occurred during the bi-national conference, in which Lao and Thai scholars participated, on Sila Viravong’s works, organized by the same Committee, also in 1990. See A Conference Report on the Work of Maha Sila Viravong from the Viewpoint of Academics from both Sides of the Mekong [มาหาศิล่าวิรุณ บ้านเมค่อน ของทั้งสองฝ่าย สัมพันธ์กัน], Vientiane: Social Science Committee, 1990. For a more critical study of Sila Viravong’s contributions to the study of Lao culture, see Peter Koret, ‘Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study’. In Grant Evans (ed.), Laos: Culture and Society, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999, pp. 226–257. For his contributions to the study of Lao grammar and language in the context of emerging Lao nationalism, see Søren Ivarsson, ‘Towards a New Laos: Lao Nhay and the Campaign for a National “Re-awakening” in Laos, 1941–45’. In Grant Evans (ed.), Laos: Culture and Society, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999, pp. 61–78.

3. Uthin, Maha Sila Viravong, pp. 236–243. Sang Sinsay, in particular, was reprinted seven times between 1949 and 1983.

4. This biography, entitled Chao Maha Uparat Phetsarath, was published posthumously in the LPDR in 1992 and was translated into Thai and published in Bangkok in 1999. See Sila Viravong, Prince Phetcharath: Iron Man of the Lao Kingdom [ช่างพทชร ผู้พิทักษ์แห่งอาณาจักร], translated by Sommai Premchit, Bangkok: Matichon, 1999.


9. [Sila Viravong], Phongsawadan Lao [พ้องสวาทนา], translated by Thongsueb Suphamarg, Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1985, Preface. The new chapter added is on Laos under French rule.

10. The three Thai versions, in chronological order of printing, are: [Sila Viravong], Phongsawadan Lao [พ้องสวาทนา], Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1985. (This is an incomplete translation of the second edition from 1972. Missing, however, are the last three chapters on the disintegration of Laos into three principalities, Laos under Thai domination and Laos under French rule. This version is published by Khurusapha, the official publishing arm of the Thai Ministry of Education); Sila Viravong, Phongsawadan Lao [พ้องสวาทนา], translated by Sommai Premchit, Chiang Mai: Department of Sociology
and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 1989. (This is a full translation of the first edition from 1957); and Sila Viravong, *A History of Laos* [ประวัติศาสตร์ลาว], revised and updated in 1985, translated by Sommai Premchit, Bangkok: Matichon, 1996.

11. Interest in Lao history remains strong in Thailand in the twenty-first century. The popular *Art & Culture Magazine* (Sinlapa Watthanatham) recently published a translation of certain parts of a Lao high school history textbook which was originally published by the LPDR Ministry of Education. See Somchai Nil-athi (trans.), ‘Lao History – the version of the Lao Ministry of Education [ประวัติศาสตร์ลาว ฉบับกระทรวงศึกษาธิการ]’, *Sinlapa Watthanatham*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2000, pp. 110–119; Somchai Nil-athi (trans.), ‘Lao History – the version of the Lao Ministry of Education (2) [ประวัติศาสตร์ลาว ฉบับกระทรวงศึกษาธิการ (2)]’, *Sinlapa Watthanatham*, vol. 21, no. 8, 2000, pp. 68–79; and Somchai Nil-athi (trans.), ‘Lao History – the version of the Lao Ministry of Education (3) [ประวัติศาสตร์ลาว ฉบับกระทรวงศึกษาธิการ (3)]’, *Sinlapa Watthanatham*, vol. 21, no. 9, 2000, pp. 100–109.

12. For this line of judgment, see, for example, Souneth, ‘Maha Sila Viravong and Lao History’, pp. 73–88.


21. *Sangkhitiyawong* is a good example of the new Thai historical tradition of the early Bangkok period which served such a political legitimacy purpose. See Saichol Wannarat, ‘Buddhism and Political Thoughts in the Reign of King Rama I, 1782–1809 [พระสุรนารีวัจฉาslideDownทราวิทย์ภริยากรมพระวชิรญาณวโรมัณฑิตพระยาปิยรัตน์ ‘สิริภพ ราชวงศ์ที่ 2]’, MA thesis, Bangkok: Department of History, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, 1981, pp. 122–123. See also the discussion on the early Bangkok
phongsawadan in Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Bangkok History in Ayutthaya Chronicles [ประวัติศาสตร์กรุงเทพในยุคพระธาตุยาสี], Bangkok: Bannakij, 1980.

22. Sila, Phongsawadan Lao, 1957, chapter one.
27. Sila, Phongsawadan Lao, 1957, pp. 70–73.
29. For example, an edict was proclaimed during the reign of Phothisarat to prohibit all non-Buddhist beliefs within the Lao kingdom, Sila, Phongsawadan Lao, 1957, p. 100; and Anou was cited for the bridge he built at the most sacred Phra That Phanom, Sila, Phongsawadan Lao, 1957, p. 239.
35. Sila, Phongsawadan Lao, 1957, pp. 251–252. This episode is known in Thai history as the ‘heroism of Khunying Mo’.
36. Sila, Phongsawadan Lao, 1957, p. 244.
42. For example, when the use of Thai characters to write Lao was proposed on the basis of their practicality and efficiency by a French administrator, it was opposed by Prince Phetsarath for fear of the eventual disappearance of the Lao writing system, language and literature. See Ivarsson, ‘Towards a New Laos’, p. 71.
44. For a critical discussion of Lao Nhay and the national re-awakening campaign in Laos, see Ivarsson, ‘Towards a New Laos’, pp. 61–78.
46. For a brief account of his life and work as well as his role in the Lao nationalist movement during the 1940s, see Uthin, Maha Sila Viravong. For discussions of Sila Viravong’s literary activities during the 1930s and 1940s in the Lao nationalist context, see Ivarsson, ‘Towards a New Laos’, pp. 61–78 and Koret, ‘Books of Search’, pp. 226–257.
51. For example, the battle of Nong Bualumphu. See Sila, *Phongsawadan Lao*, 1957, p. 256–257.
54. For example, *The Roots of the Thai* by Khun Wichitmatra was published three times between 1928 and 1935. See Wichitmatra, *The Roots of the Thai* [สกิจิท], Bangkok: Ruam San, 1973.
61. Wichitmatra, *The Roots of the Thai*.
70. For a sketch of his biography as well as his early life in Thailand, see Uthin Bunyavong, *Maha Sila Viravong*.
Given the long-term outcome of developments in Indochina following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, it is not surprising that much of the subsequent historiography focuses on Vietnam’s revolution at the expense of events in Laos and Cambodia. On the other hand, when Indochina in 1945 is considered as a whole, generally by either French or Vietnamese party historians, there is a tendency to downplay or even ignore differences among the three countries. For the French, in Vietnam and Laos it was a matter of reversing the anti-colonial regimes which had evolved after the Japanese defeat – which they saw as the work of a minority of troublemakers – and restoring power to themselves and to their loyal collaborators, whom they viewed as representative of the majority opinion among their subjects. For the Vietnamese communists, 1945 brought the outbreak of ‘revolution’ throughout the colony, with the peoples of all three countries linking up in ‘solidarity’ under the enlightened leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) to drive out the hated French enemy.

Needless to say, neither of these approaches is completely satisfactory, particularly if one attempts to look at 1945 from some sort of Lao perspective. Yet even this is a difficult task, since there is no single ‘Lao perspective’ on those events. In the case of Vietnam, most historians, whether or not they are sympathetic to the party, would basically agree on the sequence of events that came to be known as the August Revolution, though they would differ as to the factors behind its success and as to how the long-term consequences should be assessed. Yet for the corresponding period in Lao history, while the successive scenes of the drama are basically the same no matter who is telling the tale, the relative importance of the different actors, their objectives and the identity of the mastermind behind the scenes vary from version to version.
This chapter will focus on two narratives of 1945. The first, which I will call the ‘nationalist’ or ‘Issara’ version (named for the Lao Issara or ‘Free Lao’ movement), emphasizes the role of non-communist figures such as Prince Phetsarath, the highest ranking Lao under the colonial regime, who became a powerful nationalist symbol. The second, which will be referred to as the ‘revolutionary’ or ‘party’ narrative, is centred on the ICP and the links between developments in Laos and Vietnam. A study of the variations and discrepancies between the two versions will necessarily raise more questions than it answers; but these questions are both significant and revealing because they have implications for the evolution of Lao historiography – and, ultimately, Lao nationalism – over the past half-century.

SETTING THE SCENE

The Lao political stage in 1945 was peopled with characters from all over the ideological spectrum, with virtually nothing in common other than their shared geographical space – and even this space extended in different directions (across the Mekong to the west or across the Annamese Cordillera to the east) for different groups. French rule had been a unifying factor in some respects, a divisive one in others. The establishment of an entity known as *le Laos français* in 1893 brought together regions which had been separated for nearly two centuries following the fragmentation of the old Lao kingdom of Lan Xang in the early 1700s. Yet the effects of this long period of division were not easily erased: in addition to the traditional royal capital at Luang Phrabang, separate political and cultural centres had evolved in the south (Champasak) and northeast (Xieng Khuang). Vientiane, now the administrative capital, could also lay claim to a century of existence as a separate kingdom before its destruction by Siamese forces in the late 1820s following a revolt against Bangkok’s suzerainty by Chao Anou, its last ruler. Xieng Khuang was inhabited mainly by the Phuan, an ethnic group which was related to the Lao, but had its own identity and preferred to handle its own affairs and keep its distance from events in Luang Phrabang or Vientiane. Meanwhile, the latter city, along with Savannakhet and Pakse/Champasak, had produced powerful families whose interests tended to compete at least as much as they overlapped.

The power of these ‘regional aristocracies’ had been heightened by the French decision to maintain two separate administrative regimes within a single colonial entity. Part of Laos was a protectorate (like Cambodia and the parts of Vietnam renamed Tonkin and Annam) under the authority of the Lao king, and the remainder of the territory was a colony under direct French rule (like Cochinchina). Initially, the royal realm comprised only the province of Luang Phrabang itself, though several other provinces were later added. Significantly, the French kept the territory to the south of Vientiane under their direct rule,
which reinforced the localism of Savannakhet and Champasak – particularly the latter, where a princely ruling house still held power. Phetsarath, speaking in 1956, commented that during the early decades of French colonial rule:

The people of each mueang felt that their homeland was limited only to that mueang and that other mueang were essentially other countries. This was because except for the province of Luang Phrabang, these other mueang did not have any king ruling over them, and so each mueang set itself up as independent.4

Phetsarath attributed this problem to the fact that the French initially required officials to serve in their home districts (mueang) and did not allow them to be posted elsewhere. His account implies that the problem was solved once he persuaded the colonial regime to allow its civil servants more mobility within Laos; but in fact regionalism remained a significant force throughout colonial rule (and, indeed, until the present time), with obvious implications for any attempt to unify Laos under a single government, royal or otherwise.

Two other issues must be considered before we focus on the events of 1945. The first is the fact that the circumstances surrounding French colonization effectively split the Lao people in two. ‘Laos’ came into being in 1893 through a Franco-Siamese treaty which created a border along the Mekong. (A subsequent treaty ceded two areas on the west bank to France, which are presently Xayabury and western Champasak provinces.) The result was the well-known anomaly whereby there were more Lao in Siam than in Laos. Although Bangkok had been working hard to assimilate what is now northeastern Thailand even before the 1893 treaty and continued its efforts after that point, the Lao of that region – which the French referred to for decades as le Laos siamois – maintained a strong and separate identity. While many in Laos felt strong resentment towards the Bangkok government over historical grievances, including the forced retrocession of the right-bank territories after a brief war between Thailand and France in 1941, conversely they maintained strong cultural, linguistic and kinship ties with the northeast (see Peter Koret’s contribution). This orientation across the Mekong would eventually foster one particular strain of Lao nationalism.

A second issue is the French decision to encourage Vietnamese immigration into Laos throughout the colonial period to provide a degree of dynamism which they felt the local population generally lacked. While the Vietnamese represented a relatively small percentage of the colony’s total population – less than 3 per cent as late as 1936 – they constituted the largest community in most towns except for Luang Phrabang. Moreover, the civil service and the educational system in Laos were dominated by Vietnamese, as were the colonial militia and the labour force in the tin mines.5 As in other colonies, the ‘importation’ of an alien group to serve the colonial regime generated deep-
seated resentment among many Lao, a resentment which resonated throughout Lao nationalism. At the same time, it was this Việt kiều (expatriate Vietnamese) community which served as the bridge for the penetration of Marxist ideology into Laos and which became the locus for the limited activities of the ICP in that colony.

THE EVENTS OF 1945

Until the final months of World War II, the impact of the Japanese presence in French Indochina was much less strongly felt in Laos than in its neighbours, as the Japanese forces were concentrated in the other parts of the colony. In fact, until that point, arguably the most significant event had occurred before the Japanese occupation with the retrocession of the right-bank territories to Thailand – though it was the Japanese who had brokered the agreement and twisted French arms to accept it. Although the wartime period brought heightened nationalism in Laos as it did in Vietnam and Cambodia, this nationalism was of a rather different character and took on various forms. Three different elements of this nationalism must be introduced at this point in the narrative: two groups and an individual.

Whereas in the latter colonies the Japanese encouraged anti-French elements through contacts with individuals and movements with varying degrees of sympathy for Tokyo, in Laos the French themselves were the catalysts for a new strain of nationalism aimed largely at deflecting pan-Thai propaganda emanating from Thailand and persuading the Lao that their best interests still lay on their side of the Mekong. (At the same time, the French were also mounting a campaign of loyalty to ‘Indochina’ rooted in the ideals of the Vichy regime, a movement common to all five parts of the colony, but this development appears to have had little impact in Laos. If anything, it was counterproductive as educated Lao were unreceptive to propaganda encouraging closer identification with an entity that they perceived as already dominated by Vietnamese.) This ‘Lao Renovation Movement’, whose main vehicle was Lao Nhay (Great[er] Laos), the first Lao newspaper, focused mainly on cultural, literary and linguistic issues. But its very existence had certain political implications and its core group provided a number of Lao Issara leaders.

A second grouping which developed independently of Japanese influence was the Lao Pen Lao (Lao[s] for the Lao). Although the movement seems to have appeared under this name only after March 1945, its origins lay with a group of Lao who had fled to Thailand several years earlier. These men, the first to use the name Lao Issara, represented the trans-Mekong-oriented strain of nationalism mentioned above. Their links with the Thai were complex, however. On the one hand, they found common ground with elements within
Thailand who were opposed to the strategic and military alliance between the Bangkok government of Phibun Songkhram and the Japanese, and to French colonialism as well. The most prominent of these elements were found in the Seri Thai (Free Thai) movement led by Pridi Phanomyong, Phibun’s long-time political adversary. On the other hand, these Lao nationalists’ close ties to prominent figures in northeastern Thailand, whose loyalties to Bangkok were suspect, made them questionable partners in the eyes of some Seri Thai leaders, and the ‘alliance’ barely outlasted the end of the war.9

Finally, any discussion of Lao nationalism during this period must include Prince Phetsarath. As a high-ranking civil servant, he had served the French loyally but not unquestioningly. In addition to pushing for various administrative changes to strengthen the status of Lao civil servants, he had spoken out against the tendency to assume that Vietnamese immigration was the greatest hope for the future development of Laos.10 Educated in Saigon and Paris (there was no schooling in Laos above the collège or lower secondary level), he seems to have had an equally clear understanding of the French, the Vietnamese and his own people.

Phetsarath is a complex figure who defies easy labelling. Much of his authority and prestige were derived from his career within the colonial system, yet he was neither a creation nor a creature of that system. He cooperated with the French and later with the Japanese as long as it served his interests, yet once he had the opportunity to turn against both of these powers, he lost no time in doing so. He was a prominent member of the royal family, yet became a bitter rival of King Sisavang Vong (r. 1904–59) and Crown Prince (and future King) Savang Vatthana (r. 1959–75), despite his marriage to the latter’s sister. In large part, this discord was due to historical circumstances which had relegated his family line to a subordinate position,11 but it was to some extent a clash of ambitions as well.

On 9 March 1945, the Japanese launched a coup against the Vichy regime in Indochina, with which they had been more or less peacefully coexisting throughout the war. Some Frenchmen were killed, others imprisoned or put under house arrest and still others (mainly military officers) fled into the jungle to prepare guerrilla operations. Although one or two French officials remained in office in Vientiane, most top government positions were now filled by Lao, with Japanese officers holding the ultimate authority. Phetsarath continued to hold the position of prime minister, which had been created following a reorganization of the royal government in 1941, and various other members of the Lao elite joined him in the government.12

The Japanese seizure of power had several important consequences beyond the removal of the French. First, it enabled Phetsarath to strengthen his power and ensured that he would dominate political developments in Vientiane during the crucial days after the Japanese surrender five months later. As Laos awaited occupation by Chinese and British troops (according to the Allied powers’
decision at the Potsdam Conference) while facing an imminent return of French forces. Phetsarath worked to build links to the southern provinces, which appear to have maintained a good deal of their earlier autonomy after the Japanese takeover. In early September, he sent emissaries to these provinces (Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravane and Champasak) to sound out local authorities on the prospects for reunification with a central government in Vientiane/Luang Phrabang. The response was sufficiently favourable for him to proclaim the reintegration of the south into the Kingdom of Laos on 15 September. At this point he was also strong enough to stand up to French officials who attempted to reassert their authority in Vientiane following the Japanese defeat. Lacking the firepower to enforce their demands, the French were forced to evacuate the capital and relocate in Thailand – though they would return in force soon enough.13

The events of March 1945 also accentuated the conflict between the two branches of the royal family. Phetsarath and his full brother Souvanna Phouma were both prominent in the new, Japanese-supported government, while the ruling king and crown prince made clear their preference for French rule. The crown prince reportedly tried to supersede Phetsarath’s authority and oppose the Japanese, though this ‘palace revolution’, as Geoffrey Gunn has called it, failed. King Sisavang Vong then declared ‘independence’, like his counterparts Bảo Đại and Norodom Sihanouk in Vietnam and Cambodia respectively, though most sources agree that he only did so under considerable Japanese pressure.14 Although Phetsarath seems to have temporarily gained the upper hand, as soon as Japan surrendered, the conflict resurfaced. French forces re-entered Luang Phrabang in late August, and Sisavang Vong formally declared that ‘the French Protectorate has never ceased to be exercised over the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang’.15 Phetsarath ignored this decision and refused to publicize the declaration in Vientiane. He sought the king’s approval for his efforts to integrate the southern provinces under an independent government, but received no response and announced the reunification as a fait accompli.

The third consequence of the Japanese displacement of French authorities was an outbreak of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment among the Vietnamese communities in Laos and a concurrent rise in tensions between these Việt kiều and the ethnic Lao. Many of the details of these events are far from clear, but in Vientiane there were clashes between the two communities in which several people died. Anti-Vietnamese sentiment was known to be strong (though latent) among the urban Lao population, and the government responded to these sentiments by replacing most of the Vietnamese in the civil service and militia and expelling large numbers of Việt kiều from Vientiane and Luang Phrabang. At the same time, many Vietnamese seem to have supported the Japanese during these crucial months, probably based on Japan’s promises of independence for their homeland. French sources portray the Japanese in Laos as essentially sympathetic to the Việt kiều, who represented a
strong anti-French force, and at least some groups of Vietnamese were reportedly armed by the Japanese. A number of Vietnamese, particularly in the southern provinces, had links to the ICP, and it is evident that the rise of the party-dominated Việt Minh revolutionary front in Vietnam had a significant impact on the communities in Laos.

Finally, the Japanese coup de force also created a schism between those members of the Lao elite who remained loyal to their French masters (now either in prison or in the maquis) and those who were determined to prevent these masters from returning to power. As mentioned, this conflict manifested itself in the rivalry between the two branches of the royal family, but it was equally acute and even more complex in the south. Many top-ranking figures in Thakhek, Savannakhet and Pakse either actually joined the French guerrillas in the bush or at least remained sympathetic to them. Notable examples included Prince Boun Oum of the Champasak ruling family, Leuam Insisiengmay (chao khwaeng or provincial chief in Savannakhet) and Kou Abhay (his counterpart in Pakse). By the time of the Japanese surrender, these pro-French leaders were in direct contact with Lao Issara elements infiltrating across the Mekong from Thailand. The fact that, as Oun Sananikone (the leader of these elements) remarked, ‘the feelings of the Lao civil servants in Pakse [and elsewhere in the south] were with those in the forest [the French] much more than with us’ made for considerable tension. This tension could only be heightened by the anti-French activities of the large Vietnamese communities in these same towns.

Throughout late August and September, developments in different parts of Laos were moving fast, though hardly in coordination with each other. Issara returnees from Thailand were able to take power in the key Mekong towns – Thakhek, Savannakhet and Pakse – by negotiating an uneasy coexistence with Lao officials and Vietnamese community leaders, but the French guerrillas and their supporters were not far offstage. Oun has evoked the atmosphere of these tense weeks in vivid terms:

So the situation at that time was like meat in a vise. In the towns, there were Chinese soldiers [from the KMT occupation forces], and in the countryside, there were French soldiers. Both of them wanted to destroy us. In addition, we still had Japanese units who were not yet disarmed, and armed Vietnamese. Both of them, when they wanted to do anything, did as they pleased and didn’t ask for the approval of the country’s masters. Consequently, we Lao Issara fell into a very difficult status. Even most of the people liked the French more than they liked us.

To the north, things were not much better. Though Phetsarath’s power was essentially unchallenged in Vientiane, he faced ongoing resistance from the king in Luang Phrabang, where the French had set up a de facto power centre.
This threat was somewhat neutralized by the arrival of the Chinese troops, who were generally more sympathetic to Phetsarath’s government than to the French, but the presence of a reigning monarch hostile to his objectives constituted a serious obstacle. Meanwhile, in the strategically important northeastern provinces of Xieng Khuang and Xamneua, local Vietnamese were opposing French guerrilla forces and, according to several sources, actively working for the reattachment of these areas to Hồ Chí Minh’s new regime in Hanoi.\textsuperscript{19} Phetsarath also faced hostility from the Phuan ruling family of Xieng Khuang, who had little sympathy for any Lao authority in either Luang Prabang or Vientiane.\textsuperscript{20}

The event which succeeded in temporarily uniting the disparate anti-French elements around the country was the king’s decision – announced on 10 October – to strip Phetsarath of both his position as prime minister and his title of viceroy (Uparat). This decision was undoubtedly the result of the growing tensions between Phetsarath and the court over the past few months, but it may very well have been provoked by a more recent development as well. On 8 October, a group of prominent Lao, including members of both branches of the royal family, as well as several representatives of the southern elite, formed a People’s Committee in Vientiane to prepare a full-fledged ‘Lao Issara government’. The People’s Committee intended to establish a constitutional monarchy with Sisavang Vong on the throne and Phetsarath as prime minister. Phetsarath declined the offer on the grounds that he was prime minister of the existing government, and even when that situation changed abruptly forty-eight hours later, he still refused to head the new government. Instead, the first Lao Issara cabinet was constituted under the premiership of Khammao Vilai, who had been serving as \textit{chao khwaeng} of Vientiane. On 12 October, the new government held a large ceremony in the capital to formally proclaim the independence and unity of Laos under its authority, along with the promulgation of the first Lao constitution. The regime then established a Provisional National Assembly, which subsequently chose a new national flag – the same as that used by the current Lao People’s Democratic Republic – to replace the ‘three elephants’ flag associated with the royal family.\textsuperscript{21}

The symbolism of changing the flag was soon concretized by a significant political event: the abdication – or deposition, depending on one’s perspective – of the king. Sisavang Vong refused to become the constitutional monarch of an independent Laos, so on 20 October the National Assembly voted to depose him. On 4 November, Chinese troops surrounded the buildings occupied by the small French military contingent, while groups of demonstrators moved on the palace. The king and his royal cabinet formally surrendered power to the Issara government, which consolidated its victory by deposing the crown prince for good measure. The king issued a sort of abdication statement, placing himself ‘under the government of the Lao nation’, affirming that he had signed no treaties with the French relative to the status of that nation, and that he would
hold no grudge and take no revenge against any member of the government for its actions.\textsuperscript{22} The Issara government was thus placed on a firmer footing in terms of its authority and legitimacy. At the same time, the consolidation of its military forces under the leadership of Prince Souphanouvong (a half-brother of Phetsarath who had recently returned from Vietnam) enabled it to make some gains against the French forces and their Lao allies. Equally important was a military alliance signed between the Lao Issara and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in Hanoi, which was in fact the only government to recognize the Vientiane regime. Joint Lao-Vietnamese units (apparently including both Viêt kiều and ‘volunteers’ imported from Vietnam itself) were able to force the French-Lao guerrilla forces out of most of the towns they had occupied – though not out of the country. The government had only a short breathing space, however, as reinforced French units began retaking district and provincial capitals in late 1946. This process was accelerated by the temporary lull across the border after Hồ Chí Minh signed a provisional agreement with the French in March, which allowed them to concentrate their military efforts on Laos.\textsuperscript{23}

Coming under increasing pressure, the Issara government attempted to forestall anticipated French initiatives to the ex-king by bringing him back on board. In late March, Khammao sent a very apologetic telegram to the palace, saying that ‘the entire Lao people […] wish to demonstrate their love and affection for you and to see you continue to reign over all of Laos’. It took nearly another month for the Khammao government to persuade him, by which time the French were thrusting their way up the Mekong.\textsuperscript{24} They occupied Vientiane only two days after the king’s final acquiescence and were in Luang Phrabang by mid-May. As both Phetsarath and the Issara government fled across the river to Thailand, Sisavang Vong disavowed all official decisions he had made since the Japanese had first occupied the royal capital in April 1945. He sent telegrams to top French officials expressing his joy for their ‘liberation’ of Laos and affirming ‘our own loyalty and that of our family and our people to France, to whom we have remained faithful through the worst times’.\textsuperscript{25}

The Lao Issara leaders’ exit from the political scene in their homeland dealt a fatal blow to the Issara movement itself. Although they maintained a government-in-exile for the next three years, which Phetsarath now consented to head, the unity of the movement – fragile from the beginning – eroded further. As the Kingdom of Laos moved gradually but steadily toward greater autonomy and finally toward independence (albeit within the French Union), the Issara government’s raison d’être became less and less important for its more conservative members. Meanwhile, Souphanouvong continued to build ties with the communist revolutionaries in Vietnam, which generated serious tension with those same conservatives. The final crisis came in 1949, when Souphanouvong broke with the government-in-exile and prepared to make his
way back to Laos, eventually to head the anti-French resistance movement established by Lao and Vietnamese communists. That same year, King Sisavang Vong signed a treaty with France which, although stopping short of complete independence, was deemed acceptable by most of the Issara leaders, who then returned home to join the royal government in various capacities. Phetsarath, however, refused to join either the Vientiane government or the communist resistance and remained in exile until 1957, when he finally went back to Laos just two years before his death.26

NARRATING 1945

The rather long narrative above has tried to provide not only an overview of developments in 1945, but also an idea of the complexity and diversity of the various forces involved. We will now turn to an examination of the ways in which the story is told by various nationalist (i.e., non-communist) and revolutionary Lao sources. The nationalist writings on 1945 are necessarily more diverse in their viewpoints, as they were not subject to the constraints of a ‘party line’ on history and as some of them were actually published outside the country. It is possible to make a fundamental distinction between ‘northern-centred’ narratives, which focus on events in Vientiane and Luang Phrabang, and ‘southern-centred’ narratives, which concentrate more on the region from Khammouane (Thakhek) southward. The most prominent writer in the first category is undoubtedly Sila Viravong, a scholar of Lao history and literature who wrote prolifically on both subjects (see Chalong Soontravanich’s and Peter Koret’s contributions). He joined the future Lao Issara group in their Thai exile during the early years of the war and later returned to witness the events of 1945 as a close associate of Phetsarath.27 Although his most famous historical work, Phongsawadan Lao (A Lao Chronicle) has little to say about 1945, he wrote two other books which covered these events in more detail, History of 12 October 1945 and His Highness Viceroy Phetsarath.28

The first of the two is probably the most detailed account of the Lao Issara government written from the nationalist perspective. Interestingly, Sila explains in his introduction that he originally wrote the book in 1958 on the occasion of Khammao’s death; but that he and other former Issara colleagues decided that its contents might offend their former opponents now in power and perhaps even endanger his life.29 As a result, the book did not appear until shortly before the fall of the Royal Lao Government, when those most likely to be upset – the Rightists – had already gone into exile. Not surprisingly, History of 12 October is centred on Phetsarath as an individual and the Lao Pen Lao as a group, of which Sila himself was a member. He gives a fairly straightforward narrative of the events of 1945 and early 1946, ending with the exile of the Lao Issara government and the French reoccupation.
Sila’s account concentrates mainly on developments in Vientiane and Luang Phrabang, in particular the actions of Phetsarath and the king. Although he is careful not to criticize Sisavang Vong directly, it is fairly clear that the latter’s role was at best peripheral and at worst ran counter to the plans of the embryonic Issara regime. He ignores the king’s reluctant declaration of independence in April and essentially writes the royal government out of the picture by saying that after the defeat of the Japanese, who had replaced the French as its protectors, it ‘no longer had any status’ (mot saphap pai). Phetsarath appears as a kind of free agent, now de-linked from the discredited royal government, whose vision for an independent Laos matches that of the returnees from Thailand. It is he who stands up to the French when they try to reassert their control in early September, and his defiance – along with a show of force from the Vientiane population – forces them to leave. He also conceals the king’s 7 September telegram calling for a return to French rule, ‘for fear that the citizens would rise up and harm King Sisavang Vong’.

The nucleus of the Lao Issara government was formed by a group of men whom Sila refers to as phu kokan, usually translated as ‘Promoters’ when it is used for the planners of the June 1932 coup against the absolute monarchy in Siam. The choice of this term was probably not coincidental; for the new leaders may well have seen themselves as heirs to the earlier Thai movement, especially since the exiles in Thailand presumably had contact with Seri Thai leader Pridi, a key figure in the 1932 coup. The official name of the Lao ‘Promoters’ – khana kammakan latsadon or People’s Committee – also evoked the 1932 coup group, as did the term chosen for the National Assembly: sapha phuthaen latsadon.

Sila’s History of 12 October focuses on the construction of the Lao Issara as a government, followed by the battles which took place with French guerrilla forces and ends with the reoccupation of Vientiane and Luang Phrabang. He devotes several pages to the establishment of the Lao Pen Lao ‘association’ (samakhom), which he describes as a successor to the People’s Committee. According to his account, the Lao Pen Lao was formed as a sort of umbrella movement to ‘support and strengthen the government on every occasion’ and to counter accusations that various individuals were too pro-French, pro-Vietnamese or pro-Lao. He lists branches in Luang Phrabang, Savannakhet, Xieng Khuang and Khammouane, whose leaders include most of the members of the new government, spanning the political spectrum.

The biography of Phetsarath, which also clearly fits into the ‘Issara’ historiography category, includes a lengthy statement attributed to the viceroy himself, delivered to the Lao government delegation which visited him in Thailand in 1956 to invite him to return home. His account and Sila’s summary of his life emphasize his role in reunifying Laos by reintegrating the various provinces under a single government and his earlier contributions to strengthening the position of Lao civil servants under colonial rule. There is
little discussion of his activities in 1945–46, a fact which will be considered in
the conclusion.

Another detailed account is found in *Chronicle of the Lao Nation*, published
in the early 1970s by Prince Khamman Vongkotratana. The book is a history
of the Lao people from earliest times (as found in traditional Lao sources), but
the narrative extends down to the death of Sisavang Vong and Phetsarath in
1959. The author’s dedication emphasizes the viceregal line over that of the
ruling king, and it is clear from his account that his sympathies lie with
Phetsarath rather than Sisavang Vong. He is clearly anti-Vietnamese and has
little good to say about the activities of either the Việt kiều or the Việt Minh
troops in Laos. Conversely, he is admiring of Souphanouvong, whom he
defends against charges of communism, saying that the ‘Red Prince’ was
actually a socialist. While Khamman’s account offers no new insight into the
events of 1945, and in fact he goes into considerable detail about developments
after Sisavang Vong retook the throne with French support, he seems to imply
that the latter event was ultimately bad for the country. The narrative of the
years following the French return in 1946 is filled with natural disasters
(presumably bad omens) and incidents of violence interspersed among the
successive treaties gradually leading toward Lao independence. Sisavang Vong
appears to do nothing but travel to France for repeated medical treatments and
for the signing of these treaties. Finally, Phetsarath’s return, death and funeral
overshadow his royal cousin’s final days, and Khamman even quotes the king
as acknowledging – virtually on his deathbed – that it was in fact Phetsarath’s
actions which had temporarily kept the country from falling back into French
hands and obtained true independence.

A slightly different perspective comes from the memoirs of Oun Sananikone,
a leader of the original Issara forces in Thailand and probably the most
important figure in the south who had links neither to the French nor to the
Vietnamese. Not surprisingly, Oun is the hero of his own narrative, and certainly
he does appear to have played a prominent role in asserting Lao control over
Thakhek and Savannakhet before the French could reoccupy them. It is clear
from Oun’s account that for him the ‘real’ Lao Issara force consisted of himself
and those who had been with him in exile. He relied on his connections and
personal authority to deal with both the pro-French officials and the Vietnamese
communities in the two southern towns. Phetsarath in Vientiane is a rather
distant – even somewhat peripheral – figure in Oun’s story. Oun goes to
Vientiane in mid-September, but only agrees to meet the Prince because a monk
tells him he should. Phetsarath and his government, Oun says, had a favourable
opinion of him, and he claims to have been given the position of
‘Commissioner’ for the newly integrated southern provinces. (This appointment
is not mentioned in other sources.) Oun emphasizes (correctly) that
reunification thus took place a month before the formation of the Issara
government in October, implying that this important development was at least
partially due to his efforts. When the government was formed, he received a cabinet position, but he says that this was done without consulting him, since he was in the south, and notes that he subsequently had no time to fulfil his ministerial duties because he was too busy fighting French forces around Savannakhet and Thakhek. Oun is slightly disparaging toward the new government, saying that only two ‘real Lao Issara’ (himself and one of the deputy ministers) were members; most of the others ‘were only well-educated and capable people who gave their cooperation to us Lao Issara’. He also makes the rather curious comment that Phetsarath agreed to ‘sacrifice his position’ as prime minister in favour of Khammao, ‘even though [the prince] neither agreed with nor approved of the Lao Issara’.

These perspectives will be analysed in more detail below, following a discussion of the ‘revolutionary’ sources. Prior to 1975, relatively little historiography was written from the perspective of the Lao Party, for at least two reasons. First, most written material concentrated on the revolutionary struggle (first against the French and then against the Royal Lao Government [RLG] and the American government), so that even the recent past provided little more than a general backdrop for that struggle. Second, from 1950 until 1975 the visible arms of the revolutionary movement were the Neo Lao Itsala33 (‘Free Lao Front’, later changed to Neo Lao Haksat, ‘Patriotic Lao Front’, more commonly known as the Pathet Lao or ‘Lao Nation’) and the ‘Lao Resistance Government’ (latthaban lao totan), both headed by Souphanouvong, while the party hid behind these public masks. There was, in fact, no separate Lao Party until 1955. The ICP had supposedly dissolved itself in 1945, but continued to function throughout Indochina. In 1951, it re-emerged and split into three national parties, but for reasons which remain unclear, the Lao component was not formally established until several years after its Vietnamese and Cambodian counterparts. Since the party was remaining hidden and since the Neo Lao Itsala had yet to be created in 1945, it was perhaps awkward to say much about those events.

One of the few historical works written for outside consumption was Phoumi Vongvichit’s *Laos and the Victorious Struggle of the Lao People against U.S. Neo-Colonialism*, published in several foreign languages in 1969. Phoumi briefly mentions the events of August–September 1945, which he characterizes as a ‘General Insurrection to seize power from the Nippons’. The Provisional Government proclaimed on 12 October, which he refers to as the ‘October Insurrection’, ‘showed [the Lao people] that the imperialists were neither mighty nor invincible and could be beaten if the Lao people united and struggled along a sound revolutionary line’.

A more detailed version can be found in the Political Program presented at the Second Party Congress of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) in February 1972 by Kaysone Phomvihane, the LPRP General Secretary. Speaking at a party gathering, Kaysone could be much more explicit about the role of
the ICP in the colonial period. He explained that in October 1945 the Lao people had ‘risen up in a struggle to seize power and proclaimed an independent Laos’. As for the Lao Pen Lao and Lao Issara, he described them as ‘patriotic movements of the urban petty bourgeoisie which were influenced by the anti-Fascist struggle movements in Indochina led by the ICP’. These ‘bourgeois intellectuals’, Kaysone said, had ‘had a definite function in contributing to the uprising and seizure of power in 1945 led by the ICP’, but because of their class perspective, ‘they were unable to gather the masses together and lead a national democratic revolution’. (A ‘national democratic revolution’ is led by the party but is not restricted to the proletariat; rather, it includes more diverse elements such as ‘patriotic bourgeoisie’ and intellectuals. The Lao Party places their 1950–75 struggle in this category.) Only the ICP, he concluded, was able to perform that task.35 Several years earlier, in a eulogy for Hô, Kaysone had referred to a Lao ‘August Revolution’, when the ICP in Laos ‘mobilized the masses [and] organized and led our people […] to seize power into their own hands and proclaim Lao independence’.36

The first detailed history of the Lao revolution written in Lao seems to have been the account found in Lao History, published by the Ministry of Education in 1989.37 Its 500 pages cover the period beginning with the French colonization in 1893, with the main focus on the two wars of resistance in 1946–54 and 1954–75. The events of 1945 are treated in detail and placed firmly in the context of the birth and rise of the ICP, dating back to 1930. The text basically narrates the same events as Sila’s version, with a similar emphasis on the role of Phetsarath and the Lao Issara government. It pays particular attention to a proclamation which Phetsarath made to the French community in Laos on 1 September, explaining that Laos had proclaimed its independence because ‘the legal ties which bound us to France through treaties and conventions have been effectively severed because France failed to keep her commitment to defend us against outside forces’.38 Although the main objective of the proclamation – which in Sila’s account is omitted in favour of the prince’s personal confrontation with French officials – was to ask the French population to stay calm and not provoke trouble, the 1989 text treats it as essentially a declaration of independence.

This party history gives a fairly clear picture of the diversity of political positions represented in the Lao Issara and mentions the involvement of several figures who would later become bitter enemies of the left. It emphasizes Souphanouvong’s activities in the south, but portrays him as working within the broader framework of the Vientiane-based government. The formation and achievements of that short-lived regime are carefully chronicled, with particular attention to the People’s Assembly, ‘all of whose members [collectively] represented the Lao masses of all types’, and to the new constitution and especially the ‘people’s democratic rights’ it upheld.39 (The 1945 constitution has also been analysed in detail in another recent publication on ‘the expansion
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of the Lao state’. The writer, Phongsavat Buppha, is generally favourable toward this ‘first constitution in the history of Laos’, though he notes that it did have a number of ‘shortcomings’ since it was drafted only by ‘feudal intellectuals and petty capitalists’ with little input from ‘progressive forces’, since most of the latter were out leading military forces in the provinces. Even so, he considers that the 1945 charter was much more ‘progressive’ than the version promulgated under French auspices in 1947.40

The 1989 history diverges significantly from Sila’s account when it comes to the ideological framework for its narrative. Like Kaysone, the writers describe the period of August–September as a series of popular ‘uprisings’ (luk-hue-khuen) under the inspiration – and, in some cases, the direct leadership – of the ICP. Their conclusions as to the factors behind the 1945 victory echo time-honoured themes of Lao – and Vietnamese – revolutionary historiography: The ‘favourable international conditions’ resulting from the Soviet army’s defeat of German, Italian and Japanese fascism (apparently unaided by any Allies); the Lao people’s ‘tradition of struggle based on courage, patriotism, and solidarity’; and the ICP’s leadership.41 Even the probably Thai-inspired names of Issara organs are modified to sound more Marxist and less evocative of bourgeois royal regimes. For example, the latsadon of ‘People’s Committee’ and ‘People’s Assembly’ is generally changed to pasason, which is the regular term for ‘people’ in a revolutionary context.42

Within the revolutionary historiographical tradition there is also a ‘southern-centred’ approach which appears in several mainly hagiographical works focusing on Souphanouvong and Singkapo Sikhotchunnamali, a schoolteacher and civil servant in Thakhek who joined the Lao Issara and later rose to become one of the top military commanders in the Pathet Lao armed forces. Shortly after Souphanouvong’s 80th birthday, the Lao government published a collection of tributes and essays (some by Western scholars) in his honour. Around the same time, a short autobiography of Singkapo appeared, written in a fairly colloquial Lao style and apparently based on an oral account. Finally, in 1993 a detailed account of the ‘Three Iron Men of Thakhek’ (Souphanouvong, Singkapo and a Vietnamese officer) was published, focusing on events between the Japanese surrender and the French reoccupation of Thakhek, when French airplanes strafed the town and a number of Vietnamese and Lao were killed as they fled across the Mekong. (Souphanouvong was seriously wounded at the time.)43

In all three of these books the main focus is on the Thakhek-Savannakhet region; key developments in Vientiane, though noted, are peripheral to the main story except when Souphanouvong goes there to consult with Phetsarath. Much of the Souphanouvong birthday volume concentrates on the later years of his career, but in the other two books he and Singkapo share centre stage. The ‘Iron Men’ volume also has a series of charcoal drawings of a young, handsome Singkapo ‘explaining’ things to Japanese soldiers – who are by turns smiling,
frowning or pensive – and addressing his neighbours in Thakhek. Then he gives way to a young, handsome Souphanouvong who assumes the leadership role after a scene where he is seated in front of a solemn H‘ Chí Minh. There is no mention of Oun Sananikone or of any Issara leaders in the south; instead, reference is made to a ‘Revolutionary Committee’ headed by Singkapo which was formed in Thakhek at the time of the Japanese surrender. The names Singkapo mentions as the ‘leaders of the Lao Issara government’ in his region are all men who later became senior party members, including Nouhak Phoumsavan, Sisomphon Lovansai and Sisana Sisane. Nor does either account say anything about Singkapo crossing to Thailand to join the Issara, even though Oun’s account explicitly places him in Nakhon Phanom (across from Thakhek) before Oun ‘put him in charge’ of Thakhek after they took control from the Japanese.44

The most interesting aspect of the two Singkapo-Souphanouvong volumes is the obviously prominent role of the Vietnamese communities in Savannakhet and Thakhek during this period. The ‘Iron Men’ account in particular places great emphasis on their participation in the revolutionary activities in these towns and mentions several Việt kiều leaders with whom Singkapo worked closely. While the text is usually careful to distinguish the Lao and Vietnamese communities as two separate forces working together, its picture of solidarity between them occasionally raises some doubts. One wonders, for example, just how moved ‘patriotic’ Lao youth would have been by fund-raising plays such as the ‘Diên H‘ng Meeting’ (held in 13th-century Vietnam to reach a consensus on resisting a Mongol invasion) and ‘Nguyën Trãi’ (a 15th-century Vietnamese strategist who helped drive out the Ming).45 Not surprisingly, the complex and occasionally tense negotiations between Vietnamese loyal to the party and Lao leaders suspicious of their ambitions, a key theme in Oun’s account, do not appear here.

DISCUSSION

The nationalist and revolutionary sources provide contrasting perspectives on a number of issues. Three important points will be discussed here: 1) the driving force behind the Lao Issara government; 2) the role of Prince Souphanouvong; and 3) the place of the August–October 1945 period in Lao history.

LEADERSHIP

The first of the three issues to be considered is just who provided the leadership for the Lao Issara government. Nationalist and revolutionary sources alike recognize the key role played by Phetsarath. Indeed, it would be impossible to deny this role. The problem is, however, that Phetsarath was never really a member of the Lao Issara, either the movement or the government. The People’s
Committee was made up of Vientiane-based returnees from Thailand and men like Khammoo who were already serving within the colonial system. Phetsarath declined to head their government and held no official post after being stripped of his viceregal and prime ministerial titles. From Oun’s southern perspective in particular, Phetsarath does not loom large on the horizon, and it cannot be assumed that his popularity further down the Mekong matched his prestige in Vientiane and Luang Phrabang. It seems fairly clear that he provided a focal point around which disparate political elements could rally, and perhaps he was in a position to act as arbitrator when disputes arose. For example, he almost certainly played an important part in the negotiations over Souphanouvong’s position within the government when his half-brother went to Vientiane in late October. He presumably could take credit for the integration of the southern provinces into the government, though Oun’s account makes clear that this probably involved some negotiation as well.

In this respect, the nationalist accounts, with their picture of different elements co-operating in a common cause against a common enemy under Phetsarath’s moral authority, offer a high degree of plausibility. When we turn to the revolutionary sources, however, we seem to be on much shakier ground in regard to the issue of leadership, as they attempt to squeeze the whole narrative of 1945–46 under the direction of the ICP. As mentioned above, before 1975 (within party circles) and after 1975 (publicly), Kaysone alluded to the ICP’s supposed leadership role in the events of 1945. With the appearance of more detailed accounts of the revolution, this role has been considerably enlarged.

The 1989 Lao History provides the best examples of this approach. Throughout its narrative of these events, there are repeated references to ‘the leadership of the Party’, ‘the Lao Party organization’ (khana phak khwaen lao), ‘the Vientiane area Party branch’ (nuai phak khet Vientiane), etc. Developments in Laos are linked to resolutions and decisions passed by the ICP leadership in northern Vietnam beginning in the early 1940s, and the Vietnamese revolution of August 1945 is said to have contributed ‘directly to [providing] the conditions for the uprisings’ that took place in Laos. Even individuals and movements which had nothing to do with the party are portrayed within a Marxist revolutionary context. The Lao Pen Lao, for instance, is described as a ‘mass organization’ made up of two groups, one oriented towards the Seri Thai and the other ‘influenced by the ICP’. Perhaps the most interesting passage in the text, however, relates to the formation of the Lao Issara government:

Seeing that within the ranks of Party members there was nobody with an influential role vis-à-vis the masses, and lacking sufficient conditions to lead or contribute to the government, the Party organization [ongkhana phak] built on the resolution of the [ICP] Central Committee concerning the recruitment and establishment of governments through propaganda, through building up eminent
individuals [phu song khunwutthi] who were already influential [and getting them to] support the Party line [and] then contribute to [the formation] of those governments. With this clear perspective, the Party members therefore recruited eminent individuals and former high-ranking civil servants to […] act as representatives of the people [pasason] and construct a government suitable for the proclamation of national independence and sovereignty according to the urgent demands and needs of the revolution.

The revolutionary posture of the masses which had clearly manifested itself over the past two or three weeks [prior to October], together with mobilization and training from the Party, quickly changed the position of the former high-ranking civil servants to a clear revolutionary stance (such as Prince Phetsarath). At this time ‘national independence and freedom’ became slogans which tugged on hearts and drew together the Lao people of every class, ethnic group, gender, and religion to struggle together and achieve these high ideals.

With the appearance of Chinese and French forces in the heart of Vientiane, the Lao Party organization [ongkhana phak khwaen lao] gave orders to the effect that the construction of a strong and independent Lao government with the support of the masses had become an objective need and that the time had come. The core [Party] cadres then decided to put all their efforts [literally, to expend all their strength and sweat] and mental energy into recruiting and doing everything possible for a government to be born according to Party orders.

On 8 October 1945, eminent individuals, high-ranking civil servants, and patriots of every political stripe came together to discuss urgent issues and decide the fate of the nation; this meeting became the People’s Committee [khana kammakan latsadon or khana kammakan pasason – both names are given], the majority of whose members were representatives of the ‘Lao Issara’ group.46

Other party histories provide a similar perspective of the party guiding and leading the ‘revolution’ through various organizations. One source refers to a phantom ‘Independent Lao League’ (santibat lao ekalat), a ‘national front’ (neohom haeng sat) which the ICP is supposed to have set up in Thailand in February 1945 and which had links to the Seri Thai.47 Another also brings in the Lao Pen Lao, the ‘organization of eminent individuals, intellectuals, former civil servants, and even some patriotic members of the royal family such as Viceroy Phetsarath’. This fact is mentioned in the same sentence with a reference to the ‘Lao Party organization’ establishing armed forces and ‘preparing mass political forces’, thus implying that the Lao Pen Lao was also a sort of party front organization comparable to the ‘National Salvation’ (Cứu Quốc) groups in Vietnam.48

The picture given of ICP leadership and planning of the events of 1945 is far from convincing. It is known, of course, that the ICP had established a network of cells in Laos back in the 1930s. But it is quite clear that these early
cells were almost completely made up of Vietnamese, and that participation by ethnic Lao was virtually nil. One history actually lists names of apparently Lao ‘comrades’ from the Lao Party section when it was established in 1936, but the author notes that their identities are ‘not clear yet’, and in any case they numbered only four out of thirty-two members. (Given that as late as 1951, just before the ICP was split, only 2.7 per cent of the members in Laos were Lao, the 1936 proportion was actually somewhat impressive.) Western scholars are unanimous that no real Lao revolutionaries emerged before Souphanouvong in 1945. Future LPRP leaders like Kaysone, Singkapo and Nouhak at this point in time were at most climbing on board the party train through contacts either in Vietnam or among Việt kiều communities in Laos, and even Souphanouvong seems to have owed his position (and probably much of his success) to his Vietnamese connections. Yet no other individuals are mentioned – only vague groupings such as the ‘Vientiane area branch’ and the ‘Lao Party organization’.

It is probable that this sort of ‘virtual party’ leadership of the events of 1945 has been fabricated out of whole cloth. We are told that decisions were made and plans carried out in accordance with ICP directives and strategies. Yet we can see no Party members among the instruments of these policies. The most likely exception would have been those Vietnamese with ties to the Việt Minh. Although they did play an important role in Thakhek and Savannakhet, there is no evidence of Việt kiều involvement in Vientiane and Luang Phrabang, where the important political developments were taking place. Even the most broadly conceived ‘national front’ would have required party revolutionaries at its core, as was the case for the Neo Lao Itsala and Neo Lao Haksat after 1950. The first half of the first sentence in the Lao History passage quoted above is almost certainly true: There was nobody within the Lao Party qualified to participate in what was an essentially elite-led, ethnically Lao government. The second half is almost certainly false: The party would hardly have been in a position to ‘recruit’, ‘build up’ or otherwise indoctrinate these members of the Lao elite. Even in the south, the Vietnamese party members would have had to accept subordination to their counterparts to avoid heightening tensions. It is not surprising that LPDR historians are uncomfortable telling a story that leaves the party on the sidelines in this first stage of the revolution.

A second point to be considered is the role of Prince Souphanouvong in the events of 1945–46. Given that he eventually split from the Lao Issara government-in-exile and ended up as the titular head of the resistance movement opposing the regime which most of his former comrades-in-arms had joined, it is not surprising that the nationalist historians are generally rather cool towards him. Katay Don Sasorith, who became one of the leading rightwing political figures in the late 1940s and 1950s, completely ignores
Souphanouvong in his narrative of the Lao Issara, which centres around Phetsarath. (The prince’s break with the Issara was preceded by a bitter exchange of letters with Katay.) In Sila’s narrative, he is a somewhat peripheral figure, overshadowed by his older half-brother Phetsarath and operating as a member of the Issara government and of the Lao Pen Lao. Souphanouvong’s membership in the latter organization seems doubtful given that it generally represented the more conservative and Thai-oriented wing of the Issara, including Sila himself. The historian appears to be linking the Issara and Lao Pen Lao as closely together as possible so that they become virtually one and the same, and thus Souphanouvong must necessarily be included.

Oun Sananikone provides the most detailed account of Souphanouvong’s activities in the south, an account coloured by his evident dislike for the prince, his former roommate at the Lycée Albert Sarraut in Hanoi, and for the latter’s Vietnamese wife, who came to Savannakhet in October 1945 shortly after her husband. Oun is clearly resentful of Souphanouvong’s quick rise to prominence after his return from Vietnam. The prince, who had been Minister of Communications in the October government even before his return, now became Minister of Foreign Affairs and also replaced Oun as Supreme Commander of the Lao Issara forces – two decisions which Oun describes as being made completely without consulting him. He views Souphanouvong as overly ambitious and as a close collaborator of the Vietnamese from the start, commenting that his return to Laos ‘had occurred because the north Vietnamese government [i.e., the DRV] had given him many tasks to accomplish in Laos’.

Yet he claims to have consistently acknowledged the prince’s authority as a superior officer and does recognize his important military role between October 1945 and March 1946.

According to Oun, following Souphanouvong’s return he met with Oun and Phoumi Nosavan (another Issara leader, the future rightist who seized power in Vientiane in the late 1950s) and suggested that they should organize a ‘Lao liberation front’. Oun questioned this decision, since Laos was already independent, but Souphanouvong explained that ‘Lao independence at this time was just what we had proclaimed but the French had not yet guaranteed Laos’ independence.’ Phoumi and Oun agreed, and a new front was set up with Souphanouvong as chairman and Oun as vice-chairman, even though Oun ‘didn’t believe in the necessity for it’. This front does not appear in any of the Lao sources consulted for this study, either nationalist or revolutionary. However, the most detailed Vietnamese account of the Lao Issara does mention an ‘All-Laos Conference of Issara Cadres’ (Hội nghị cán bộ It-xa-la toàn Lào) supposedly organized in Thakhek on 8 October, which the writer claims elected Souphanouvong as ‘Chairman’ or ‘President’ (Chủ tịch) of the Lao Issara and Phetsarath as its ‘honorary chairman/president’.

The picture of an ‘all-Laos’ meeting in Thakhek is improbable, but the two sources taken together suggest a local ‘power play’ by Souphanouvong to
consolidate his position. Its omission by party historians is probably due to the fact that it makes Souphanouvong look overly ambitious and even defiant of his brother and the Lao Issara regime, whose legitimacy those historians uphold. Souphanouvong and Oun were also involved in the formation of an armed unit which became the embryo of a Lao army, made up of Issara forces linked to Oun and Souphanouvong’s personal guards, who were Vietnamese but, according to an internal document by the prince himself, would be ‘considered as Lao by adoption’. As there were no leaders in Vientiane able to put together an army, the creation of this joint Lao-Vietnamese unit would certainly have strengthened Souphanouvong’s hand when he went to Vientiane.56

A more interesting question is the timing of Souphanouvong’s return from Vietnam. Pre-1975 sources all agree that he reached Savannakhet in early October; the generally accepted date is the 7th, based on the account of Trần Văn Dinh, a Vietnamese military officer who accompanied him on this trip. As late as 1989, an October return is also clearly indicated in several official accounts included in the book published in honour of his birthday.57 However, the Vietnamese article cited above gives a date of 6 September, which has also appeared in several revolutionary sources, including the 1989 text and the two ‘Singkapo-Souphanouvong’ accounts. (The latter versions are a bit garbled. The ‘Three Iron Men’ text has Souphanouvong receiving a telegram in Hanoi from Phetsarath on 2 September, then travelling ‘seven days and seven nights’ and reaching Savannakhet on the 6th, while Singkapo’s own account says that he frequently met with the prince ‘as a representative of the civil servants to find out about the fate of the nation’ – even before the Japanese surrender, when the two men could not possibly have met in Laos.)58

There is no evidence to support a September date for Souphanouvong’s return to Laos. It is possible that the more recent Lao sources picked up the wrong date from Trần Xuân Câu’s article, as party historians routinely rely on Vietnamese sources to complement their own rather meagre materials. It seems more likely, however, that the prince’s return has been pushed forward in order to heighten his importance in the events of August–October 1945. There are several reasons which would justify such an agenda. First, it allows the Party to de-emphasize – or even ignore completely – the role of Oun and the other Issara returnees from Thailand, who were never particularly sympathetic to Souphanouvong or the ICP and, over the long run, rejoined the French-supported royal government. Although one perhaps needs to take certain points of Oun’s account with a grain of salt, there is no doubt that he and others from across the Mekong were active in the southern provinces for weeks before Souphanouvong arrived on the scene. Second, inserting Souphanouvong into the story adds a ‘Lao link’ to the ICP at a point where there probably was none. Souphanouvong was not a party member in 1945 – and in fact did not join until 1953 – but having come from Vietnam and bearing the imprimatur of Hồ and other DRV leaders, he serves as a strong thread to weave the events in
Savannakhet and Thakhek into the broader narrative of the Lao ‘revolution’ led by the ‘ICP’.

Finally, and perhaps most simply, ‘giving’ Souphanouvong an extra month of activity in the south strengthens his credibility as one of the main revolutionary leaders. Despite the emphasis in Lao revolutionary accounts on the enthusiastic welcome he received in reaching Savannakhet and Thakhek, one must raise the question of just how deep public support in these southern towns would have been for a prince of Luang Phrabang stock who had spent the better part of the last quarter-century in France and Vietnam. If he actually set up both a political movement (with himself at the head) and an armed unit within forty-eight hours of his arrival, it is more than likely that he bit off more than he could chew and that his real authority at the national level only came with his visit to Vientiane at the end of the month. It is equally possible that the bulk of his support lay with the Việt kiều community, who were heavily pro-Việt Minh and would perhaps have been more drawn to him for his connections with the DRV than the local Lao would for his personal prestige. The populations of Thakhek and Savannakhet were roughly 85 per cent and 72 per cent Vietnamese respectively. The Việt kiều figure heavily in the ‘Three Iron Men’ account, and even Trần Văn Định comments that in Savannakhet, where they received a warm welcome, ‘My first impression […] was that it was a Vietnamese town: We heard Vietnamese voices, and the crowd of thousands who greeted us was largely Vietnamese’. If Souphanouvong’s power base was in fact mainly Vietnamese, he was a long way from becoming a true ‘Lao revolutionary leader’ at that point in time.

**CLASSIFYING OCTOBER 1945**
For nationalist historians, there is no question that 12 October 1945 was the most important date in modern Lao history. (A peculiar exception is the history written by Khamman, which mentions the establishment of the Issara government, but seems generally more interested in chronicling King Sisavang Vong’s overtures to the French.) However, these historians do not characterize the events of October as either a ‘revolution’ or an ‘uprising’. Rather, they usually prefer the terms ‘liberation or restoration of independence/freedom’ (ku ekalat/itsalaphap) or ‘national salvation’ (ku sat).

In these accounts, Phetsarath is the key figure up until the king removes him from power, and even that development, it seems, only strengthens his legitimacy and authority by dissociating him from what has become a rather cravenly pro-French regime. It is Phetsarath who has unified the country and safeguarded its independence by defying the king’s call for a return to the protectorate, and it is Phetsarath who assumes the role of a sort of ‘patron’ for the new regime. Thus October 1945 represents not a revolution, but an act of ‘national salvation’ achieved through the actions of various members of the
Lao elite. For the nationalist account is very much an elite-centred perspective: ‘the people’ demonstrate their anger or excitement at various developments, but they appear largely as ‘extras’ on a stage dominated by a few key actors.

The revolutionary perspective is different in at least two important ways: its chronology and its characterization of October 1945. For most of the party accounts, 12 October is the climax of a chain of events that begin with ‘popular uprisings’ (luk-hue-khuen) or ‘seizures of power’ (yuet amnat) in August: first Savannakhet, then Thakhek, then Vientiane. The agents of change are variously ‘the Lao people’, ‘our revolutionary forces’ and ‘the Lao labouring people’. This perspective is summarized most succinctly in Saman Vinyaket’s brief party history: ‘On 23 August 1945, our revolutionary forces seized their right of mastery over Vientiane, and on 12 October they officially proclaimed independence to the world’. Other sources give a more detailed account, emphasizing the separate events in each town which occurred under party leadership and then flowed together in a single revolutionary current. Events like Phetsarath’s reunification of the country are noted, but they are secondary in importance to the ‘uprisings’ which began in August and culminated in the October government. This version of the story is fairly accurate for the southern towns in that power was actually seized by a combination of Issara and Vietnamese forces, but for Vientiane there was no change of power during this period. It is tempting to suggest that the ‘seizure’ in question refers to one of the shows of force by the Việt kiều community which hardly contributed to the emergence of the Lao Issara unless it served to catalyze Lao nationalism.

Given this interpretation of events, it is natural for the party to classify them in revolutionary terms, whether as an ‘insurrection/uprising’ or as a ‘revolution’ (patiwat) – or, more accurately, the first stage of the revolution, the first step on a long road that led to the end of the monarchy and the establishment of the Lao PDR in December 1975. This perspective has been universal in revolutionary historiography both before and after 1975. However, the more it is fine-tuned and elaborated, the more dubious it becomes. Consider, for example, the assessment of Pawatsat Lao in 1989:

[…] This victory [in 1945] became the most important historical step for the Lao revolution. […] The revolution of 1945 overthrew the yoke of the colonialists and the Japanese warlords, seized power for the hands of the people, built internal unity, [and] obtained full rights and sovereignty for the land of Laos […] [These events were of] epochal significance in that they represented a victory for Marxism-Leninism over imperialism and the correct political path which was demonstrated in the support of the masses, and the revolutionary task came to truly belong to the masses […] The August uprising and the proclamation of independence on 12 October 1945 were thus a manifestation of a profound and thorough class struggle unprecedented in the history of the
nation: [both] a direct struggle between the Lao people and the oppressive, exploitative imperialists […] and a class struggle within the country in order to resolve the class contradictions within Lao society itself.\textsuperscript{64}

Needless to say, one would have to look long and hard to see the ‘victory of Marxism-Leninism’ in the achievements of Phetsarath and the Lao Issara, and the idea of ‘class struggle’ in a movement led and directed mainly by the traditional elite is difficult to accept. But these assertions are necessary in order to buttress the claims that the party inspired and directed this important ‘first step’ of the Lao revolution.

A final observation on the work of Lao revolutionary historians is in order. They have been significantly influenced by their Vietnamese counterparts. The close ties between the Vietnamese and Lao revolutionary movements are well known and do not need to be discussed here.\textsuperscript{65} What is significant here is that much of both the framework and the discourse of Lao historiography is of Vietnamese inspiration. Christopher Goscha has shown how Vietnamese writers have constructed a ‘Lao August Revolution’ along the lines of their own, and to some extent the Lao are following their line (see Goscha’s contribution in this volume). Kaysone, in his eulogy for Hồ Chí Minh, explicitly referred to an ‘August Revolution’ in Laos, though admittedly this may have been meant for the ears of the Vietnamese cadres who were no doubt present in the liberated zone.\textsuperscript{66} The phrase does not frequently appear in Lao sources, but the implications are there: repeated references to the impact of the Vietnamese revolution, specifically the ‘favourable conditions’ created by the ICP’s seizure of power in August 1945 in Vietnam and the inspiration it is supposed to have provided for the Lao people. The very conception of a series of ‘popular uprisings’ around the country culminating in the proclamation of an independent government corresponds exactly to developments in Vietnam during August–September 1945. A recent work of military history even delineates the ‘first period’ of the anti-French struggle as lasting from August 1945 through December 1946.\textsuperscript{67} As we have seen, the first of these two dates does have some relevance for Laos, but the second has little significance; on the other hand, it is meaningful in the Vietnamese context, as it marked the outbreak of war between the French and the DRV, and it is a normal ‘benchmark’ in the historiography of Vietnam.

**CONCLUSION**

Ultimately both the nationalist and revolutionary historiographies share a common flaw in their narration of 1945. They de-emphasize both the ethnic diversity of the Lao population and the political diversity of the elite in favour of a constructed ‘Lao people’ and ‘Lao nation’. The first weakness is, of course,
not unique to Laos, and it is common for a discourse generated by a majority (in this case the lowland Lao) to ignore the minorities who are on the periphery of their political stage (see also Akiko Iijima’s chapter in this volume). To be fair, the nationalist scholars are mainly concerned with what happened in the towns, so that the upland peoples are marginal to their narrative – as, indeed, they probably were in reality to many of these political developments. The party version of history errs somewhat in the opposite direction with its assumption that ‘the Lao people’ as actors in the tale included both the majority and the various minorities acting as a single unit. Some authors consistently use the term *pasason lao banda phao* (‘the Lao people of various ethnic groups’), while for other authors the multi-ethnic nature of the ‘people’ is understood. Such a perspective clearly ignores ethnic tensions and rivalries, as well as the reality that some upland minorities preferred the French to either the Lao or the Vietnamese and took sides accordingly. There is also the issue of the ethnic Vietnamese communities, whose revolutionary activism in these crucial months often generated more tension than it did solidarity with their Lao neighbours.

Equally important is the need to recognize the lack of a consensus among the Lao elite as to what direction their country’s political development should take and where it should look for support. Nowhere has this problem been articulated more succinctly and eloquently than in these remarks by Nina Adams, penned during the civil war:

> From 1940 on, Laotian leaders continually had to choose whether to work with the French, the Japanese, the Thai, or the Vietnamese. […] In the chaotic and climactic period 1945–1947, the small Lao elite continually divided and regrouped as individuals weighed the alternatives and balanced the claims of personal obligation, past affection, and potential career against their assessments of the country’s future.

Overall it can be argued that the nationalist narratives do a better job of acknowledging this diversity. The main divide was between those members of the elite who joined the Issara government and those who felt that their best interests (and those of their country) still lay with the French. Except for Phetsarath and for those who followed Souphanouvong into the party, this schism was largely healed by the dissolution of the Lao Issara in 1949 and the return of most of its members to join the royal government. While the psychological divisions may not necessarily have healed, the common threat of the revolutionary forces did serve as a unifying factor – ultimately with more success than the attempts at coalition rule with the Pathet Lao. Thus Sisouk na Champasak, a member of the consistently pro-French princely family, could make the following characterization of the two political groupings:
Most of [those who fled to Thailand in 1946], sincere and convinced patriots, had allowed themselves to get dragged into this adventure in a reaction against the colonial regime, whose time had passed, and to establish an autonomous State in its place. Their national aspirations overlapped with those of other Lao patriots who remained in their country – patriots who were just as convinced but who were less impatient and more informed and who knew that between the [French] protectorate and independence, it was still necessary to move in careful stages.\(^71\)

If events after 1949 allowed the nationalists to acknowledge the degree of diversity which characterized the Lao Issara itself and to avoid stigmatizing those whose loyalties lay elsewhere, revolutionary historians could not comfortably do so. This explains the rather ‘schizoid’ perspective, whereby the moderate and conservative figures who dominated the political stage in 1945 – several of whom became bitter enemies of the revolutionary movement – are acknowledged yet are portrayed as acting under the inspiration and even at the behest of the ICP. This is due partly to the fundamental ‘patriot-traitor’ dichotomy so common to communist (and other) revolutions. It is also due to a sort of conceptual mental block which assumes that such important events, directed against colonialism and imperialism and striving for independence, have to have been part of the ‘revolution’. And a genuine ‘revolution’ can only be led by the party, hence the need to insert the ICP into the narrative and, in turn, to squeeze that narrative into as orthodox a Marxist framework as possible.

The ultimate irony is that both non-communist (and anti-communist) nationalists and revolutionaries can claim October 1945 as their legacy.\(^72\) Those who eventually joined the RLG can see that regime as a sort of heir to the independence they had first won in 1945, even if that independence was granted in stages by the French the second time around. Those who eventually joined the party can cast October 1945 as launching the struggle for independence, which was only completed in 1975.\(^73\)

It will be interesting to see the direction which LPDR historiography takes as the ‘revolution’ fades into the past and as the memories and relics of the ‘old regime’ become more powerful and less stigmatized – at least unofficially. There are numerous ambiguities and complexities at work, not least where Lao royalty is concerned. On the one hand, the regime has yet to achieve ‘closure’ \(\text{vis-à-vis}\) the former monarchy, to which the Neo Lao Haksat gave lip support almost until the day it forced Savang Vatthana to abdicate, and his eventual death in a prison camp (along with several members of his family) remains a sort of ‘state secret’. On the other hand, the reality is that two of the most prominent and popular leaders of the twentieth century – Phetsarath and Souphanouvong – were both royal, and both remain towering figures on the Lao nationalist landscape.\(^74\) The official attitude toward Phetsarath remains unclear. He is not criticized, yet he cannot be fully canonized since he refused
to join the revolution. Even the recent biography published under official sponsorship tells us much more about his prowess as a hunter than as a political figure. Perhaps as time goes by and the post-1975 political polarization of Lao society becomes less marked, Phetsarath will emerge as the most satisfactory and credible bridge between the two strands of historiography.
NOTES

1. I would like to thank Christopher Goscha and Søren Ivarsson for their feedback and help with materials for this piece. I am also grateful for regular access to the library of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, where most of my research was carried out.

2. In Cambodia, it was not even necessary to reverse anything: once the less pliant Prime Minister Son Ngoc Thanh had been dealt with, the royal government under King Norodom Sihanouk essentially reverted to the prewar status quo ante.

3. This is not to imply that there is nothing ‘nationalist’ about the ‘party’ narrative or that there is no concept of ‘revolution’ in the ‘Issara version’. Obviously these are not diametrically opposed concepts, since nationalism has never been absent from any of the Indochinese revolutionary movements.

4. Sila Viravong, His Highness Viceroy Phetsarath [វិចិតរិក្ខាចក់ហ្មាធដៃ], Vientiane: Social Science Committee, 1996, pp. 90–91. Among Tai peoples, the term mueang refers to socio-political units of various sizes, which are usually incorporated into horizontal networks and/or vertical hierarchies. In Siam/Thailand and Laos, the term came to be used for the administrative unit equivalent to a district, and it appears to have that meaning in this context.


6. Lao Party sources frequently emphasize the burden of the ‘double yoke’ of French and Japanese rule throughout the war, but it seems clear from other sources that Japanese involvement with Lao affairs was minimal before 1945. Such exaggeration of the Japanese presence may reflect the influence of Vietnamese historiography, or simply an assumption that as ‘fascists’ and ‘warlords’ (khun suek) the Japanese troops must necessarily have been oppressive.

7. There was, of course, no unitary ‘Vietnam’ during this period. In this article, I will use the term as a convenient ‘shorthand’ for ‘Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin’, when it is not necessary to distinguish among them.


9. Martin Stuart-Fox, A History of Laos, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 57 and Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, pp. 127–131. For a comment on the ephemeral nature of the alliance with the Seri Thai, see the memoir of one of the Lao Issara leaders, Oun Sananikone: John B. Murdoch (trans.), Lao Issara: The Memoirs of Oun Sananikone, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1975, p. 22. Some of the northeasterners had separatist ambitions for their region, so their ties across the Mekong were less than desirable from Bangkok’s point of view.

11. Phetsarath’s father, Boun Khong, had been viceroy under King Kham Souk (r. 1890–1904), known to the French as Zakarine. The two men were cousins. According to traditional Lao royal custom, the viceroy should have become king upon Zakarine’s death in 1904, but the French chose the latter’s son (Sisavang Vong) instead, bypassing Boun Khong. Though the roots of this rivalry between the two branches went back several generations, the French decision was the most immediate cause. See the Translator’s Introduction by John B. Murdoch (trans.), Iron Man of Laos: Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1988, pp. xiii–xv, and the family tree on p. 5, for a discussion of this issue.

12. Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, pp. 107–126, has a good account of the March–August 1945 period which draws on Japanese-language sources.


15. Quoted in Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, p. 140.


17. Murdoch, Lao Issara, p. 28.


19. Both provinces had been under the control of the Vietnamese empire in the nineteenth century and even in the early days of colonial rule had been administratively linked to Tonkin and Annam rather than Laos.


22. This account is based on Deuve, Le Laos 1945–1949, pp. 89–92, 96–98; a briefer version is in Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, pp. 145–146. The dates are slightly different in the two sources; Deuve’s are probably more accurate, as he gives the fuller citations for the various archival documents. The king’s final statement is translated from Sila Viravong, History of 12 October 1945, Vientiane: Pakpasak Kanphim, 1975, p. 29.

23. Accounts of the French reoccupation include Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos,


27. A sort of *festschrift* was published after his death: Uthin Bunyavong et al., *Maha Sila Viravong: His Life and Work*, Vientiane: Social Science Committee, 1990.


30. Phetsarath’s account is in Sila, *His Highness Viceroy Phetsarath*, pp. 90–100. This part of the document is much more coherent and in many ways more informative than the book which is usually considered to be his memoirs (Murdoch, *Iron Man of Laos*). Historian Arthur Dommen, in his introduction to the second edition of the English translation of these ‘memoirs’, has raised some serious questions about the accuracy and credibility of this source (pp. xxiii–xxxv). Sila’s biography makes some use of the book, but only for the first-person sections believed to be Phetsarath’s diary. See Sila, *His Highness Viceroy Phetsarath*, pp. 67–76.


32. See Murdoch, *Lao Issara*, pp. 26–30, for these events; quotations from p. 30. According to this translation, Oun was ‘Minister of the Economy’, while Sila, *History of 12 October*, p. 20, says he held the Agriculture portfolio.

33. *Issara* and *Itsala* are two renderings of the same Lao word. The first spelling is usually used for the movement founded in 1945, the second for the party front established in 1950. This is a useful convention given the confusing similarity between the two names.

34. Phoumi Vongvichit, *Laos and the Victorious Struggle of the Lao People against U.S. Neo-Colonialism*. Hanoi: Neo Lao Haksat Editions, 1969, pp. 43–44. The author was one of the foremost party intellectuals; he had been a *chao khwaeng* under the French until 1945, when he joined the Lao Issara movement and later the revolution.


In Kaysone Phomvihane, *On the National Democratic Revolution in Laos* [Về cuộc cách mạng dân tộc chủ của Lào], Hanoi: Sự Thật, 1986, p. 34. This eulogy was delivered in the liberated zone in September 1969.


42. The text sometimes gives both forms together, but the writers clearly prefer *pasason*. In modern Thai politics, both *prachachon* and *ratsadon*, the equivalents of these two terms, have come to coexist comfortably. This seems to have been the case for the RLG period – Sila’s text uses both words – but since 1975 the word *latsadon* has disappeared from official discourse, and pre-1975 revolutionary texts used only *pasason*. I am assuming that this is because the first term originally had connotations of the people as royal subjects.

43. The Souphanouvong volume has been published in English and Thai editions: *Autobiography of Prince Souphanouvong*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia Mining Corporation Berhad, no year, and *Prince Souphanouvong, Revolutionary Leader* [สุภานุวงศ์ ผู้รุกรานชาติ], Bangkok: Social Science Institute, 1990, respectively. The Singkapo autobiography is Duangsai Luangphasi (ed.), *Singkapo Sihkhotchunnamali: His Life and Work* [สิงคโปร์ซัคฮ์ชนนท์มาศ ชีวิตและกิจกรรม], Vientiane: Saonum Printers, 1991. The Thakhek volume is Duangsai Luangphasi, *The Three Iron Men of Thakhek* [สามคนเหล็กแห่งทากhek], Vientiane: Lao Committee for Peace, Solidarity and Friendship with the Nations, 1993. The 1991 autobiography contains a nice piece of unconscious irony. In addition to the information about Singkapo’s life contained in his narrative, there is also a reproduction of a French-language summary of his career (p. 26). Although no source is indicated, the document is clearly photocopied from the biographical appendix of Jean Deuve’s *Le royaume du Laos, 1949–1965: Histoire événementielle de l’indépendance à la guerre américaine*, Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1984. Deuve, the most prolific French writer on Laos, commanded the guerrilla forces which recaptured Pakxan (now the capital of Borikhamxay Province); if he had been fighting a bit further down the Mekong, he and Singkapo would have been shooting at each other. Singkapo and his editors apparently failed to notice that Deuve’s summary of his life, which they so proudly reproduce *in toto*, states bluntly that from 1969 on, he ‘began to lose his influence [in the Pathet Lao] as youth trained entirely in Vietnam replaced the first Lao Issara’. His biography notes that he became President of the Lao Committee for Peace, Solidarity and Friendship with the Nations and of the Lao Olympic Committee, suggesting that Deuve’s comment was not far off the mark.

44. Murdoch, *Lao Issara*, pp. 25–26. The Revolutionary Committee is in Duangsai,
The Three Iron Men, p. 29. The future party leaders are in Duangsai, Singkao Sikhotchunnamali, p. 16.

45. The plays are mentioned in The Three Iron Men, p. 15. Oun also refers to these shows (Murdoch, Lao Issara, p. 37).


47. Saman Vinyaket, The Lao People’s Revolutionary Party: Expanding the National Tradition [สัมมาณ vīyākkat the lāo jām jān pē̃ lāo kikō̂m pē̃lāo jān pē̃ bīnh], Vientiane: State Printing House, 1995, p. 3.


49. The information from 1936 is in Saman, The Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, p. 2; the 1951 figures are from Christopher E. Goscha, ‘Le contexte asiatique de la guerre franco-vietnamienne: Réseaux, relations et économie’, PhD thesis, Paris: École Pratique des Hautes Études, Partie laotienne, chapter five, p. 17. For detailed studies of early party activities in Laos, see Christopher E. Goscha, Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999, chapters two to four and Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, chapters two and three.

50. Just what political role, if any, Kaysone had in 1945 is far from clear. Arthur Dommen claims that Hồ had ‘dispatched’ him back to Savannakhet (his home town) ‘with an important mission’ – to infiltrate Oun’s group. He then describes a conflict between Kaysone and the newly returned Souphanouvong over leadership of the local movement which was settled by Kaysone’s recognition of the prince’s authority, see Dommen, Conflict in Laos, p. 73. This story seems somewhat farfetched and, to my knowledge, is not corroborated by any other sources. Gunn, citing a report by a Lao observer, says that Kaysone was appointed by Oun to manage the government printing press, which is plausible, see Gunn, Political Struggles in Laos, p. 134. The introduction to an English-language collection of Kaysone’s writings published in Moscow notes merely that he ‘took part in the liberation of Savannakhet from the Japanese’ without elaboration, see Kaysone Phomvihane, Revolution in Laos: Practice and Prospects, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981, p. 5. He is not mentioned in the Souphanouvong-Singkao accounts, which would be a highly unlikely omission from the record given his position in the party at the time these were published, and in the 1989 history his first recorded action is the establishment of the Latsavong military unit in 1949, Thongsa, Lao History, p. 198. There is also a curious reference to him in the memoirs of General Võ Nguyên Giáp, who apparently first met him in mid-1948 in the northern Vietnamese province of Thái Nguyên. Giáp was quite taken with the young man, but his description of the encounter portrays Kaysone at that point as a young patriot who ‘expressed the wish that the Vietnamese troops could help him return to his country’ and ‘believed that if he returned, he would be able to find like-minded people whom he could gather into a combat force’. Giáp spent three days training him in political and military matters and then had party cadres escort him to the border, where a road was being built to Xamneua, see Võ Nguyên Giáp, Fighting While Surrounded: Memoirs [Chiên đẩu trong vòng消费品: hồi ức], Hanoi: Nhà Xuất bản Quân đội Nhân dân and Nhà Xuất bản Thanh
niên, 1995, pp. 342–343. If Giáp’s recollections are at all accurate, this suggests that
Kaysone was only just integrating with the revolutionary forces at that relatively late
date. Goscha’s research shows that Lao sources confirm his presence in Savannakhet in
August 1945, but place him either in Vietnam or in the Lao border area for the next few
years. His ‘debut’ in an important leadership role seems to have taken place in 1949,
when he set up the Latsavong unit and also officially joined the ICP; see Goscha,
‘Le contexte asiatique’, Partie laotienne, chapter two, pp. 14–15, and chapter four,
pp. 10–11.

51. See Katay Don Sasorith, Le Laos: Son évolution politique, sa place dans l’Union
Française, Paris: Editions Berger-Leverault, 1953, pp. 59–69; the correspondence
between the two men is in Brown and Zasloff, Apprentice Revolutionaries, pp. 347–361.
The enmity between them was not without a certain irony. One of the main criticisms
Katay directed against Souphanouvong was his ties to the Vietnamese, but Katay him-
self was the son of a wealthy Việt kiều merchant in Paksé and a Lao mother. Katay’s
success was a source of pride to some South Vietnamese. See Tùng Văn, ‘Katay Don

52. Sila, History of 12 October, pp. 31–32.

53. Murdoch, Lao Issara, p. 38. Souphanouvong is a key figure in Oun’s account on
pp. 34–44.

54. Murdoch, Lao Issara, p. 36.

55. Trần Xuân Cậu, ‘The Lao August Revolution of 1945 [Cách Mạng Tháng Tám
Lào năm 1945]’, Nghiên cứu Lịch sử, no. 163, 1975, p. 37. For a more detailed study
of this source, see Christopher Goscha’s chapter in this volume.

56. On these developments, see Goscha, ‘Le contexte asiatique’, Partie laotienne,
chapter one, pp. 30–32. Goscha found documentary evidence of both the ‘Army for the
Liberation and Defense of Laos’ and the ‘Independent Laos [i.e., Lao Issara] Commit-
tee’, and these sources (dated 8 October) match the information given by Trần Xuân
Cậu, with Souphanouvong and Phetsarath as president and honorary president respec-
tively. However, these documents were issued by Souphanouvong and Oun in the south
before the formation of the Lao Issara government in Vientiane. I strongly suspect that
the Committee or ‘front’ was stillborn and that both Souphanouvong and Oun realized
that the military unit would be more useful to both the anti-French struggle and their
own ambitions, and perhaps that they were not strong enough to challenge Vientiane’s
domination of the new government. The Vietnamese officer who was midwife for the
birth of this army does not mention the Committee. See Trần Văn Dinh, ‘The Birth of
the Pathet Lao Army’. In Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (eds), Laos: War and

57. Autobiography, p. 2 (Pasason newspaper), p. 15 (Sisana Sisane) and p. 36 (his
October date is also confirmed by Jean Deuze, alias Michel Caply, Guerilla au Laos, p.
308.

58. Thongsa, Lao History, p. 162; Duangsai, Singkapo Sikhotchunnamali, p. 13;
and Duangsai, The Three Iron Men, pp. 32–34.

59. See the biography written by his son Soupha in Autobiography, especially
pp. 29–35. Other than a stint in the rural Savannakhet district of Muong Phin in the early
1940s, the prince – a civil engineer with the colonial government – did all his work in Vietnam.


62. As late as 17 September, Phetsarath had to post warnings in Vientiane aimed specifically at groups of armed Vietnamese causing disorder in the capital; the decree is in Deuve, Le Laos 1945–1949, pp. 295–296.


64. Thongsa, Lao History, p. 169.


66. Kaysone, On the National Democratic Revolution in Laos, p. 34.

67. Ai, A Summary, pp. 28–36. The text itself shows no clear reason why December 1946 marked an important date for the Lao revolution, which suggests that the periodization may be borrowed from Vietnamese historiography.

68. Conversely, given the amount of fighting that went on in rural areas when the French were reoccupying the territory, these minorities were probably very much affected by military developments.

69. This was true, for example, of the Phuan, while the Hmong were divided between pro-French and pro-revolutionary elements. See the account of a member of the Phuan ruling family in Archaimbault, ‘Les annales de l’ancien royaume de S’ieng Khwang’, pp. 661–667.


71. Sisouk na Champassak, Tempête sur le Laos, Paris: La Table Ronde, 1961, p. 16. Sisouk is quite critical of both Phetsarah and Souphanouvong, but more on personal than on ideological grounds. He is much more admiring of his brother Souvanna Phouma, who became the most prominent standard-bearer of moderate Lao neutralism.

72. For Vietnamese, the party-led August Revolution is much more ambiguous, and many anti-communists have to settle for 1949/1950 [the establishment of the State of Vietnam under Bào Đại] or 1954 [the French departure after the partition at Geneva] as the culmination of the struggle for independence.

73. This theme is also present in the various introductions written by non-commu-
nist political figures for Sila’s account, written two months before the RLG when enthusiasm for the prospects of a Neo Lao Haksat government was high.

74. See the insightful discussion on ‘Recalling Royalty’ in Evans, The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance, pp. 89–113.

75. It seems fairly clear that portions of the book, published only after the author’s death, have been removed. The final paragraph of the chapter on ‘Politics and Government’ promises that the next section will narrate Phetsarath’s involvement with the Lao Issara. The next chapter, ‘Prince Phetsarath Flees to Thailand’, picks up the story in April 1946 with reference to something which ‘was said above’ but which is in fact not there. See Sila, His Highness Viceroy Phetsarath, pp. 77–78.
7. THE NYUAN IN XAYABURY AND CROSS-BORDER LINKS TO NAN

AKIKO IIJIMA

The nationalist historiography of Laos and of other modern Asian nation-states tend to focus on precisely that: the nation and those people belonging to the borders of that state, its nationals. Reading these versions of the past, one often has the impression that modern borders are impermeable, as twentieth century nation-states homogenized pre-existing identities within bounded territories. What is harder for the advocates of the nation-state to accept is the possibility that pre-national cultural links could continue across these modern frontiers, in spite of Western colonial or Asian nationalist projects.

For Laos, the nationalist view of identity begins to blur if one leaves the cities to travel to remoter, hilly parts of the country, where the nation-building power of modern roads and communications have not yet penetrated deeply to erase pre-existing identities and to transform the culturally diverse peoples living in the highlands into a larger Lao nationalist family. Just to the west, in the modern nation now called Thailand, Bangkok authorities have worked hard since the early twentieth century to use the railway and then the construction of a modern road system to integrate the large ethnic Lao population in Northeast Thailand (Isan) more closely to Thailand than to the ethnic Lao populations across the Mekong in French Indochina. And yet neither the Thais nor the French shut down entirely pre-existing exchanges among ethnic Lao.

This chapter concentrates on continued exchanges among the Nyuan in upper Laos and Thailand. There are six villages recognized as Nyuan in the northeastern part of Xayabury Province (khwaeng) of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR). The Nyuan (in Lao) or Yuan (in Thai) is a label usually associated with a branch of Tai-speaking peoples. They constitute the majority population of the nine northernmost provinces of Thailand, totalling about three million people. Although some ethnologists identify the Nyuan as ‘Northern Thai’, the latter seldom call themselves Yuan today. They prefer the
term *khon mueang*, ‘country folk’ or the ‘people of the principalities’. I was therefore impressed by the assertion of the Nyuan villagers in Xayabury, who said that ‘We are Nyuan. Our ancestors came from Chiang Mai’, when I first met them in March 1996. The local Lao district office of Xayabury, to which the six villages belong, designates them collectively as Khet Nala (the Nala area) in recognition of their unique Nyuan character. In the national census conducted in 1995, Lao citizens were asked about their ethnic origins. Forty-eight different responses were provided as names of possible ethnic groups, one of which was Nyuan (spelled as Nhuane in the census report). According to this document, the Nyuan ‘ethnic group’ stands as the thirteenth largest, but accounts for only 0.6 per cent of the entire population. Despite their self-identification as Nyuan, however, the villagers in question also have much in common with their Lao environment. Although they speak the Nyuan language sporadically, their daily tongue is Lao. It is therefore hard to distinguish them linguistically.

This chapter does not seek to prove the uniqueness of Nyuan identity. Its aim is rather to show how the Nyuan people in northern Laos have been able to preserve a sense of ‘Nyuaness’ through their continued cross-border links and affiliations with their counterparts in Nan province in upper Thailand, in spite of the creation of the Thai and Lao modern states. The material for this reflection stems from fieldwork I conducted among the Nyuan of northern Laos. These oral sources point up the importance of studying non-national regional identities running across modern borders. Such sources and trans-national fieldwork can provide a corrective to modern nationalist histories of Laos and Thailand which stop their linear definition of identity at the border of the nation-state.

Geography, of course, is important to understanding these movements across the Thai-Lao border. The entire province of Xayabury, in which these Nyuan villages are located, is uniquely situated between the Mekong River, flowing from southern China, and the Thai border. It is therefore the only LPDR province located on the right bank of the Mekong. The present national boundary was disputed by the French and the Thais. It only came into being by the terms of the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1904 and another signed in 1941 following a brief Franco-Thai war over control of western Indochina. Thereafter, thanks to Japanese pressure on the French, the province came under Thai control and was renamed Lan Chang until it was returned to the Kingdom of Laos in 1946. This is important, because not only had this province been a part of a larger French colonial Lao state, itself part of ‘French Indochina’, but during World War II this province was also ceded to the Thais and incorporated into the competing Thai nation-state. Despite all this, the Nyuan still succeeded in maintaining this cross-border identity with Nan province.
THE EARLY HISTORY OF KHET NALA

Who are the Nyuan? Stories related by the villagers about their ancestry vary. Nevertheless, one can conjecture that there were at least two different groups which eventually developed into the majority of the population of today’s Khet Nala. The first group to settle in Ban Nala is said to have come from various places in present day northern Thailand, mainly Chiang Mai, Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai, Lamphun and Lampang. From Nala, the villages of Ban Nathon and Ban Wanghin branched out; and from Ban Nathon, a certain Phu Thao Saenwong went to open rice fields in Ban Nalaeng Noi, a development said to have occurred around 1920. The settlers of Ban Nakhun, the second group, are said to have come from Phayao. Nakhun villagers say that the languages of Nakhun and Nala are slightly different.

As for the original settlers of Ban Nala, another version claims that they were soldiers of Chao Anou’s army, which consisted of five units – Hat Khip, Kok Wan, Pak Waet, Na Nuan and Nala, all of which were Nyuan. In December 1996, in Ban Pak Waet, another Nyuan village near Xieng Ngoen in Luang Phrabang Province, this writer heard them enumerate as many as eight names of Nyuan villages as having provided this heroic Lao king with special guards. No definite conclusion can be drawn from the oral tradition for the moment. It is nonetheless noteworthy that Nyuan villagers seem to have known more or less of each other, in spite of the distances often separating them, as we shall see.

If one consults European materials, the records of two nineteenth century French travellers mention Khet Nala. One of the earliest European visitors to enter this locality seems to have been Henri Mouhot. He arrived by way of a land route running from Paklay to Luang Phrabang in late June or early July of 1861. In September, shortly before he died, he spent several nights in Ban Nakhun [Ban Nakone] and Ban Nala [Ban Na-Lê], where he was proud to have killed a female tiger in the company of ‘Laotian’ villagers. In 1883, a French Navy physician, Paul Neis, followed the same land route as Mouhot. Neis immediately noticed some special characteristics of the villages and people he met along the route. As he wrote: ‘[T]hese villages are cleaner and the houses more spacious than in the rest of Laos. The inhabitants are taller and better built than the other Laotians and some of the women are really pretty’. Since he also noted the men’s tattooing habits, referring to them as ‘Black Bellies’ (Lao kon dam), it is clear that he was speaking of the Nyuan. An American woman missionary recorded in 1903 that tattooing was a ‘unique custom’ of ‘the Yuan Laos’, which was considered to be ‘a badge of respectability and manhood among the people’. She added that ‘[n]early every man has his body tattooed from the waist line to the knee or a little above or below the knee’. Before he reached the Mekong at Thaduea [Thadena], Dr Neis spent ten days among the Nyuan villages, the last of which was Nala, “the big, rich village”.

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His account gives the impression that Nyuan villages in those days were more numerous than today. Neis added that ‘the whole country has been populated for only two or three generations by Laotians with “Black Bellies” driven from the North of Xieng Mai by a Burmese invasion’. It is not clear how or where he obtained this information, but one can assume that the Nyuan villages, at least Ban Nala and Nakhun, had already been well-established by the mid-nineteenth century.

MOVING MONKS, PEOPLE AND NYUAN REGIONAL IDENTITY

That one of the palm-leaf manuscripts kept in Wat Saen To Don Cai Kaeo Kwang of Ban Nala was dated 1845 supports such an interpretation (see Table 7.2). Although the temple of Ban Nala holds a nineteenth century manuscript, it is unanimously said that its construction started on Monday, in the twelfth month of the year kot-san pi wok, or 1920. A monk named Khuba Wong headed the work. Sometime in the 1930s, Khuba Wong built the temple of Ban Nakhun. He later went to the Muang Nan area in Luang Phrabang Province to fabricate Buddhist images there. According to the villagers, this Khuba Wong had come from a certain Dokbuap Village in Nan Province.

The extension of my fieldwork into Nan in northern Thailand followed in Khuba Wong’s cross-border footsteps. The village of Dokbuap, said to have been Khuba Wong’s home, is presently located in Ban Buppharam, Tambon Huaikaeo, Phuphieng District. The village used to lie across the Nan River and had flourished as a trading post. Yet nothing could be learned about Khuba Wong. This was not the case in Ban Pa Laeo, King-amphoe Santisuk. This village had formerly been situated on the travelling route between Xayabury and Nan. There, Mr Waen Saenpanya remembers that his father had been one of Khuba Wong’s disciples. As he recalled his father’s story, Khuba Wong was originally from Chiang Mai and had been ordained a monk after his wife’s death. He thereafter became the abbot of the temple in Ban Pa Laeo. Khuba Wong made Buddhist images in four temples nearby. When people from Xayabury passed by on their way to Nan, they saw them and invited him to come to their villages to do the same. Mr Noirot Ratchasan was a novice for eight years during the 1930s. He claimed that three people from Ban Nakhun came to invite Khuba Wong to construct a temple there. Khuba Wong set out with his colleague Khuba Wan and two novices. Mr Noirot was a pupil of Khuba Wan but he learned the Nyuan script from Khuba Wong personally. Mr Noirot agreed that Khuba Wong had come from Chiang Mai. According to others who knew him, he returned later to a secular life, married and died in Ban Pa Laeo. He had a reputation as an all-round craftsman, and has been remembered also for a red tattoo (sap hang) on his body.
The movement of Khuba Wong reminds one of the famous Khuba Kancana who moved back and forth between Phrae and Luang Phrabang and led a royal enterprise to make palm-leaf manuscripts in Luang Phrabang in the 1830s. Though incomparable with the charismatic leadership of Khuba Kancana, Khuba Wong could be counted as one of those itinerant monks who were often seen to have magical power. Their movements and the trans-national demands for their services, whether teaching Nyuan, making Buddhist images or delving into magic, contributed to creating a basis for preserving Nyuan identity links.

Monks were not the only ones travelling between Nan and this part of today’s upper Laos. Nyuan villagers also went periodically to the vicinity of Nan. Most of the male elders in Khet Nala who were interviewed had been there. The following excerpts from our interviews provide an idea of how Nyuan villagers have continued to move between upper Laos and Thailand. Here are a few examples of their journeys to Nan, right across the colonial and national border of modern Laos:

‘X’ [A monk aged 77, Ban Nathon]: In 1939, at the age of 19, he travelled to Nan for the first time with his friend, who had relatives in Ban Sop Nyang [Ban Sop Yang, King-amphoe Santisuk, Changwat Nan] and later married a woman there. He worked in a tobacco factory in Nan area for two years, married at the age of 22 to a woman from Wiang Sa District of Nan, and a year after his marriage he returned home with his wife. He thereafter travelled to Nan twice for business. In Nan, he changed his money from piastres (ngoen man) into Thai baht at the largest store, owned by a Chinese named Son (cek Son), and at the same store he bought iron utensils such as knives and ploughshares (phit).

Marriage and business across the colonial divide were not as difficult as we may have thought.

‘Y’ [A male villager, 54, Ban Nathon]: He went to Nan when he was 18 years old in 1962. He carried muntjak (fan) hides and a few kilograms of pangolin scales (ket lin) with him to sell at a Chinese store, and bought cloth and ploughs. A plough cost 5 baht and he could sell it for 7-8 baht.

Colonial categories could even facilitate these movements:

‘Z’ [A male villager, 75, Ban Nala]: Around 1957, he went to Nan in order to visit his elder brother who had gone to Nan as a soldier under French protection and settled there and to buy things. He went with six other Nala villagers and stayed at his brother’s house, which was located in Ban Khangthi at the northern entrance of Nan town (hua wiang). The things he bought in Nan were paper umbrellas, betel bowls, liquid dyes and wooden tobacco boxes (up yu), and he carried them back on his shoulder to sell.

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Of course, these accounts make it clear that their journeys to Nan in those days were designed to purchase things not available in their villages, such as iron-made farming implements and clothing, etc. Although they often carried money to Nan to buy these products, they sometimes took forest products such as muntjak hides and pangolin scales to sell or trade. However, these movements also suggest that when the French colonial state did not or could not provide goods, the Nyuan maintained their ‘old’ ways of procuring them. Some say that such journeys for purchasing goods were performed until the late 1950s, when they were finally in a position to produce the necessary things themselves.

The trip the Nyuan villagers made from Laos to Nan Province in Thailand took eight days and seven nights. They travelled in a group of about ten people, being armed with sabres to protect themselves against tigers. The route passed through Mueang Phiang and Pak Sot before arriving at the border where, they claim, a kind of tree stood as a boundary marker. The villages in the border area were inhabited by Phai people and the travellers stayed for a night or two with them. Then they stayed one night at Ban Sop Mang, another in Ban Sop Nyang or Ban Pa Laeo, the latter of which has already been mentioned in connection with Khuba Wong. They then reached Nan. It was during these trips that the Nyuan villagers happened to come upon Khuba Wong’s works. They do not seem to have been stopped often by Thai or French border guards or customs inspectors.

Although purchasing goods might have been their first intention since Nan was an important market town, there was more to it than just ‘business’. To them, Nan was a *mueang* of a larger Nyuan contact zone, where they spoke the same Nyuan language and shared the same script. The strong cultural affinities they felt with Nan and its people also explains why they would make this long journey to the west. While Nyuan villagers and the Lao of Mueang Luang (Luang Phrabang) shared some cultural things to some extent, they rarely mingled with each other through marital relationships. Several men married local women of Nan, whereas they claim that the women of Mueang Luang would not talk to them because of the difference of speech (*pak*). They add that they went to Muang Luang, which they could reach in a few days’ walk, just for pleasure.

**TRANSMISSION OF THE NYUAN PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS**

The continued use of the Nyuan script is another means by which the members of Khet Nala have been able to preserve their sense of ‘Nyuanness’. Inside village temples, one finds many of small Buddhist images that have pedestals with recently written lines in the Nyuan script or the Lan Na type of Tham
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letters, which are exactly the same as the script used in northern Thailand. A survey of the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme (Ministry of Information and Culture, LPDR), conducted in 1994, confirms that about 90 per cent of the palm-leaf manuscripts held in the monasteries of Khet Nala had been written in the Nyuan script (see Table 7.2). The script, which transcended local differences, used to be an indispensable component in the making of a premodern Nyuan Buddhist world. Its present use in Khet Nala confirms the trans-national character of the Nyuan tradition. The shared use of this script, in turn, helps us to understand better how the Nyuan have been able to preserve such a distinct cultural tradition into the late twentieth century amidst the predominantly Lao environment and despite the nationalizing process of the modern Lao nation-state.

It is in this larger context of cultural, economic and social exchanges that the question of the moving Nyuan manuscripts should be analyzed. For it was the monks and the villagers moving between these two areas that led them to realize they were sharing manuscripts of the same Nyuan script. During their trips to Nan, villagers had the chance to look at palm-leaf manuscripts while staying at the local temples. Interested in them, they sometimes borrowed them, so they could be read at home and, more importantly, copied. One former monk testified that he used to copy a number of manuscripts that had been borrowed from temples in Nan. He named Wat Pa Laeo and Wat Sop Nyang in particular, saying that the manuscripts had been kept for about a year among the Nyuan of upper Laos before being returned to their counterparts in Nan.

According to my interviews and fieldwork, the first set of manuscripts arrived from Payao in Nan to Ban Nathon in Laos by a villager-traveller named Nan Si. This occurred around 1930. Another traveller named Nan Nyana, who died around 1937, also brought manuscripts from a village close to Muang Pong in Nan, including one which is dated about 1922. The manuscripts in Wat Nalaeng of Ban Nalaeng Noi are said to have been copied from those of Wat Nathon. When the pioneer, Thao Saenwong, settled there around 1920, he simultaneously built a temple and appointed a monk named Suphan as abbot. Suphan purchased palm-leaves in Luang Phrabang and copied manuscripts from Wat Nathon. An armful of manuscripts written by Suphan are still to be found in the temple. Yet not all the manuscripts in Wat Nalaeng are of Suphan’s hand. By going over the colophons of some of the manuscripts, this writer found that manuscripts of different origin were mingled: one was apparently written in Ban Kaeokwan, Nan, the other in Ban Kok (Boklua District, Nan) and another was brought from Muang Ngao in Phayao Province, Thailand.

The circumstance by which these manuscripts were mixed up was probably related to the travelling nature by which they were circulated across the region by a variety of villagers and monks on the move. One should bear in mind that a significant characteristic of palm-leaf manuscripts in general is their...
portability. Thus one does not always have to connect the origin of manuscripts and the contents therein to the places where they are finally located. One must rather try to trace the history of the manuscripts’ journeys in conjunction with human movement, whether it be a small company’s trip or large-scale migration.

The circumstances concerning the manuscripts of Wat Nalaeng Noi are suggestive of the degree of villagers’ consciousness of being Nyuan in relation to Lao neighbours. Wat Nalaeng Noi holds only one manuscript in Tham Lao script, dated 1907. The villagers tend to associate it with a certain Tu Nantha, the only monk ever to come from the Luang Phrabang area to reside. According to them, Tu Nantha was originally from Kok Wan, a Nyuan village in the rural area outside Luang Phrabang. However, he was ordained in Luang Phrabang, for there was no temple equipped with an ordination hall in Kok Wan. Tu Nantha took refuge in Wat Nalaeng Noi, when there was a fire in Kok Wan, and stayed for two years. But because he had been educated in Luang Phrabang, he wrote in Tham Lao script. Here we can see another example of the type of relationship already noted, with other Nyuan living beyond Khet Nala.30

FROM FRENCH INDOCHINA TO THAILAND? MAINTAINING A NYUAN IDENTITY

A unique change occurred during World War II which could have posed a challenge to maintaining a Nyuan identity. Between 1941 and 1946, this small province in which the ‘Lao Nyuan’ had lived since the turn of the twentieth century was incorporated into the Thai Nation-State. To what extent did the Thai nationalist project, now extended into this part of former French Laos, seek to turn the Nyuan into ‘Thai’? (See Søren Ivarsson’s contribution). Recent access to the Thai archival files for this province provides some insights.

While the Thai Ministry of Interior papers kept in the National Archives of Thailand say little about the lives of the people ‘down-below’, they do reveal that the fundamental concern of the Thai administration towards the ‘newly acquired land and people’ was to integrate them into Thailand and its ‘nation’ (chat) so as to make it ‘like a single person who is coherent in body, speech and mind’.31 However, this was easier said than done and five years was hardly enough time to execute effectively such a project. The difficulties were clearest in Lan Chang Province, where ‘the land is locked with high mountain ranges and [is] barren’.32 In the whole province of Lan Chang, the District of Samaburi, Xayabury as it was called under the Thai administration, was especially marked by underdevelopment. During his inspection tour made in February 1942, the provincial commissioner reached Samaburi town and stayed there for a couple of days. Although he reported that ‘I feel people in general conscious of being good citizens (phonlamueang di), whose duty is to behave so as to be ready to
render service to the state (ratchakan) in wartime’, he actually met only 500 people from four villages out of a total district population of more than 25,000. The problem, he said: ‘No road affords communication and riverine routes are obstructed by rapids. Difficulties and dangers are in every direction’. Like the French before them, the Thais would find it difficult to incorporate the Nyuan into the larger national body without good roads.

The life history of a Nyuan under the nominal Thai control during this period is revealing. The present writer heard the name of this person while in Nan Province, during a visit to former residents of Xayabury. This occurred during an interview with one of his old school friends, who had been born in Xayabury but was now a Thai citizen residing in Nan. Thanks to this stroke of luck, I suddenly had the opportunity to meet the said person during a subsequent trip to Xayabury. His name is Xaignawut, though his original name was different. He was born in Ban Nathon in 1928. During the period of Thai administration, he graduated from a Thai-established primary school in Ban Nala. Then, in 1942, he was chosen to proceed to the next stage of education in Paklay, which was the seat of provincial government at that time. In less than a year after he had started teaching at a school in Xayabury, the French returned and he left for Thailand as the Thai administration withdrew. From 1946 to 1948, he lived in Nan, teaching at a school in Ban Rai, to the north of Ban Sop Yang. From 1949, he engaged himself in trading businesses, going back and forth between Nan and Xayabury. He dealt in pangolin scales and muntjak hides. In 1950 he married a ‘Thai’ woman and lived in Ban Sop Yang. However, in 1954, thinking of his parents, he decided to return to Xayabury, while his wife and two children remained in Nan. Back in Xayabury, he worked as a policeman until 1975 and then was sent by the LPDR authorities to a re-education program. Presently, as an ordinary citizen, he does some farming and lives with his new family in his wife’s home village in Xayabury.

Mr Xaignawut’s case seems to tell us that nationality is often a matter of chance. The 1940s seem to have been such a chaotic period for the region that mobility for men greatly increased. In fact, this writer encountered many men in Nan who had formerly been in Xayabury. Some had a family there and abandoned it when the Thai withdrew. However, some remained in Laos and became Lao nationals after Bangkok returned these territories to the French. Even many Thai military and police personnel sent into Xayabury during World War II stayed to become Lao when the war ended.

A second noteworthy aspect of Mr Xaignawut’s life is that eventful as it may be, it still appears stable in that his movements have been limited within certain cultural zones. This does not necessarily mean that he identified himself only of Nyuan ‘ethnicity’, because it is noteworthy that Ban Sop Yang, where his former family lives, is known to be a Lue village. Mr Xaignawut himself insists that they are Kalom, not Lue, whose speech is similar to Lue, who do not know khap lue (Lue song) but sing So and Coi of the Nyuan. Whether or
not they should be regarded as authentic Lue, it is evident that the Lue are included in his referential perspective, and it is this perspective, comprising the Lao as well, to which the Nyuan villagers in Xayabury always refer. Unlike the cases with the modern discriminative categories, such as nationalities, the fences here are quite low among these ‘ethnicities’.

Although the villagers’ scope is limited to a certain extent by their knowledge and experiences, one can extend their referential perspectives into a broader context of ‘the former Yuan Buddhist world’, as Paul Cohen put it, within which ‘a multiethnic and, indeed multinational following’ were encompassed. It is remarkable that when seen from such an eclectic perspective, even the tumultuous years of Thai administration have become a passing memory.

CONCLUSION

One Nyuan villager stated that the biggest change in his life was caused by the communist takeover in 1975. Because of its limited scope, this chapter will not attempt to treat changes in people’s lives and how the ‘Revolution’ may or may not have changed Nyuan identity. What is to be stressed here is that, however drastic a change they may have undergone during the last fifty to eighty years, the self-consciousness of the Nyuan as Nyuan seems to have remained remarkably constant. It is true that today’s youngsters are no longer inclined to get tattooed and some elders feel even ashamed of their tattooed bellies, which were once regarded beautiful. They nevertheless are still fond of listening to Coi and So songs and would never deny that they are Nyuan.

Significantly, their ‘Nyuanness’ is usually spoken of in relation to and in comparison with the ‘Lao’ and the ‘Lue’. This referential perspective, grounded in local native experience, is of course historically prior to, and substantively different from, definitions of ethnicity (sonphao) employed for the national census taken in 1995 (see above). If we may call it ‘traditional’, their traditional Nyuan identity could not have been substantial, either as a component of a multi-ethnic state or as an ideally isolated community whose distinctiveness could only be extinguished when put into a broader, say national, context. On the contrary, the very existence of their self-consciousness has been dependent on interrelationships with neighbouring others and activated continuously owing to their regional mobility, which this chapter has tried to demonstrate.

The fact that the Nyuan script is one among the Tham variants can be better understood in parallel with this regional referential perspective. While it is intriguing to argue that ‘a written literary tradition employing a distinctive [Tham] orthography served as a means of people to find deep commonalities [sic] which transcended local differences’, one must be aware that such an imagination was possibly latent among those people concerned. It is
nonetheless true that this literary tradition has been transmitted across barriers of time and space so as to form ‘a cultural basis’ which, not being merely a scholarly construct, the present researcher is able to perceive. Whether the persistence of this literary tradition is just a matter of a relatively slow acculturation or because of something more ‘inherent’ in terms of some form of ethnic self-perception cannot be readily ascertained. Such a question, which is certainly worth asking, seems to be posed by the Nyuan in Xayabury and their perceptions of their ethnic identity.

Lastly, the region of this shared ‘cultural basis’ of a Nyuan identity has been increasingly drawn into a whirlpool since the late 1980s, when each concerned state took to more or less liberalizing policy and the ‘Economic Quadrangle’ scheme emerged. Although the subsequent situation partially seems to represent the re-emergence of ‘traditional’ cross-border relationships, it should not be overlooked that the liberalization is the very consequence of the clearly demarcated systems of territorial administration. Thus various phenomena with the stamp of the post-nation-state era have come forth. New phases of ethnic identity, such as ‘marketable identity’ and ‘trans-national identity’, as Keyes termed it, have been coming forth. As for the Nyuan villagers in Xayabury, this chapter has argued that, having escaped big waves of transformation so far, they have preserved their mode of self-identification within the ‘traditional’ referential perspective, and it may be safe to infer that they shall remain un-infiltreted for some time because of inconvenient communication and transport networks. However, assuming their referential perspective should not remain intact, while the Lao and the Lue also undergo transformations, one ought to refrain from further prediction.
TABLE 7.1: SIX NYUAN VILLAGES IN XAYABURY PROVINCE

[Source: Batch Master File for the census 1995]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>No. households</th>
<th>No. person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xayabury</td>
<td>Xayabury</td>
<td>Nalaeng Luang (Mi Sai)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nalaeng Noi</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nathon</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wanghin</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nala</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nakhun</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 7.2: NUMBER OF MANUSCRIPTS

[Source: Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme, Copy of Survey Sheet, 1994]

* Figures in brackets are dates of dated manuscripts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Script</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Ban Nala, Wat Saen To Don Cai, Kaeo Kwang</th>
<th>Ban Nakhun, Wat Don Khun</th>
<th>Ban Nalaeng Noi, Wat Si Bun Luang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tham</td>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>2 [1750?]</td>
<td>3 [1928,1984]</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tham</td>
<td>Lao/Nyuan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 [1902]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyuan</td>
<td>Pali</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. The six villages are, namely, Ban Nakhun, Ban Nala, Ban Nalaeng Noi, Ban Nathon, Ban Wanghin and Ban Nalaeng Luang, of which the principal village is Ban Nala. See Table 7.1.


4. As to a migrant community in Saraburi Province, central Thailand, it is reported that people allege to be Yuan. Kannika Wimonkasem, Northern Thai Dialect [ภาษาเหนือเหนือ], Bangkok: Sinaapakon University, 1991, p. 7. There is another Yuan migrant community in Nakhon RatChaSima Province, Northeast Thailand, where people call themselves Yuan and are proud of being Yuan. See Yuphin Khemmuk, ‘Beliefs and Rituals of the Thai Yuan Sikhiu, Sikhiu District, Nakhon RatChaSima Province [ความเชื่อและพิธีกรรม: โหง้ยนวลีด้วา อำเภอป่าสักดาบ จังหวัดนครราชสีมา]’. In Collected Articles on Beliefs and Rituals: Local Knowledge of Thai-Tai Villagers [ความเชื่อและพิธีกรรม: วัฒนธรรมชนเผ่าไท-ไท], Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai Province’s Cultural Centre and Ratchapat Institute’s Cultural Centre, 1994, pp. 1–17.


8. Lillian Johnson Curtis, The Laos of North Siam, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1903, pp. 146–147. The Siamese in the nineteenth century called today’s northern Thai people ‘Lao phung dam (black bellied Lao)’ in contrast to the ‘Lao phung khao (white bellied Lao)’, Lao people in today’s Northeast Thailand and Laos, who were not tattooed. Even today, one can find in the Nyuan villages that most of the men over sixty have been tattooed from near the thigh up to the waist.


11. Of the two temples in Ban Pa Laeo, one is in the upper, apparently older village and one in the lower village. The former is Wat Aphaikhiri, where Khuba Wong stayed, and the latter is Wat Pa Laeo.


13. ‘In the Laos country [north of latitude 17 40’ on the way to Nan]’, a British traveller in the 1890s recognized that ‘[a]s not in Siam’ a novice ‘often goes out with his superiors into the jungle, with robe tucked up, to hew wood or do other work for the
support of the wat [monastery temple]’. H. Warington Smyth, *Exploring for Gemstones on the Upper Mekong: Northern Siam and Parts of Laos in the Years 1892–1893*, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998 [1895], p. 9. In view of such a tradition of physical labour among the monastery people under the regional Buddhism, Khuba Wong’s craftsmanship as was evident in his works may not need to be considered as necessarily exceptional.


16. 1 man was equivalent to 60 baht in 1951. According to another informant (aged 80, from Ban Nala), 1 man was equal to 80 baht around 1953. He carried 40–50 man when he went to Nan. He made the money by selling oxen (10 man each) and a water buffalo (20 man). His last journey was performed in 1972.

17. This person, Nan Thi, died in 1989 at the age of 82. But his 56 year old and 50 year old daughters still live in the same place of Ban Klangthi, Tambon Fai Kaeo, Subdistrict Phuphiang, Nan Province, and the elder daughter remembers that ten Xayabury people including her uncle and his younger sister visited her father in 1954 [as she said]. According to her, her father helped them buy things such as ploughs and spades, because they were not very good at speaking the local tongue. Author’s interview, 23 December 1997.

18. Cooking and eating utensils were purchased in the town of Xayabury. Although Nan was famous for salt mines, they did not look for salt there, since it was available at Thadua, where boats coming from Vientiane had delivered it. The people of Nan themselves used to frequent the Nyuan villages as peddlers. Some say that every year four to five Nan peddlers come. Things they brought included clothing, long sabres, axes for felling trees, foreign-made tobacco boxes, paper umbrellas, etc. The villagers paid money to buy them.

19. They sold their rice grown in dry fields (khao hai), which used to be well-known as ‘Nala rice’ in Xayabury. There today, the rice of Mueang Phiang is more plentiful.

20. They are called ‘Lao Mai’ or New Lao nowadays. According to the National Census of 1995 of the LPDR, Phai (Phrai) is classified in the same group as Lawa, represented by Thin. See State Planning Committee, *Lao Census 1995 Country Report*.

21. The local people of Ban Sop Mang still remember that the ‘Lao’ people, when they came by, stayed for only one night at the village headman’s house.

22. In Ban Pa Laeo, I am told that the people from Xayabury lodged in the temple.

23. ‘X’ [A family composed of an 84 year old father, a 67 year old mother and a daughter aged 40, Ban Nalaeng Noi]. The mother’s father was a ‘Thai Mueang Nan’, who came to sell clothing and settled in Ban Nala as a farmer. Her elder brother married in Nan and returned when his wife died. The relationship with his wife’s relatives in Ban Sop Nyang in Nan still continued, and the news of his death in 1997 was just conveyed here by people who visited them to attend a festival.

‘X’ [A sister aged 70 and a brother aged 68, Ban Wanghin]. There used to be many Nan people who got married and settled in their village.

24. ‘X’ [A male villager aged 78, Ban Nakhun]. He used to go to Luang Phrabang
Once or twice a year. On the occasion of the parade festival \textit{(bun hae)}, he went with a group of four or five friends. In addition to parades, he saw \textit{like} and the Ramayana plays and dancing festivals there.

25. The Nyuan (Yuan) script is called \textit{tua mueang} in Northern Thailand today. It supposedly derived originally from Mon Tham (dhamma) script and was adapted by the Yuan for their own dialect. It spread to Northeast Thailand, Laos, Northeast Burma and to the Sip Song Panna area in Southwest China, and developed into local variants, all with quite similar systems of writing. Those variants altogether can be called Tham script, and cultural similarities have been observed within an extended area where the variants of Tham script have been used, as does Hans Penth when he speaks of the ‘Culture of the Region of the Dhamma Letters’. Hans Penth, \textit{A Brief History of Lan Na: Civilizations of North Thailand}, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994, p. 13.

26. To try to answer this question by studying these Nyuan manuscripts, I conducted interviews with the Nyuan elderly villagers in Khet Nala (from 19 December 1996 to 12 January 1997). Inquiries into the palm-leaf manuscripts and surrounding matters readily revealed that there used to be constant traffic between those villages in upper Laos and their counterparts in northern Thailand, and in particular with Nan province. In order to ascertain and supplement the information obtained from the villagers concerning the relationship with Nan, subsequent research was carried out in Nan province of Thailand in December 1997. An additional visit was made to Xayabury in January 1998.

27. ‘X’ [Aged 64, Ban Nakhun]. He was the abbot of Wat Nalaeng from 1965 to 1969. According to him, it was customary to borrow palm-leaf manuscripts from other temples when a desired text was not found at one’s own temple, and to return them when the copying was finished. As for the palm-leaves, they were sold in bundles as writing material in the markets of Luang Phrabang. In the 1960s, the price was 10 \textit{kip} for 100 leaves. Incidentally, this person is responsible for the many small Buddhist images that are found in the temples in Ket Nala today. He sculpted, painted and wrote in Nyuan script, and dedicated his works to the temples as meritorious acts.


29. Year 1284 of the Lesser Era.

30. ‘X’ [A practitioner of traditional Nyuan medicine, aged 66, Ban Nala]. He has been to Kok Wan and Na Tang to sell his medicine. He had heard from his parents that they were Nyuan villages. Author’s interview of 9 January 1997.


32. National Archives, Prime Minister’s Secretariat Papers, SR.0201.35/30.

33. NA, Ministry of Interior Papers, 5.10/393.

34. ‘X’ [Aged 68]. He wants to maintain his anonymity. Author’s interview of 27 December 1997.

35. Only five students, including both Mr Xaignawut and the said person in Nan, out of more than 200, went on to study in Paklay.

36. See Ratanaphorn Sethakul, \textit{The Lue in Nan Province}, Chiang Mai: Payap Research and Development Institute, 1995, pp. 21–22. Ban Sop Yang is one of the fifty-eight Lue villages listed for Nan Province and originating from Muang Yong.

38. ‘X’ [A male villager, ex-monk and ex-Tasaeng, aged 66, Ban Nala].
39. They possess cassette tapes of Coi and So songs recorded in Chiang Mai.
40. A typical example is a regular statement about the number of the temple drums (kong). They say that the Lao have one, the Lue three and the Nyuan four. The kong puca of the Nyuan is always accompanied by three small drums (kong top or kong tup).
42. Keyes, ‘Who are the Lue?’ , p. 9.
44. Keyes, ‘Who are the Lue?’, pp. 46–49.

PETER KORET

Dedicated to the memory of Achan Thongkhan

Whereas typically a study of a poem would begin with a summary of what is known about the work, an examination of *Luep Phasun* and its twentieth-century interpretation can more profitably be introduced by a summary of what is not. The most serious gap in our knowledge of the poem, a matter which has remained a topic of heated debate for the past half century, is: What does it mean? If we are to examine previous studies of *Luep Phasun*, we are faced with a wide and varied menu from which to choose an interpretation. We could conclude, for example, that it serves as the heartfelt ramblings of a romantic forlorn and forsaken in love, cryptic teachings concerning the deeper philosophical points of the Buddhist dharma or political statements of coded subversion, in which ancestors of the Lao eloquently expressed their sense of self-identity as a highly civilized and fiercely prideful people, willing to sacrifice anything and everything to maintain the independence of their historical nation-state.

In addition to our ignorance of the meaning of *Luep Phasun*, we must also recognize our lack of understanding concerning even the most basic facts surrounding the composition of the work. We do not know with any certainty, for example, the meaning of its name, the identity of its author, the date of its composition or even what exactly constitutes its content. One might initially imagine that such fundamental gaps in our knowledge of the verse would intimidate all but the most determined researcher.

However, the truth is exactly the opposite. The very ambiguity of the poem – and the difficulty of espousing one definite interpretation – has proved the single major factor behind the popularity of its interpretation. *Luep Phasun* can be described as a looking glass. Through creative skills in its interpretation,
the poem can represent just about anything to just about anybody. These creative skills are encouraged and even forced upon the interpreter by the interactive quality of the poem itself, which can only take on literal meaning through the non-literal interpretation of its audience. In analyzing the poem’s interpretation, therefore, what is important is not an understanding of the original meaning of the work, or the circumstances surrounding its composition, but rather a recognition of its lack of any one specific meaning that can be proven definitively, and correspondingly the circumstances surrounding its ‘re-composition’, in which it has been invested with meanings reflective not of the poem itself, but rather the source of its interpretation.

THE TRADITIONAL CONTEXT

It is neither the intention of this chapter to put forward an interpretation of the meaning of *Luep Phasun*, nor to examine the question of whether or not it has one. However, in order to place in perspective the meanings that the verse has come to represent to a modern audience, it is necessary to consider how it was appreciated and understood in a traditional context. Similar to other works of Lao literature, *Luep Phasun* was originally intended for oral presentation. There was not a single fixed version, as text was invariably changed to some extent each time that it was hand copied from one palm-leaf manuscript onto the next. The poem was either read from a palm leaf-text, or else passages were memorized (and occasionally improvised upon) as either a part of the oral entertainment of Mo Lam, or as poetic speech commonly used in romantic exchange between young men and women. In contrast, in its modern usage, *Luep Phasun* has taken on a single fixed content and is read from printed text rather than consumed aurally. Whereas in the past a primary factor in the consumption of the poem was entertainment, at present *Luep Phasun* is read not for the purpose of enjoyment, but rather as fodder for interpretation for the higher goal of making a statement, generally political in nature.

From a variety of sources, we can trace the context in which *Luep Phasun* has been performed through the early decades of the twentieth century. From all available evidence, *Luep Phasun* was highly regarded and an influential work within certain circles. Knowledge and memorization of passages from the poem were considered part of the essential training of aspiring Mo Lam performers in certain areas. One form of Mo Lam, known as *Lam Som*, was inspired by the poem, which served as the source for much of the content of its music. At the same time, however, inventories of manuscripts reveal that *Luep Phasun* had a very narrow range of circulation. The limited distribution of the poem is confirmed through interviews, which show that the work was much less well known than popular works of Lao poetry such as *Sang Sinsai*, *Kalaket*, etc. Based upon interviews conducted with people who performed and/or
attended performances of *Luep Phasun* in the early to mid-twentieth century, the poetry was almost entirely understood in a romantic context. A very small minority of those interviewed attributed a Buddhist philosophical content to the poem. According to one informant, the obscurity and cryptic nature of the poem’s content reflects the context in which it was performed. A popular form of entertainment was the sparring of wits between male and female contestants, whom speaking solely in poetic form, would present and spontaneously answer riddles concerning both worldly matters and religious concerns. *Luep Phasun*, therefore, with the cryptic nature of its content, was intended as source material for such performances.

In the mid-twentieth century, traditional Lao literature began a period of rapid decline. Similar to many other aspects of Lao culture, the decline of literature is explainable in terms of the modernization of the region as a result of increasing social and political contact with foreign powers.8 Ironically, however, the very forces that brought about the rapid decline of the literary tradition caused certain works within that tradition to be reborn, and in rebirth to gain a far greater significance than they had within the social context in which they were originally composed. Reborn in the service of modern objectives, these works were subsequently to undergo a significant transformation both in the context in which they were used and the meanings they were to convey. *Luep Phasun* is a primary example.

**LITERARY INTERPRETATION AS SEEN FROM A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The significance of *Luep Phasun* during the past half-century can be understood within the larger framework of regional politics. A comparison of literary studies produced by Thai and Lao academics illustrates the importance of traditional Lao literature as a symbol with which to construct contesting versions of the past in order to legitimize conflicting views of the present. Whereas Lao academics have made use of the literature (referred to as the ‘Literary Heritage of the Lao’) as a tool with which to portray Laos as a historical nation great in its antiquity and creative genius, their Thai counterparts have portrayed the same tradition (known by a variety of names all of which share the common trait of lack of inclusion of the word ‘Lao’) as highly derivative of the culture of Chiang Mai.9

The role of literary interpretation in establishing (or tearing down) the concept of the Lao people as a ‘race’ and ‘nation’ illustrates the impact of Westernization upon the world view of the people in the region. In analyzing interpretations of *Luep Phasun*, it is easy (and to a certain degree accurate) to explain the seeming idiosyncrasies in their content purely and simply as self-conscious manipulation of the verse for the purpose of tailoring it to fit the
political objectives of its study. At the same time, however, one must similarly consider the extent to which the framework of the interpreters’ thoughts are shaped by their environment. As an audience accustomed to the print media becomes disoriented in attempts to understand a literary tradition primarily oral in its medium, ‘citizens’ in a world of ‘nations’ also face obstacles in coming to terms with a universe in which political allegiance and alliances were of a greatly different nature.

In summarizing the interpretations of Luep Phasun, there are three major schools of thought: romantic, religious, and political. In Thailand, early studies of the poem followed a romantic perspective. Analysis of a more sophisticated nature appeared in the interpretation of subsequent Thai scholars, in which the verse was described as a cryptic discussion of Buddhist philosophical points and an encapsulation of ‘the highest wisdom of traditional Isan society’. It is worthy of note that early Thai scholars of the poem were of Isan origin, and produced their studies within the region itself. The romantic perspective from which they viewed Luep Phasun is similar to that of the traditional understanding of the work within the society in which they lived. In contrast, religious interpreters of the verse reflect more of a Bangkok orientation.

In neighbouring Laos, the interpretation of the poem, at least as it appears in written form, is political in nature. Whereas its analysis is varied according to source, there is one basic underlying interpretation, as summarized in a high school textbook on literature published in Vientiane in 1999: ‘Lao scholars speculate that Luep Phasun was composed during the time of King Chao Anou, when the country had been colonized by Siamese feudalists. Its author composed the poem to secretly incite the Lao people to prepare to liberate their country from the yoke of Siamese feudalist domination’. From the perspective of Lao scholars, therefore, the poem serves as testimony to the war between Chao Anou and Siam in the early nineteenth century, and the resulting devastation of Vientiane. Regardless of political faction, this event is crucial to the Lao both as a building block in the creation of their self-identity as a nation, and in defining their relationship to the neighbouring Thai, explaining contemporary discrepancies in wealth and power. One primary reason behind the significance attached to Luep Phasun is its efficiency as a vehicle with which to revitalize emotions associated to this event, and thereby not allow it to fade from memory. In contrast, the suppression of knowledge of the identical event (and particularly from the perspective put forth by the Lao) has been crucial in equal proportion in the integration of Isan into the larger Thai state. Therefore, in its absolute denial of a political or historical role to the poem, the interpretation of Luep Phasun as religious or romantic verse in Northeast Thailand is every bit as political as the counterpart scholarship on the work that is produced in neighbouring Laos.

In this chapter, my primary focus is the study of Luep Phasun in Laos, where the interpretation and retelling of the poem have taken on a far greater
significance than in neighbouring Thailand. It would be a mistake, however, to consider this work to be a study of Lao as opposed to Thai scholarship. Ironically, but hardly coincidentally, the two most prominent originators and proponents of Luep Phasun as a poetic declaration of Lao nationalism are both of Thai Isan origin. Each migrated to Laos as a result of an awakening of a self-identity as a ‘Lao’ during the period in which the modernization of the region caused the decline of Lao literature in its traditional roles and brought about its rebirth in which it came to tell the story of the present.

The first written interpretation of Luep Phasun was published in the early 1950s by Sila Viravong, a pioneer in the study of Lao history and culture. Whereas the original author of Luep Phasun was highly ambiguous in his statement of the ‘hidden message’ of his composition, Sila is straightforward both in his statements concerning the meaning of the poem and his objectives in its study, the former of which is not surprisingly related to the latter. Initially under the patronage of Prince Phetsarath, Sila used his study of Lao traditions as part of a cultural revival, the objective of which was to establish the Lao as a people whose great and ancient civilization in the past legitimized their status as a nation in the present. Sila’s work during the period of French colonization was intended to provide support to the independence movement. Once independence was granted, it furthered similar goals in building the Lao nation through the creation of a strong sense of patriotism and pride in the Lao people.

If we create a composite picture of the past from Sila’s interpretation of Luep Phasun, we can observe an idealized portrayal of the Lao people and Lao nation as envisioned by its author. The brave and patriotic struggle of Chao Anou is comparable to the Lao movement for independence, based upon a Lao bond of brotherhood as a people who share a common ethnicity, history and culture. In addition, during a period in which the Lao increasingly felt the political and cultural influence of the Thai, the poem kept alive the memory of the past injustice the Lao received at the hands of the Siamese, and their determination to remain a separate and independent nation.

Sila makes use of the following lines from Luep Phasun to show the political content of the poem:

The Garuda bird spreads its wings, concealing the clouds, brilliant in its might.
The moon is dulled, intoxicated, a darkish red. Its light is darkened and concealed. It disappears.

According to Sila, the power and brilliance of Vientiane and the Lao have temporarily been obstructed by the superior military might of Siam. Vientiane is symbolized by the moon, following the translation of Vientiane as ‘City of the Moon’. Siam is represented by the Garuda bird, which historically served as an official insignia of the country.
Sila Viravong, however, went a step further than declaring that the work was a poetic statement advocating resistance to Siamese colonization. He greatly added weight to the poem as a symbol of the Lao love of independence by suggesting that its author was none other than Chao Anou himself. Whatever such an assertion may lack for in evidence is more than made up for by the strength of its appeal to a modern nationalistic consciousness. The influence of Sila’s study can be seen in the statement of one of my informants, who suggested that Luep Phasun should be re-titled: Chak Duang Chai Khong Chao Anu – (Words) from the Heart and Soul of Chao Anou, published with a bright red cover and distributed to every Lao citizen by birthright.

The second major interpreter of Luep Phasun is Somsri Desa, who studied the poem in the early 1970s. Somsri Desa’s interpretation, a forty-two page work composed entirely in poetic form, has been reprinted four times. Two decades after its initial publication, it still could be found in large quantities at the State Bookstore in Vientiane in the late 1990s for 400 kip (or approximately 2 baht) per copy, at a time when the average price for a book was well over five times such a cost. Even at this low price, they still could not get rid of the copies until I bought up most of their stock. The reprinting of the book is indicative of the popularity of the interpretation among a Lao audience, but rather the importance the government attaches to the meaning that Somsri Desa has given to the poem.

The primary distinction between the interpretation of Luep Phasun by Sila Viravong and Somsri Desa lies not in their understanding of its historical context, but rather in the historical circumstances and therefore objectives of their interpretation. Whereas Sila made use of the poem in the creation of a modern nationalist consciousness among the Lao, the purpose of Somsri Desa’s study was to serve the policies of the Lao Patriotic Front during the Lao civil war. Therefore, whereas from Sila’s perspective, Chao Anou’s struggle was comparable to the Lao independence movement and its fight against French imperialism, in the eyes of Somsri Desa, it represented the communist struggle to liberate the country from the Royal Lao government, and its ultimate goal in the creation of a communist Lao society. Somsri Desa’s study of Luep Phasun places special emphasis on sentiments expressed in the poem which bear similarities to the historical situation of Laos at the time of its reinterpretation. For example, there are several scenes that criticize certain groups of people that in the past had been on intimate terms with the author, but at present conspire against him in league with his enemy. The shift in their allegiance is based upon their belief that they will benefit from the enemy’s superior power. For example, the author of Luep Phasun writes:

Why do you not seek out your own lineage/family/name/group?
You go out and prostrate yourself before evil and ignorant people.
Somsri Desa compares these people with the Royal Lao government, which betrays the interests of its people in the hope of lucrative awards to be gained through its collusion with the United States. As Somsri Desa writes in describing these lines, ‘The reactionaries who betray our country are willing to be slaves, and act as if foreigners are superior to their own people’.  

Unfortunately for Somsri Desa, the content of *Luep Phasun* provides one significant obstacle to an interpretation favourable to communism i.e. the author’s consistent use of symbolism related to the inherent greatness of royalty. A major theme of the poem is the struggle of a king to regain his throne, the legitimacy of which is based upon his royal blood and the power of his lineage in the past. This theme is not inconsistent with Sila’s interpretation, in which the contemporary Lao are the inheritors of the great kingdom of Lan Xang. However, in the context of the communist objective to create a classless society and turn the royal palace into a moneymaking museum, the feudalist perspective of the poem’s author is hard to integrate into Somsri Desa’s interpretation of its content. In his explanation of the many riddles of *Luep Phasun*, there is in fact one riddle that Somsri Desa has failed to provide an answer. Somsri Desa agrees with Sila that the author of the poem is either Chao Anou or else one who supported his movement. If this were the case, what then would be the motivation of the author, who is working towards the revival of the Vientiane monarchy, to promote a classless society that is run by farmers and labourers? In responding to the challenge of analyzing data that is contradictory to the objective of his analysis, one of Somsri Desa’s major skills is the simple and clear-cut manner in which he divorces individual imagery from the feudal context of the society in which it originates. For example, there is one passage in *Luep Phasun* in which the author relates a folk tale in which the hero is betrayed by his wife in conspiracy with his closest friend, whom has become his wife’s lover. They conspire to murder him, but through the aid of a celestial deity known as Visukam, he is able to escape. Travelling through mountains and forests, he eventually reaches Sri Satthanak (an historical name for the Kingdom of Vientiane), where he is enthroned as king. When his wife and closest friend learn of his good fortune, they travel to see him in hopes of gaining great wealth through his charity. Although he grants them the gold and silver that they request, before their ambitions can be realized, the earth opens up and they plummet into hell. According to Somsri Desa, the hero in this folk-tale represents the working class. His evil wife refers to ‘the feudalists of the old capitalist system’, seduced by the ‘thief’ i.e. foreign imperialists. Visukam, who has ‘great and overflowing virtue’ symbolizes the leadership of the Lao liberation movement. Whereas Visukam (or ‘Vesukam’) is defined as ‘a deity skilled in every craft’ in Preecha Phinthong’s Isan-Thai-English dictionary, Somsri Desa manoeuvres the word to give it the meaning of ‘labourers’ and ‘skilled craftsmen of great power’. The assistance of Visukam, therefore, represents the author’s belief that the
Lao working class will achieve ultimate success in their creation of a modern technologically advanced Lao society. The journey of the hero through mountains and forests symbolizes the great obstacles through which the Lao masses must pass before the attainment of their victory. In describing the kingdom in which the hero is eventually enthroned, the traditional name ‘Si Satthanak’ is used by the author not merely as an historical reference to the kingdom of Vientiane in the past, but also to serve as a symbol of an independent, dignified and highly civilized Laos in the future, a meaning derived from the mythical glory that is attached to the name. According to Somsri Desa’s interpretation, the end of the story ‘emphasizes’ the fact that the capitalist feudalists and the ‘old royal system and way of thinking’ will collapse into the earth and ‘not return for an incalculable number of years’. The capitalist imperialists together with the feudalists will ‘leave the earth’ once the secret of Luep Phasun has been revealed. Whereas Somsri Desa’s conclusion of the tale is that the royal system is thoroughly eliminated, the story itself ends with the destruction of the king’s enemies.

Today, studies of Luep Phasun in Laos remain highly derivative of the works of Sila Viravong and Somsri Desa. Whereas the interpretation of Luep Phasun as a coded message of Chao Anou’s struggle is self-admittedly speculation, it is accepted ‘unanimously’ by Lao scholars, and is the sole version that is expounded in books published in Laos and in curriculum taught in Lao schools. As the actual text of Luep Phasun is largely incomprehensible to a modern audience, the key to the secret of its meaning is effectively controlled by the ‘unanimous’ Lao scholars whose ‘speculation’ of the poem is made in the service of the political agenda of the Lao government. The extent to which the official interpretation has shaped the contemporary Lao understanding of the poem can be seen in the comments of a teenager in Vientiane, who, when asked about the origin of the verse, stated: ‘It was written after the World War II by a great revolutionary leader in resistance to the Americans in their imperialist war’.

At the same time, however, there is only a certain extent to which the Lao government can control the meaning of symbolism in a poem as ambiguous as Luep Phasun. As the interpretation of the poem serves an important role as a vehicle with which to express the realities of the present, the meaning that it is given cannot help but change with time. In recent years, one can observe the emergence and development of an alternative interpretation of the poem, the role of which has shifted from the expression of the aims and aspirations of the Lao government to a critique of its actions. The earliest example that I have found which contests the official interpretation is a tape produced by a Lao band in the United States from the mid 1980s entitled Luep Bo Sun, in which imagery from the poem is interpreted as the unwavering determination of the Lao people to free their country from its repressive communist masters. Similar interpretation is also not uncommonly found within Laos itself. When I asked
one informant to explain the content of *Luep Phasun*, he echoed the official interpretation that the poem served as a coded message by Chao Anou, which he immediately proceeded to compare to the current state of the country in which the government denies its people adequate freedom of expression. The opening line of the poem, as follows, has similarly inspired alternate interpretations:

> The name of this verse is: Penetrating through the earth, seizing the royal arms and grasping them together.

In its commonly accepted interpretation in Laos, the line serves as a statement of Chao Anou’s determination to free his country from the yoke of Siamese oppression. According to one informant, however, the same line can refer to the destruction of the Lao monarchy by the present regime.

In addition to serving as a vehicle with which to present criticism of the Lao government, literary analysis, under the right circumstances, can also create an environment that triggers its expression. In one incident, for example, the interpretation of ambiguous imagery within *Luep Phasun* served as a stimulus which encouraged an informant to express openly opinions of a political nature which he would not have felt comfortable enough to state on his own without the shield of the poem. I had known this particular informant for many years, and on no occasion had I ever heard him state a comment that in any way could be considered critical of the government. During our discussions of *Luep Phasun*, I had him read a version of one of its sections that was published in France. Whereas the ambiguity of its imagery largely prevented a clear-cut interpretation, certain symbols strongly suggested to the informant that the poem was fairly recent in origin, composed following the literary conventions of *Luep Phasun* for the purpose of criticizing the current regime in Laos. One image that was particularly influential in convincing the informant of the political nature of the poem was a three-headed elephant, an official symbol of the Royal Lao government.

In the interpretation of *Luep Phasun*, the chief difficulty is in establishing the perspective from which the poem is to be understood. Once the perspective has been decided upon, it is somewhat less difficult to make all of the pieces fall into place. Therefore, once the informant had concluded that the poem was subversive in content (an assessment that appeared to be entirely genuine on his part), he set about the process of explaining the relevant meaning of each of the poem’s individual images. At first, he appeared somewhat reluctant to do this, and laughed frequently, obviously uncomfortable in the role of explaining criticism of the Lao government. However, there were two factors that allowed him to continue. First, he was being paid for his work and he felt obligated to interpret the poem to the best of his ability. Second, and more importantly, he could not be held responsible for such subversive views, as he
was in no way expressing his own opinion, but merely making use of his considerable knowledge to explain the literary heritage of Laos to a foreigner. His interpretation is worthy of note in two aspects. First, one could clearly see both the increasing confidence with which he attacked policies of his government, and the satisfaction that he began to derive from doing so. His laughter changed from an embarrassed tone to a tone far more sarcastic in nature. Secondly, whereas his original assessment that there was a political objective behind the composition of the poem would appear to be fairly reasonable as speculation based upon imagery found in its content, his detailed interpretation of individual lines as symbolic criticism of the Lao regime was far more subjective in nature. During our discussions, I learned far more concerning the informant’s perspective on Lao government policies than the nature of individual images within the poem and how they conformed to the meaning to which he attributed them. After several days of such interpretation, I found convincing evidence to indicate that the poem had been composed earlier than the date speculated by the informant, which totally invalidated his interpretation. From the moment that the informant learned of the earlier date of the composition, his political commentary came to an abrupt end, never to resume.

LITERARY INTERPRETATION AS SEEN FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

As illustrated in the previous section, the wide range of conclusions found in the study of Luep Phasun are explainable in terms of the political and historical circumstances of their source. However, when we further examine how data is processed in the drawing of such conclusions, we observe a second major factor fundamental in the shaping of the poem’s comprehension, which is cultural rather than political in nature.

My original objective in reading literary interpretations of Luep Phasun was to gain an understanding into the meaning of the poem and the historical circumstances behind its composition. However, as a result of the great extent of variation between individual interpretations, my research interest broadened to the investigation of the meaning and historical circumstances surrounding its study. In a similar manner, when I initially set about to make a detailed study of the various interpretations of the poem in order to understand the reasons behind their variation, what became increasingly obvious was the similarity between works, not in their conclusions, but rather in how such conclusions had been drawn.

During my reading of the various studies of Luep Phasun, I came across a number of unusual aspects concerning the methods by which data in the poem was analyzed, which I initially assumed to be idiosyncrasies on the part of its
individual interpreters. However, I soon realized that such characteristics were, with few exceptions, shared by all of the interpreters, and were in fact unwritten conventions in the study of the poem. I came to realize that the primary obstacles to my understanding of the interpretations of *Luep Phasun* were my own preconceptions concerning what exactly it is that constitutes literary analysis, and the assumption that there are a set of principles in the study of literature that are universal in their application. The question needs to be asked: what does literary interpretation mean to the Lao, what are its objectives and by what rules or conventions is it practiced?

As illustrated by the examples in the following section, *Luep Phasun* is not viewed by its interpreters as a fixed and unchangeable body of text, the meaning of which needs to be uncovered through a rigorous and objective process of investigation. The poem is more appropriately comparable to a set of building blocks. Its meaning is not to be uncovered, but rather put together through a creative act of construction. To further the analogy, once the building blocks have been purchased, their ultimate shape is no longer in the hands of their producer, nor are his personal opinions concerning what they should or should not be used to build of any relevance in the eyes of their new owners. In similar fashion, the role of the interpreter is essentially creative rather than analytical in nature. When viewed as a creative act, it is not surprising that the two major interpreters in Laos both have considerable background as poets, and Somsri Desa’s work (the largest and most comprehensive study of the poem) is composed itself in the form of a verse.30

In order to understand the creative approach to the interpretation of *Luep Phasun*, it is necessary to consider the language in which it is composed, and its effect upon both the composition and comprehension of the work. The Lao language largely consists of monosyllabic words which possess more than a single meaning. In order to understand the relevant meaning of a given word, it must be considered within the larger context in which it occurs. In poetic language, which tends to be less precise than prose (as is especially evident in a work such as *Luep Phasun*), the audience has greater rights and responsibilities in the way in which words are assigned a specific meaning. The following is one of many examples in which the author plays upon the variable meanings of an individual word, making the audience the ultimate arbiter of the definition of the word and thereby the passage in which it occurs.

(First Line: Version A) Every group continuously thinks about and desires to govern (over the throne).
(First Line: Version B) Every group continually thinks of and desires to possess, hug, and take care of (their beloved),
Missing the throne of Indra, where they slept and loved
With the greatest of enjoyment. The wind swayed,
Recalling the past with a sad and uneasy heart. Missing the channel of the ocean current.
We miss the radiant woman. She cannot be separated from our heart.31

The political or romantic interpretation that one gives to the initial line depends upon the meaning that is assigned to two parallel words (khong and tum), which occur as part of the following parallel pair of which its second hemistich is comprised:

To wish to khong / To miss tum-ing

The words khong and tum can be defined as either a) ‘to possess/protect/hug/cuddle’, which gives the line its romantic level of meaning or b) ‘to govern/protect’, in which case the line becomes a political statement.32 On a romantic level, the first and final line of the poem can be seen as the author’s expression of his love and desire for a woman. However, if the poem is viewed as a statement concerning the struggle of Chao Anou, the passage is both a declaration of a desire for the independence of Vientiane and an idealized statement concerning life on the throne prior to the Siamese invasion. Similar to the previously mentioned example of an informant who used literary interpretation as a shield with which to criticize the government, the author of Luep Phasun (if one accepts the political interpretation of the poem) can be seen to be making a subversive statement for which he cannot be held accountable. The responsibility for its meaning lies in the comprehension of its audience.

In the interpretation of individual words within a Lao poem, one must take into account not only their meaning when they occur independently, but also their expanded range of definition within the context of larger compound words. For example, the word mae (‘mother’) may be interpreted to mean ‘river’ (as part of mae nam), ‘woman’ (as part of mae nying), etc. Consider its use in the following passage:

I invite you, mae, to come and assist in polishing the gem in the royal Thammarong ring to give it great brilliance.
If aided by our past store of merit, is it not possible that its light will not shine throughout the land?33

In order to interpret the above passage, it is necessary to understand the identity of the mae (‘mother’), whom the author desires to polish the gem. Throughout Luep Phasun, the author continually makes use of the image of ‘woman/young woman/beautiful woman’ in reference to the audience of the poem, a convention commonly found in much of Lao literature. In context, therefore, mae should be understood as an abbreviation of mae nying (woman).
However, according to Somsri Desa, the word mae in this passage is derived from the larger compound mae thap (army commander). As a result, the passage serves as a statement of the author’s intention to have his armed forces purify Vientiane (i.e. the gem) through the destruction of its enemies.  

In the following example, we can see an increasing level of creativity in the way in which individual words are defined in order to determine the overall meaning of a passage.

When the teacher explains the Pali Sandhi, referring to (the rules) in the Sutra. When he reaches the eight vowels, ‘E’ through ‘A’. The initial row of vowels, which are close to one another. The consonants provide support and refuge to the vowels; Combine them with the vowels in order to produce a sound.

Viewed on a superficial level, the above lines serve as a description of the teaching of the Pali language. According to Somsri Desa, however, the syllables ‘E’ and ‘A’ (vowels in the Pali language) should be understood as abbreviations for the words ekarat (freedom) and athibadai (sovereignty), of which they serve as the initial letter. Therefore, the passage is a coded description of the struggle of Chao Anou to achieve the independence of his kingdom.

Whereas the above examples illustrate the creative approach with which interpreters construct meaning in *Luep Phasun*, they also show that such an approach is grounded both in the nature of the poem that is the subject of their study and the Lao language itself. For example, although it may be hard to justify Somsri Desa’s interpretation of Pali vowels as representations of twentieth-century political concepts, it would similarly be difficult to defend an interpretation of the passage as solely a description of Pali teaching, which would be irrelevant in the context of the poem in which it occurs. Therefore, although one can be too extreme in one’s interpretation of the poem and thereby distort its meaning, one can also be too literal, and correspondingly deny it any meaning at all.

In addition to making use of a broad range of meanings in the definitions of individual words, there interpreters tend to change words within the poem that provide obstacles to their interpretation of its content. Consider, for example, the following passage:

The name of this verse is: Penetrating through the earth, seizing the royal arms and grasping them together. Leaning against Mount Meru, grasping onto it in a covetous and deceptive manner. The mountain is unsteadied/broken/torn apart. Shaken to its very core. Its kakap is scattered. The stones in the mountain collapse and tumble down, nyong.
The word *kakap* in the third line is of uncertain meaning. Somsri Desa solves the problem simply by changing the word to *akat* (‘space’). The meaning of the word *nyong*, which is the final syllable of the final line, is similarly unclear in context. One informant gives it the meaning ‘because’ by changing its final consonant from ‘ng’ to ‘ny’. The stones in the mountain scatter ‘because’ the mountain has been destroyed.

Besides altering words to clarify their meaning, vocabulary is also changed in order to make a particular passage conform to the understanding of its interpreter. Consider, for example, the following line from the second section of the poem:

Whoever says that they will turn over the earth, I will reach its innermost depths.

One informant stated that the initial word should be altered from ‘whoever’ (*phai*) to ‘I’ (*khoi*), which would change the overall meaning of the line to: ‘I will turn over the earth in order to reach (my objective)’. When the informant was asked his justification in changing the content of the poem, he answered that the work was originally composed in coded fashion, and therefore he was merely breaking through the code in order to restore its original meaning.

In the following example, we can observe how syllables within a line are changed in order to make the poem fit the political understanding of its interpreter. Compare the following two versions of line twenty-six of *Bang Lahat* (the second section of the poem): Version A (the common version) and Version B (as it appears in the Ubon version, transcribed by Achan Bunchuem). (In order to appreciate the similarities between lines, the original Lao is transcribed, and identical syllables or part of syllables are in bold print.)

**Version A:** See this (world of) Samsara, many branches conceal leaves.
(Lao: *hen haeng song san ni* *lai pai son nga*)

**Version B:** (I) see the opportunity to take this verse to cut down the tree and (all of its) branches.
(Lao: *hen haeng ao san ni* *tat lam thon nga*)

It is probable that Version B was altered from Version A, which is the more common rendition of the line. On one level, the difference between the two lines consists merely of minor changes in phrasing. Five out of a total of nine syllables in line B are identical to Line A and a sixth differs only in its initial consonant. At the same time, however, such minor alterations result in a total transformation of the line’s meaning. Whereas in Version A the line serves as religious commentary, Version B is a particularly candid statement (both to my informants and myself) of the author’s intention to use his poem to destroy his enemy, which conforms to A. Bunchuem’s political understanding of the
verse. However, it is uncertain as to whether the alterations were added in his transcription or existed in the palm-leaf manuscript from which he based his work.

In addition to the alteration of individual words, interpreters also occasionally add additional lines, which conform to the meaning that they have assigned to the poem as a whole. Somsri Desa, in his published interpretation, adds two lines that immediately follow the fourth line.

The dragons seize the Nagas, hold them in their mouths, and chew them.
The small siw fish are eaten with enjoyment by the clams and shrimp.

The imagery in these lines conforms to Somsri Desa’s overall interpretation of the passage that the Lao are destroyed by the stronger Siamese forces. As explained by Somsri Desa, the shrimp and clams are comparable to the neighbouring Lao kingdoms, which although small in size, are in a position to take advantage of the Siamese invasion of Vientiane to further their own interests. Although the above lines may be useful to their interpreter in the emphasis that they place on the political content of Luep Phasun, they are of questionable use in the interpretation of its content, as they cannot found in any of the versions of the poem that I have encountered, including Sila’s transcription, which is the source of Somsri Desa’s interpretation.

On a larger level, a fundamental outlet for the creative urges of the interpreter of Luep Phasun lies in the interpretation of the ‘vocabulary’ of symbolism that makes up its content. In order to breathe life into the verse, each of its symbols, however obscure, must be assigned a particular meaning. Both the ambiguity of the poem’s imagery and the author’s intentional play on the multiple meaning of words and phrases encourage a flexible approach to the study of symbolism. Consider the arbitrary way in which symbolism is interpreted in the following example:

Now you have come to grasp the neck of a civet cat, and the red gums that border on its tongue.
Why do you have such strong feelings of indigence stuck in your throat?

Two alternate explanations of the passage are provided by Lao informants as follows:
1) ‘To grasp the neck of the civet’ is to ‘grasp the reality of the situation’. The tongue symbolizes the smooth words of the King of Luang Phrabang who promised to come to the aid of Chao Anou. However, the red gums, which border the tongue, symbolize his heart and mind, which are deceitful. Chao Anou only becomes aware of the discrepancy between the two during the war with Siam.
2) ‘To grasp the neck of the civet’ refers to Chao Anou’s attempts to bring
together the ‘Lao kingdoms’ in the struggle against Siam. Unfortunately, in attempting to organize the struggle, it is easy for word of the secret to be revealed to the enemy by the royalty of Luang Phrabang (as symbolized by the red gums bordered by the tongue).

In order to make sense of the symbolism in Luep Phasun, an essential skill is the ability to analyse the smaller units of which it is comprised, such as words, phrases and poetic lines, which we have examined earlier in this section. Consider the following example:

Comparable to a mother elephant great in its immensity. One must increase one’s contemplation of the matter.

One must add further content in order to serve as an axe that splits the mountain.

Stones are piled up and mixed together. They are dispersed, pulverized, and pried apart to the point that one can see the bare ground.47

The above lines are interpreted by Lao informants as follows:

1) If the kingdoms of Luang Phrabang and/or Champasak unite with Vientiane, their potential for the destruction of Siamese power in their region will be greater than if each of them stand on their own. Elephants (which symbolize royalty) are great in and of themselves, but they ‘must be increased in number’ (i.e. their ‘content must be added’, as stated in the second line) to have sufficient strength in order to be successful in their struggle.

2) According to one informant, the tone marker of the word kho (point/question/articulation) in the second line should be changed from falling to rising, changing the meaning of the syllable to: ‘elephant goad’. The elephant must be whipped with increased strength in order to compel it to cause great destruction. Following this definition, the line is interpreted to mean that Lao rulers must act in a dictatorial fashion in order to compel their people to serve as soldiers in the war against the Siamese.

3) A third informant explained that the author was playing with two different meanings of the word san (in the initial line), which can be translated either as a) elephant, or b) verse/message, which in context refers to the poetic composition of Luep Phasun. The poem that the author is writing is comparable to elephants in that they a) are of high value, b) have royal connotations, and c) are of great strength and intensity. According to the informant, the author originally intended to write the poem in a subtle manner and reveal few of his intentions behind the composition of his verse. He wished to make the poem ‘enjoyable to read and full of quality similar to elephants’. However, as time passed, he increasingly felt the need to be more forceful and write truthfully without regard for the consequences. In explaining the meaning of the phrase khwan pha phu pha (‘an axe to split the mountain’) in the third line (which is typically interpreted as the need for violence), the informant stated that it should be understood in relationship to the similar phrase khwan pha sak (‘an axe
cutting a carcass’), an expression used to mean ‘to speak bluntly without regard for other people’s feelings’. In the same line, the word khau (point/question/articulation) in the initial hemistich is interpreted as an abbreviated form of khau khwam (‘content/article’). The line therefore reads: ‘One must increase the content (of the poem) so that it is exceedingly blunt’. The informant explained that the author, who originally wrote to be understood exclusively by ‘Lao intellectuals’, subsequently became aware of the need to reach out to the entire Lao population.

In the study of Luep Phasun, one commonly observes a tendency in interpreters not merely to draw major conclusions based upon evidence that is often quite fragmentary in nature, but also to develop a ‘blind spot’ and continually ignore evidence that does not support the conclusion that they have already drawn. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Many are the types of trees that are in the forest.
But I cannot find a single fragrant sandalwood.
Many are the people that comprise the village.
But there are none that touch my heart.48

On a romantic level, these lines state that the author has not found anyone that he believes to be worthy of his love. It is with this meaning that this passage is used outside of the poem as phanya (i.e. oral poetry traditionally used in courtship). Despite the obvious layer of romance, one Lao informant stated that the failure of the published Thai transcription of Luep Phasun to include a translation of any of the vocabulary from these lines was evidence of the transcriber’s attempt to ‘cover up’ the political content of the verse.49

At the same time, however, whereas an interpreter’s faith in the validity of his interpretations may appear to be as strong and unshakable as his evidence is fragmentary, a second characteristic commonly found in the study of Luep Phasun is the readiness with which individual interpreters change their interpretations over the course of time. Whereas interpretation is presented as a statement of truth, it is a truth that changes. For example, I met with one informant, A. Thongkhan, at six-month or yearly intervals for a number of years. On each visit, I would make a point of asking him for an explanation of one or more of the passages that he had previously provided me with an interpretation. He would inevitably forget his previous interpretations and present an entirely new reading of the identical symbol. However, as he never wavered from his belief that Luep Phasun was a statement concerning the political objectives of Chao Anou, each interpretation fit with his understanding of the overall verse. When confronted with the continual change in his interpretation, he thought the matter humorous, but did not find it necessary to defend the validity of his consistently changing approach. During my interviews with Somsri Desa, his interpretation of individual imagery had changed
considerably since the publication of his book several decades earlier. His overall approach to the poem had become far more religious in nature, which one might speculate to be the result of the advanced age of the interpreter, and the change in the political situation in Laos.

In discussing *Luep Phasun* separately with two major Thai scholars of Isan literature, A. Suphon Somchitsipannya and A. Sri Sarakham (the latter of whom had published a transcription of *Luep Phasun*), both initially expressed their understanding of the poem as a work of romantic verse. At first, when I explained the political perspective of the Lao, they each stated their disbelief in similar terms, dismissing it to be propaganda fostered by the Lao government. However, after showing them two lines of the poem and explaining the Lao interpretation, both shifted their view without the slightest hesitation, and stated that such an approach to *Luep Phasun* appeared entirely logical. After hearing the interpretation of the above two lines, with no prompting, A. Sri Sarakham immediately began to explain a wide variety of passages in the context of the war between Vientiane and Siam as if he had interpreted the poem from a political perspective throughout his entire career. It is worthy of note that although both of the Thai scholars had taught and/or written about *Luep Phasun* from a romantic perspective for years or even decades, on the basis of an explanation of two lines within the course of a few minutes, the perspective that they expressed of the poem went through an absolute shift. This does not imply that they would continue to view the poem from a political perspective or express such a view once our conversation had ended. However, it does illustrate the fact that different layers of interpretations can easily be ‘tried on for size’ or discarded once one is either made aware of their existence or given an opportunity for their expression.

AN OLD APPROACH TO A NEW SUBJECT: DOES CONTEMPORARY LAO LITERARY ANALYSIS FOLLOW TRADITIONAL CONVENTIONS OF LAO FICTION?

As illustrated in the first section of this chapter, not only are the concerns of the present a primary factor in how the past is deliberately presented and packaged in contemporary Lao society, but also unintentionally in how it has come to be perceived. At the same time, however, one cannot deny that the Lao past continues to exert a strong influence on its present, particularly in the way in which modern cultural practices of foreign origin are assimilated into the Lao consciousness. On one level, contemporary literary criticism in Laos is a direct product of modernization. Superficially, the style of its presentation and method of approach are modelled on the counterpart academic tradition of the West. At the same time, however, the data collected in the second section of this chapter indicate that the spread of western political concepts and/or
literary conventions cannot be seen as the sole or primary factor in determining the shape and logic of literary analysis in Laos. The study of literature in Laos needs to be understood not exclusively in relationship to Western influence of twentieth-century origin, but also in terms of the patterns of literary consumption that date back in mainland Southeast Asia for several centuries.

It would be erroneous to say that people in mainland Southeast Asia did not analyze or interpret literature prior to cultural contact with the West. In comparison with modern readers of printed books, a traditional Lao audience in many ways played a more active and creative role both in seeking out meaning in individual literary works, and adapting them to efficiently fulfill the needs of the society in which they were utilized. The role of the audience in the creation of meaning in literature can largely be explained in the context of the medium in which literary works were originally composed. However, as Lao literary interpretation in traditional society differed substantially in its objectives and therefore content from the modern study of literature, it has not been recognized as a form of literary analysis by contemporary scholars. Effectively rendered invisible, it has almost entirely been ignored as a subject of study.

A popular label for traditional literature in Laos is nangsue nangha, which has been interpreted by several informants to mean ‘books of search’. On one level, as a result of the medium, there were many obstacles faced in the comprehension of literature. Overcoming this problem required not only a deep knowledge of religion, culture and specific conventions of the literature, but also the ability to selectively change its content to preserve its meaning and to increase the efficiency in which it was communicated. One literary convention that is commonly found in Lao literature is a formalized appeal for the transcriber to make use of his creativity and wisdom in order to expand and improve upon pre-existing works.

The creative role of the transcriber went hand in hand with the anonymous nature of the literary tradition itself. There was no concept that a work was composed by a single author or that it could be claimed to be the intellectual property of a given individual. When I asked about the authorship of a literary work in Savannakhet province, I was informed that it was ridiculous to think that a creation of such complexity, wisdom and beauty could have been the work of a single composer. I was told that literature must be understood as a collective work of many generations. It is common to find the names of transcribers, and people who have paid or contributed materials towards the transcription of a manuscript, followed by requests to be rewarded with great merit, millenniums in heaven spent with a host of angels, beautiful young wives, etc. In contrast, it is far rarer to encounter a literary work that includes the name of an author. It is apparently easier to claim credit for the physical act of transcription than the artistic act of creation. The hesitancy to claim credit for authorship can be explained both in the nature of the literature and the
cultural context in which it was composed. First, in a literary tradition in which individual works are frequently derived from oral folk stories, and make generous use of stock conventions, motifs and themes in the construction of plot, it is hard to make a valid claim to the ownership of a specific tale. Second, the significance and sacred quality attached to the literature is based to no small degree on the fact that its origins cannot be traced to a single mortal being of flesh and blood whose wisdom and legitimacy can be brought into question. Literary works are believed to belong to a distant and anonymous past, and generally considered to be scriptural in origin. Various conventions regarding the use of literature illustrate the religious connotations with which it has traditionally been perceived. For example, offerings of flowers and incense are commonly placed in front of temple libraries, manuscripts must be carried at shoulder level or higher, etc. In Lao society, knowledge of the culture and conventions of the past can effectively be exploited as a tool with which to enhance one’s personal stature and power. Through the humbleness and respect that one displays in one’s devotion to the study and propagation of the wisdom of one’s forefathers, one can be forgiven for a certain degree of arrogance in one’s humble (if jealously guarded) display of such knowledge. In contrast, to claim that one is the creator of an artistic work could in and of itself be viewed as an unwelcome sign of arrogance, and at the same time diminish the perceived importance of the work, and thereby its value to its composer. It must be borne in mind that whereas the act of altering a text believed to be scriptural in origin might theoretically be viewed as sacrilegious, the preservers of Lao tradition were given a considerable degree of freedom owing to the limited access to the knowledge of such texts. Creativity, therefore, lay not in the self-acknowledged composition of original works, but rather the leeway and flexibility in which literature could be transformed in the very process of its preservation. In traditional Lao society, therefore, the search for meaning in ‘books of search’ was aimed not at the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity concerning the intentions of an unknown author in an uncertain past, but rather the fulfillment of practical needs in their performance and consumption in the present. The idea of adapting pre-existing literature to serve the changing needs of the time and location of its performance is as old as the Lao tradition of literature itself. Lao Buddhist literature is largely taken from oral folk tales, transformed into life tales of the bodhisattva with the aim of serving the temple in its teaching of Buddhist values and beliefs. In a similar fashion, there is a tradition of transforming the content and recording style of individual stories to suit the needs of both religious and secular environments.

The above characteristics of traditional literature are all evident in the approach that is taken to its interpretation. The process of literary interpretation, seen in the statements of its practitioners and the work they produce, can be encapsulated as:

a) To construct a meaning to literature that is relevant and beneficial to its
audience and/or those who have commissioned its interpretation;

b) To manipulate the content of literature in order to make it conform to the meaning that has been constructed. The original intentions of its author are irrelevant.

As illustrated in this chapter, there is a tendency among interpreters of *Luep Phasun* not to adhere strictly to the original text in their analysis of the poem. When confronted concerning personal alterations that interpreters have made to the poem, their reactions clearly suggest that they consider such actions neither unusual nor invalid as an approach to the study of literature. We have previously observed the way in which Somsri Desa has inserted lines into the text of *Luep Phasun*. Somsri Desa’s addition to the poem is made all the more striking by the inclusion in his book of Sila’s original transcription (in which the lines do not occur) immediately following his study of its content. He is apparently unconcerned that an inquisitive reader might discover the discrepancy between the text of *Luep Phasun* as presented in his interpretation and the actual poem that has served as its source. When asked about this discrepancy, Somsri Desa explained that Sila’s transcription is similar to the case of the musical art form of Mo Lam, in which even the most skilled performers have been known to give lax performances in which they forget to include certain lines. Following World War II, Lao literature came to be transformed into a ‘national literature’ and ‘academic subject of study’, in which individual works such as *Luep Phasun* were frozen in fixed written form. At the same time, however, as illustrated by Somsri Desa’s comments, concepts concerning literature and its analysis continue to exist within the framework in which the literature was originally composed, which was considerably more oral in its context, and in which change and variation were accepted as an integral aspect of the transmission of individual works.

In its creative approach to the analysis of literature, the modern interpretation of *Luep Phasun* is comparable to the process of transcription in the past, in which the wisdom and artistic ability of individual transcribers was an important element in the preservation and adaptation of the literary tradition from one generation to the next. Consider how individual interpreters understand the process through which meaning is to be derived from the poem. Thawat Punnnothok, who interprets *Som Thi Khuet* (a section of *Luep Pha Sun*) as a work of religious philosophy, writes: ‘It is the reader’s responsibility to interpret the puzzles [in the poem] to fit the particular point of dharma [to which the reader believes them to refer], and [only] then will they understand their meaning’.57 This statement is striking and perhaps unintentionally insightful in the strangeness of its logic. Normally, one must first understand a particular passage, and as a result of that understanding assign it a meaning. In this case, however, the process is reversed, and a passage can only be understood by its audience once the audience has assigned it its meaning. Whereas Thawat limits the reader’s role to fitting puzzles to religious truths, his very statement...
indicates that had he not decided to study the poem from a religious perspective he could equally interpret individual passages as being love poetry, political statements or whatever else. The relevance of Thawat’s statement is further supported by the similarity of a statement from an old man in rural Savannakhet province concerning the same work, of which he owned a copy transcribed onto palm leaves. ‘People who know what the work means’, he said, ‘know what it means’. It is probably not coincidental that the meaning of *Luep Phasun*, according to those who ‘know what it means’ and tell others who do not know what it means, is in some way beneficial to the interests of those who ‘know what it means’. Similar to the composition and transcription of literature in traditional society, literary interpretations, as exemplified by the works of Sila Viravong and Somsri Desa, were not undertaken on a personal whim, but rather under the sponsorship of a specific group or individual. The difference between the religious emphasis of the former and the nationalist or communist ‘assignment of meaning’ in the latter, therefore, indicates less a major change in the thought process of their authors than the orientation of the sponsors under whose guidance the works have been created. The importance that is placed in literary analysis not on the subject of study *per se* but rather its relevance to the objectives in its study can be seen in the very name by which the subject is referred to in Laos: *ti laka*, i.e. ‘fixing a price’ or ‘placing a value’ on literature. It is noteworthy that the Lao at some point made a conscious decision not to make use of the word *wichan* (‘to analyse’) for literary analysis, a label commonly used in neighbouring Thailand to describe the identical subject. As the cost of a specific commodity owes less to its intrinsic value than the demands of the market, the content of literary analysis is dictated as much by the demands of its interpreters as the subject of their interpretation. If literary interpretation is printed exclusively by the state printing press, sold at the government book store and taught in government schools, there is little mystery concerning the value attributed to *Luep Phasun*, although its actual meaning has remained a matter of doubt for at least half a century.

Finally, it is not the intention of this chapter to claim that the manipulation of the past in the service of the present is unique to the scholarship produced in Laos. On the contrary, the more I read academic studies of Western origin, the more I wonder if their content can in some way be explained in terms of the influence of Lao monks, performers of Mo Lam and, more importantly, Buddhist concepts of impermanence. That question, however, is beyond the range of this chapter, which is limited to the phenomenon as it occurs in Laos.

In conclusion, in this chapter and my larger study of *Luep Phasun*, I am greatly indebted to the late Achan Thongkhan, who was invaluable in the assistance that he provided in my search both for the meaning of *Luep Phasun* and the meaning of searching for meaning in literature.
NOTES

1. This chapter is based upon research for a book tentatively titled *Luep Phasun: A Study*, which will include a translation of *Luep Phasun*, an interpretation of its content and interpretation of its interpretation.

2. Consider the following: 1) In addition to being difficult to understand, the name of the poem is not written in identical fashion on all of the manuscripts. At present, it is commonly known as either *Luep Phasun or Luep Bo Sun*, which can be translated respectively as ‘Extinguishing the Light of the Sun’ and ‘Impossible to Erase’. On palm-leaf manuscripts, the word tends to be written as *Luepphasun or Luephasun*. 2) Whereas Sila Viravong’s published transcription is agreed upon by all parties to form the core of the work, the precise manner in which the core is divided into individual sections remains a topic of debate. (See Peter Koret, *Luep Phasun: A Study*, forthcoming, chapter four, pp. 1–2.) 3) In addition to Sila Viravong’s published transcription, there are additional, perhaps apocryphal sections ranging from one to four, of which some have yet to be discovered, existing at present only in name. (See Koret, *Luep Phasun: A Study*, chapter one, pp. 15–19). Note, for example, that Thai scholars commonly include ‘*Kala Nap Mue Suai*’ as the final section, whereas it is considered a separate unrelated poem by the Lao. 4) There is uncertainty regarding the relationship between individual sections and their relationship to the work as a whole. (See Koret, *Luep Phasun: A Study*, chapter three, pp. 49–53, 59–61.) Many of the individual sections occur (both in performance and written form) independently of the larger poem. Some are better known and more widely distributed than *Luep Phasun* itself. There is debate, therefore, as to whether the sections originated as part of *Luep Phasun* or were merely appropriated by its author in the composition of his work.

3. One might also argue that some of the content of *Luep Phasun* was originally adapted from these forms of oral poetry rather than vice versa.

4. In contrast to its earlier role as entertainment, in modern schools the memorization and copying of the verse is used as a form of punishment for wayward students.

5. The importance attributed to the work can be seen, for example, from the article on *Luep Phasun* in Jarubut Rueangsuwan, *Treasures of Northeast Thailand* [ทะศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ], Bangkok: Religious Press, 1977, pp. 136–137; and Sila Viravong’s article ‘*Vannakhadi* [ InvalidArgumentException ]’ in *Vannakhadi San*, April 1954. The importance of the poem in the training of Mo Lam is discussed in the first page of the introduction to the Si Saket transcription of *Luep Phasun* transcribed by Kanha Yasirin. See Kanha Yasirin, *Luep Phasun* [ InvalidArgumentException ], Khukhan, Si Saket: Prasat Yue Nuea Temple, 1969.

6. Thanks to Adam Chapman for this information, which he learned while doing research for his doctoral thesis on Mo Lam.

7. The limited circulation of the poem can be seen from a) the Toyota-funded inventory of manuscripts in Isan, published and collected at the Isan Cultural Centre at the Ratchaphat Institute in Maha Sarakham, and b) the inventory of manuscripts in Laos, an ongoing project funded by the German government.


9. Koret, ‘Books of Search’, pp. 235–236. Culturally and historically, the Kingdom of Lan Na was much closer to Lan Xang than to Ayutthaya, the forerunner of...
modern Thailand. However, as the territory of Lan Na became incorporated into the
boundaries of modern Thailand, there has been a tendency among Thai scholars to con-
sider that it belongs to Thailand retroactively, i.e. Lan Na culture is Thai culture. This
type of attitude is reflected in an incident that occurred at a conference on the contempo-
rary state of knowledge of Tai literatures held in Chiang Mai in 2001, attended by Thai
and Lao scholars. During the conference, the Thai professor Prasert Na Nagara took
strong offense at a statement of one of the participants that the Emerald Buddha was
removed from Laos by the Siamese. He ‘corrected’ the comment, explaining that the
Emerald Buddha did not originate in Laos, but rather had been taken by the Lao from
Chiang Mai, and as such the Siamese were merely ‘returning it to Thailand’.

11. Thawat Punnothok lives and works in Bangkok. Jarubut Rueangsuwan, although
born in Isan, lived and worked in Bangkok, where he served as the head of the Thai
parliament.
12. Onkaco Nuannavong et al., Literary Textbook for the Fifth Year of Matthayom
[มหัศฎาคมโรงเรียน], Vientiane: Educational Printing Enterprise, 1999,
p. 85. (Fifth year of Matthayom is equivalent to the eleventh year of high school in the
United States.)
13. The nineteenth-century war between Vientiane and Siam remains a significant
event in the consciousness of many Lao. Chao Anou is widely regarded as a national
hero, and Isan considered to belong rightfully to the Lao people. For example, one monk
in southern Laos described the meaning of the name Isan in terms of the phrase phak san
wai kon, which means ‘the court is temporarily out of session’. He stated that one day
the ‘Thai occupation of Isan’ will be brought before the World Court, the impartial judges
of which will immediately return it to Laos. Chao Anou’s struggle with Siam is consid-
erably less of a contemporary topic of discussion in Isan, although the story continues to
be retold in the form of Mo Lam, packaged in attractively colored sets of tapes and CDs.
14. A Thai film, currently in production, commemorates Nang Suranari, a mythic
(?) heroine from Korat, who played a role in defeating the ‘aggression’ of Chao Anou.
This is one of a series of recent films portraying the heroism of ancient Thais in mythical
(?) battles to defend their nation from the oppression of their neighbors. When the Thai
prime minister traveled to Vientiane, the Lao government requested unsuccessfully that
he cancel the film’s production. One wonders what would horrify the Lao most, a cin-
ematic justification of the Siamese war with Chao Anou or the fact that the Isan people
may well be its major audience, spending millions of baht on tickets so that they can
watch ecstatically as Siamese army commanders, played by their favourite movie stars,
decimate their own ancestors.
15. The exact date of Sila’s earliest political interpretation of the poem is some time
between 1954 and 1960. In his study of literature entitled ‘The Benefit of Literature’,
which he published in 1960, Luep Phasun is depicted as a political statement composed
by Chao Anou. See Sila Viravong, The Benefit of Literature [คุณคติในวรรณคดี], Vientiane:
National Library, 1996, pp. 242–244. However, in a short article devoted to the poem
entitled ‘Vannakhadi’ which he contributed to the literary magazine Vannakhadi San in
April 1954, there is no mention of politics at all, and the verse is simply stated to be deep
in its meaning and commonly used in courtship. See Sila Viravong, ‘Vannakhadi’.
According to a work produced by the Lao Social Science Committee, Sila initially pub-
lished a transcription of Luep Phasun in 1952. See Uthin Bunyavong et al., Maha Sila
Viravong: His Life and Work, Vientiane: Social Science Committee, 1990, p. 239.

16. As illustrated by Sila’s political use of Luep Phasun, the diversity of the ethnic groups in Laos was not a primary factor in the creation of Lao nationalism.

17. Luep Phasun, lines 9 and 10.

18. The word ‘chan’ in the name for the nation’s capital (Vientiane i.e. ‘viang chan’) can be translated either as ‘moon’ or ‘sandalwood’. Its original meaning in context is believed to be the latter, although there is no conclusive evidence. In any case, the meaning of ‘chan’ as ‘moon’ is commonly known, and therefore could serve as a symbol of Vientiane.

19. The above lines have become the best known passage in the poem, commonly taught in Lao schools as evidence of the political nature of the work.


22. Bang Lahat (Second Section of Luep Phasun), lines 22–23.

23. Somsri, Phuei San Luep Bo Sun, p. 26. In personal conversation, the following lines from Bang Lahat were similarly cited by Somsri Desa to represent the betrayal of the government:

*Celestial beings) will see the truth of these people with their evil ways, Whom have already done a lot of good for people who are evil, Which is comparable to scooping water, lifting it slowly, and pouring it over sand* (Bang Lahat, lines 113–115.)

According to Buddhist belief, good actions will bring about positive consequences. However, from the perspective of Somsri Desa, the statement serves as a warning to the Royal Lao Government that acting in the interests of the United States will ultimately be without reward.


25. Somsri Desa’s interpretation can be found in Phuei San Luep Bo Sun, pp. 25–26.

26. The following is a similar example of Somsri Desa’s interpretation of Luep Phasun (lines 188–193):

*It is now (my) wish to walk towards Silver Mountain, of the greatest of beauty. It is impossible there for one to be lacking in beautiful women, women of the highest value in life. In great comfort and happiness, loving/entwining to one’s heart’s desire. As one reclines, (the women drive away mosquitoes) from the lion bed with a brush made of animal hair. There is a cave/room, inside of which is a royal bed inserted with bells that are strewn about. There is a plank-roofed tower containing a sky tassel and window to allow the passage of air.*

A lion bed is a royal bed, the legs of which are shaped as if a lion’s legs and claws. A sky tassel is a type of decoration used to adorn a temple or palace roof. According to Somsri Desa (in Phuei San Luep Bo Sun, pp. 17–18), Silver Mountain is a paradise imagined by the Lao in the past. It is a place where people forever remain young and beautiful and live in great buildings. It represents the Lao dream for a society in
which there are no social classes, and is made use of in Luep Phasun as a means with which to incite Lao people to work towards the development of a communist utopia. In analyzing Somsri Desa’s interpretation of the passage as a symbol of a society without social classes, one wonders why such an ideal would be represented by a description of a palace filled with objects, the use of which is reserved exclusively for royalty. From an alternate perspective, the identical image could be seen as a statement concerning the author’s ambitions for the throne.

27. The publication consists of a version of Som Thi Khuet. See Cercle de Culture et de Recherches Laotiennes, Nangsue Lucang Palom Lok: Song Nam Nai Lucang Sue Som Thi Khuet, Paris: Cercle de Culture et de Recherches Laotiennes, no year.

28. The power of this image as a symbol of the old regime can be seen in an incident that occurred to me in 1990 at the Luang Phrabang airport. I was speaking to a Lao friend, explaining (quite innocently) that the geographical shape of Laos was similar to that of an elephant’s head, Luang Phrabang being its eye. My friend quickly pointed out that Laos looked nothing at all like an elephant, but was rather shaped like a lotus flower. When I disagreed, he continued to insist that Laos did not resemble an elephant until I changed the topic. He later informed me that a government official had been listening to our conversation, and my friend was fearful that discussing Laos in terms of elephants would be considered subversive.

29. The French version that we originally consulted contained no information concerning the manuscript from which it had been transcribed. Afterwards, however, I found that it was similar to a published transcription of the poem entitled San Som Thi Khuet, based upon two palm-leaf manuscript versions from Loei province in Thailand. See Danuphol Chayasin, San Som Thi Khuet [San Som Thi Khuet], Loei: Loei Teacher’s College, 1981.

30. In addition to being a prominent scholar of traditional Lao verse, Sila was a skilled poet in his own right, as can be seen, for example, from his poetic compositions of several of the stories from the last ten lives of the bodhisattva in the Jataka tales. Somsri Desa has always been primarily a writer of verse, largely composed in the service of the communist party.

31. Luep Phasun, lines 34–38.

32. The author plays on the double meaning of the identical words in similar fashion further on in the poem in the following lines:

   Line 120. I will not have myself separated/abandoned/grown distant from your friendship.

   Line 121a. I desire to protect and govern you.

   Line 121b. I desire to possess and lovingly take care of you.

33. Danuphol, San Som Thi Khuet, lines 7–8.

34. As stated in personal conversation. We can see a similar example of Somsri Desa’s creative approach to interpretation in his explanation of the significance of the sacred drum in the literary work Thao Lao Kham (another work associated with Chao Anou and his war with the Siamese). In describing its special quality, Somsri Desa informed me that we should not be too restrictive in our definition of the word kong (drum). In addition to its definition as a musical instrument, its meaning, as based upon its occurrence in compound words, can also be understood as ‘meeting’ (as in kong pasum) and ‘armed forces’ (as in kong thap), the significance and sacred quality of which can be seen in the context of the political culture of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

35. Luep Phasun, lines 315–318.
36. Although the words were most likely coined long after the composition of the poem, this does not appear to have been a concern in their interpretation.

37. Luep Phasun, lines 1–4.

38. Some informants explain that ‘kakap’ is derived from the word ‘kap’ (‘petal’ or ‘outer layer’), which is preceded by the alliterated syllable ‘ka’ for poetic reasons, following a convention that occurs several times in the poem. (However, in other examples, the initial syllable includes a short rather than long vowel.) According to such an explanation, as a result of the destruction of Mount Meru, its outer surface shatters.

39. As stated in personal conversation.

40. Bang Lahat, line 127.

41. The line is written following the phrasing of Version A in all of the copies of Luep Phasun that I have encountered, with the single exception of the printed version from Ubon.

42. A. Bunchuem’s political interpretation of Luep Phasun was stated to me in personal conversation, during which he emphasized the explicit nature of its expression in Bang Lahat. A similar political interpretation can also be found (although in far less direct terms) in his published introduction to the poem.

43. Somsri, Phuei San Luep Phasun, p. 4.

44. Somsri, Phuei San Luep Phasun, p. 4

45. Bang Lahat, lines 17–18. The word ‘hen’ (‘civet’) in the initial line can also be translated as ‘to see’. Therefore, the meaning of the overall line could also be interpreted (if perhaps less imaginatively) as: ‘Now you have come to grasp the neck and see the red gums that border on the tongue’. The Lao informants who provided the following interpretations, however, stated their preference for the inclusion of the word ‘civet’.

46. A recurring theme of the poem (at least in its Lao interpretation) is the treachery of the King of Luang Phrabang, whom ultimately sided with Siam against his ‘fellow Lao’.

47. Luep Phasun, lines 114–117.


49. In the Thai transcription, A. Sri Sarakham includes a translation of difficult vocabulary on the right side of every page. The reason no vocabulary is translated for these particular four lines appears to be the simple fact that there are no words within the passage that present any problems in comprehension for a modern Thai reader.

50. The passage that I presented to them consisted of the two-line description of the Garuda bird spreading its wings, blocking out the light of the moon, which has been quoted and explained earlier in this chapter.

51. It is possible that they had understood the poem from a political perspective in the past, but did not feel comfortable in its expression in Isan society. (A. Bunjeum had previously expressed reluctance to express his political understanding of the work in Thailand.) However, this was certainly not the impression I received from our conversation.

52. For further discussion, see Koret, ‘Books of Search’, pp. 226–229.

53. There is no way to tell whether this was the original intention of the phrase. The initial phrase, nangsue, means ‘book’. The second phrase consists of a) nang, the initial syllable of the previous phrase, for poetic reasons, followed by b) ha, which can be translated as ‘to search’. A similar example can be seen in the expansion of the word
‘student’ (i.e. luksit) into luksit lukha, which perhaps is based upon a student’s ‘search’ for knowledge.

54. For example, if a portion of the text was incomprehensible as a result of a) an error on the part of its transcriber, b) archaic language, or c) regional vocabulary of limited circulation, it was the duty of the transcriber to make the required changes in order to preserve the overall meaning of the work. For a more detailed discussion, see Peter Koret, ‘Whispered So Softly It Resounds Through The Forest, Spoken So Loudly It Can Hardly Be Heard: The Art Of Parallelism In Traditional Lao Literature’, PhD thesis, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994, pp. 64–71, 78–82.


56. For further discussion, see Koret, ‘Whispered So Softly’, pp. 51–52.

PART III

CONTESTING NEW LAO PASTS:
FROM THE OUTSIDE
9. ON THE TRAIL OF AN ITINERANT EXPLORER: FRENCH COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY ON AUGUSTE PAVIE’S WORK IN LAOS

AGATHE LARCHER-GOSCHA

The Frenchman willingly forgets that he was a conqueror. He listens to the beating heart of the races.
– Louis Malleret, 1934

We must admit that posterity may not have been a good handmaiden to Auguste Pavie …
– Ouest-France, 1997

Appearances can often be deceiving. Given the number of commemorative ceremonies made in honour of Auguste Pavie (1847–1925) since 1945, one would think that he holds a major place in the history of French colonialism. In 1947, the 100th anniversary of Pavie’s birth was celebrated in his hometown of Dinan, located in France’s northwestern province of Brittany. The ceremony was particularly significant, given the chaotic political situation of the time: the Franco-Indochinese war had just begun and France was struggling to establish an Indochinese Federation. A native of Dinan, the Minister of the Colonies, René Pleven, needed Pavie to help him put Laos back on track with France. To organize this celebration, he formed a committee for “The Centenary of Auguste Pavie”. He had the support of the Association nationale pour l’Indochine française, presided by Alexandre Varenne, himself a former Governor-General of Indochina. The members of the committee were mostly active politicians still in office, while the committee of honour consisted of former Résidents Supérieurs from Laos (Messieurs Bose, Eckert and Eutrope), active and retired colonial administrators (Admiral Georges Thierry d’Argenlieu, Edmond Giscard d’Estaing, Maurice Le Gallen, Albert Sarraut...
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and Jacques Soustelle) and a variety of others whose careers had been linked to French overseas territories. Marius Moutet, the Minister of Overseas France and former Governor-General of Indochina, travelled to Brittany with René Pleven and Jean Cédile, as official representatives of Emile Bollaert, who had recently been named High-Commissioner of France in Indochina. Other notable guests included Princess Savang, the wife of the heir prince of Laos, a delegate sent by King Norodom Sihanouk, and a Vietnamese representative of the Société des Études indochinoises.

Figure 9.1. Remembering Pavie and the myth of the peaceful conquest – commemorative plaque placed on the façade of Pavie’s birthplace in Dinan (Photograph by Agathe Larcher-Goscha)
With this prestigious lineage, the city of Dinan honoured Pavie’s memory on 1 June 1947. The funeral commemorative procession began by visiting Pavie’s tomb, then the house in which he had been born at Place Saint-Sauveur. It was crawling with visitors, as they moved on towards the English Garden. There, the highlight of the ceremony occurred when the authorities unveiled a statue of Pavie. (See Figure 9.1). A few days later in Paris, a series of lectures were held at the *École Nationale de la France d’Outre-Mer* (which had sent a delegation of its students to Dinan) to pay tribute to Pavie’s work. Georges Coedès, director of the *École Française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFEO), professor of Thai and of Indianized Civilizations in the department of Oriental Languages and head of the courses at the above *École Nationale*, reviewed Pavie’s life and works, as did his colleague Charles Robequain, another Indochinese specialist. The homage was marked by great solemnity.

In Vietnam, thanks to the organization of the *Société des Études indochinoises*, the celebrations had already taken a bit of a lead over the metropolitan festivities. On 8 May, Louis Malleret of the EFEO had already related Pavie’s activities in Laos during an instructive educational conference, focussed in particular on the pacifist nature of the man. Malleret also organized an exhibition on the exploration of the Upper Mekong, which opened at Saigon’s Municipal Theatre on 22 June. Other initiatives sought to drive home the memory of the man who had traversed all Indochina and who was considered to be the father of French Laos. A commemorative stamp was issued in France and his memoirs, *Au pays des millions d’éléphants (A la conquête des cœurs)* (In the Land of a Million Elephants (In the Conquest of Hearts)), was reprinted. Never had the symbolism of the man been so mobilized, not even during the symbolism-obsessed Vichy period of Admiral Decoux. This resurrection in the late 1940s would even see the publication of a new biography of the famous explorer.

Pavie’s posterity was at its height because it was politically useful and redeemable in a time of crisis between France and Indochina, when all of the traditional reference points of colonialism had been shaken by World War II. The French colonial order in Indochina had been profoundly undermined by Japanese occupation and the subsequent attempts by Indochinese nationalists to fill the vacuum left by the Japanese overthrow of the French and the Japanese defeat by the Allies in August 1945. The French willingly evoked the image of Pavie, the ‘peaceful conqueror’ in Laos, as much to reassure themselves as to legitimate their return to the region and the reconstruction of their Indochinese colonial edifice. Yet this interest in Pavie had not always been so strong. For the time being, those who invoked his name did so in an attempt to show that the colonialism so violently rejected by nationalist liberation movements had been able – and still could – assume the kind, generous and altruistic forms embodied by the person of Auguste Pavie. This was clearly the message being emitted during the various commemorative celebrations of 1947.
Figure 9.2. The bust of Pavie in Dinan (Photograph by Agathe Larcher-Goscha)
After this unprecedented flurry of commemorative ceremonies, the memory of Pavie would fade away for several decades. Dinan would revive him in the early 1980s, thanks to the initiatives of the city librarian, Mr. Loïc-René Vilbert. The latter had bought a number of books and manuscripts during the auction of Pavie’s library in Rennes in 1978. In 1979, he wrote a biographical sketch of the explorer for an anthology of famous Bretons, and republished several of Pavie’s works. Moreover, he set about giving Pavie, a man who had been ‘resurrected from obscurity’, his ‘realms of memory’ (lieux de mémoire). As such, in 1984 Vilbert had a new commemorative plaque placed on the façade of the house in which Pavie was born. (See Figure 9.2). In 1997, he organized the grand celebrations for the 150th anniversary of Pavie’s birth. Dinan had renewed its ties with its famous ‘son’. With great local media attention, this event was a big hit. Between 27 September and 19 October, an exhibition presented the Asian pilgrimages of this explorer-diplomat, thanks to numerous documents lent by the Missions Etrangères de Paris, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Musée de l’Homme among others. On display were a variety of manuscripts, maps, photos, documents and works of art. The exhibit ran for three weeks at the City Theatre, and the municipal library displayed a series of photographs of Vietnam. The library also held the core of what would officially become, thanks to these celebrations, the ‘Pavie Archives’. It began with a collection of documents that Pavie himself had given to the city before his death, and then others donated by his wife, who would continue to enrich this collection following other exhibitions. Charles Josselin, then Secretary of State for Cooperation, wrote the preface to the exhibition catalogue and stressed that this event had been a good way for keeping alive the memory of a ‘resolute humanist’, attached to democracy, to the meeting of peoples as the indispensable source of development. On the eve of the ‘Francophonie Summit’ in Hanoi in November 1997, Charles Josselin thought it a good idea to underscore what would have to be called the ‘spiritual ties’ linking Pavie’s policy to the contemporary one of cooperation he was pushing in former French Indochina. As he put it in Hanoi: ‘The decentralized relations of cooperation that have never stopped developing between our French regions, departments, and communes and Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are, to a large degree, the heritage of our geographer and diplomat from Brittany’. Of course, these commemorations sought to be free of ‘all colonial nostalgia’, designed instead to be an occasion for reflection upon the meaning of Franco-Lao political cooperation.

This chapter examines how the colonial world re-appropriated the scientific and political activities of Auguste Pavie in Laos and the difficulty French historiography had had in reflecting objectively on men who have for a long time belonged more to the realm of legends than to that of history. We opened with this introduction to Pavie’s legacy as a way of remaining loyal to our methodological approach during the preparation of this study. We first
immersed ourselves in this commemorative tide before turning to investigate its *raisons d’être* in the present and the past. To be honest, we thought the historiography on Pavie would be massive. However, it soon became clear that the posterity bequeathed by Pavie was never as great as one might think. It would not be exaggerated to say that Pavie’s fame was rather slow in coming. Several writers correctly noted this during the commemorations of 1947. For example, an article published in the colonial paper, *Climats*, deplored the fact that Pavie’s memory had been nearly forgotten: ‘Pavie, this is a prestigious name which France should have brandished like a flag each time that [She] was criticized for her “colonial oeuvre”’. For, Auguste Pavie was France in her purest colonial glory: It was he who delivered Laos to France, and he did this, alone, without violence, by the simple ‘conquest of hearts’. The fear of seeing Indochina slip away from French control after World War II had suddenly harkened faraway figures from the past, who could be resurrected to serve as new models for the future. Our investigation began here, with this belated resurrection of Pavie, at the precise moment when ‘the French Union [was] in peril’, and the relative indifference shown to him by the colonial opinion-makers in France.

Compared to the fate reserved for other ‘colonial heroes’ of his kind, Pavie always received only limited attention during the colonial period. Why did he not become the object of a real colonial cult, when he had all the necessary qualities to be hailed as the Savorgnan de Brazza of Indochina? In a conference at the Colonial and Naval Institute in 1945, Paul Blanchard had already pointed out the injustice done to the memory of Pavie. Why was Laos the poor relation in colonial mythology, unlike the prolific, ingenious and active colonial myth making in Vietnam? What can the case of Pavie teach us about French colonial historiography on Laos? These are the questions which motivated us to undertake this study. To answer these questions, we begin by sketching out the major events and biographical details in Auguste Pavie’s life and work. A second section then examines the principal aspects of the French historiography on Pavie from the end of the nineteenth century and suggests how this can tell us something about the way France created and then bequeathed herself a certain conception of her role in Laos.

**A MAN WITH A MISSION: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS**

Who, in fact, was Auguste Pavie? In 1869 a young officer in the Marine Infantry disembarked in the city of Saigon. Pavie had enlisted in the army at the age of 17 with the resolute desire to seek out adventure. He was in luck. Hardly ten years earlier, France had intervened in Cochinchina and Cambodia. The conquest was just starting and it required a wide range of men, both military and civilian, as French colonialism extended itself in eastern mainland.
Southeast Asia. It was in this way that adventure presented itself to Pavie, when, released from the Army in France, he entered the Telegraph Service in Cochinchina as an apprentice in October 1869. As Louis Malleret pointed out in a lecture in 1947, the telegraph was at this time a novelty. The recent Cochinchinese service (1861) and Pavie’s work in it was anything but pencil pushing. The few existing lines provided communications among military outposts, and it had taken tremendous effort to set it up given the often difficult topography (swamps, mountains, rivers, etc.). Pavie quickly understood that at the end of these telegraph lines he would find new and mysterious horizons extending before him. He was determined to discover them shortly after returning from France, where he had spent a brief time fighting for his country during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.

Back in Indochina, he was first assigned to the Post Office at Long Xuyen in Cochinchina, and then, in 1876, to the office of Kampot, which was hardly more than a modest hut. Kampot was a small Cambodian port on the Gulf of Siam. It was home to a patchwork of peoples, among whom Pavie immersed himself progressively. Pavie was not like most soldiers, bureaucrats or early colonizers of the time, who sought to cut themselves off from the local population and dreamt of recreating a little piece of France in an exotic Indochinese setting. On the contrary. Despite a shyness often noted by his biographers, he still sought out the company of others. He learned to speak Khmer and became familiar with the local traditions and customs, becoming fascinated by the history of a ‘people with a colossal past that is hidden in a shadow’. He later be criticized by a certain number of his colleagues in Cochinchina for showing too great an interest in the Cambodians who, in their eyes, did not deserve that much. But he did not care what they thought, for Pavie’s curiosity was turned towards the Theravada Buddhist world. He quickly formed ties with the monks of Kampot, as he would do in every step of his future explorations. When, in 1879, Pavie reached his new post in Phnom Penh, 160 km away, he already had good book and practical knowledge of the land. He had developed during his trips a sharp sense of careful observation of nature and the cultural practices of its inhabitants.

Since his arrival in Kampot, Pavie had indeed started to collect all sorts of natural objects and products, so much so that he would send his collections to Saigon for an exposition organized in 1881. This spontaneous and original donation drew the attention of Charles Le Myre de Vilers (1833–1918), first civil governor of Cochinchina, who began a friendship with Pavie. Their meeting was crucial. Pavie found himself in charge of the direction and supervision of the laying out and construction of a new telegraph line of more than 600 km, which was to link Phnom Penh to Bangkok. In the end, more than double that distance was covered – mostly on foot or on the backs of elephants – and laid out to complete this ambitious long-term project. During these missions, Pavie would begin his long reconnaissance walks and would
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take on that particular physiognomy for which he would become famous, that of a thin and fragile man, always dressed in a Khmer *sampot* and baggy trousers falling to his knees, walking barefoot, his chiselled facial features punctuated by an impressive beard and a large-brimmed hat always fitted tightly on his head.

After eleven years in Cambodia, Pavie made a short trip to France (September–December 1885) to accompany a dozen young Cambodians who had been sent to Paris to study French. On his initiative, the modest *École Cambodgienne* was created. René Cornevin, who wrote a bibliographic notice on Pavie for the Academy of Overseas Sciences’ collection called *Men and Destinies*, saw in this initiative the expression of a ‘veritable policy of cooperation based on reciprocal exchanges’,20 as advanced by his hero of this epoch. The *École Cambodgienne* would soon be transformed into the *École Coloniale*21 in 1889 thanks to the action of Paul Dislère. It developed from this point into a large institution and served as training ground for future French colonial administrators.

On 11 November 1885, Pavie was named Vice-Consul 2nd Class in Luang Phrabang, thanks to his Parisian contacts and the unparalleled knowledge of the peninsula he had acquired over the years. Aware of his contacts and work with the Siamese, his superiors in Paris essentially wanted him to keep the government abreast of the steady advance of Siamese influence into Lao territories, and wanted him to represent the French presence in this zone. The simple postal clerk thus found himself charged with a mission of territorial reconnaissance with important political and diplomatic implications. He would become the man of the moment, a complicated one. For since the mid-nineteenth century, the Lao principalities had become a contested zone among continental and European powers (see Volker Grabowsky and Søren Ivarsson’s contributions). Since the 1860s, Siam had found herself increasingly hemmed in by British expansion into Burma and the Malay Peninsula and Vietnamese, followed by French, moves into Lao territories to the east. Keen on consolidating her hold over the territories, Bangkok turned her ambitions towards the upper valleys of the north. The French expansion into Cambodia in 1863 and in Annam and Tonkin in 1883 and 1884 greatly worried the Siamese, who forced the court of Luang Phrabang to accept the presence of two Siamese commissioners. It was only a question of time before these new geo-strategic factors would bring to the forefront the question of delimiting the western borders of a sought-after French protectorate over Laos. When Pavie was named to Luang Phrabang, the Bangkok court, obligated to accept his presence there, had already sent troops to the Black River and made known its claims over Xieng Khuang (Tran Ninh). Pavie was urged to get to his post as quickly as possible. He would not arrive in Luang Phrabang until February 1887, since the Siamese had done their best to delay his journey.

For several months, despite the fact that his every move and gesture were closely monitored by a Siamese commissioner, he struck up a friendship with
the head monk at the Wat Mai temple and succeeded in meeting with King Oun Kham, when, in 1887, the principality was brutally sacked by Deo Van Tri. The latter, son of the Chief of the Thais of Lai Châu, had led this attack on Luang Phrabang in order to take revenge on the Siamese who had taken hostages, including his brothers, in the principality a few months earlier. In his diary, Pavie described in striking detail the real panic that seized the inhabitants during the raid – the inhabitants fleeing the attackers from one side of the Mekong to the other as if stricken with the inability to defend themselves. Now more than ever, Pavie made himself the bearer of the good French word to the Lao people, promising them a return to peace under French protection. It must be said that in his version of the mission, Pavie had described the scene in a very engaging manner and had certainly understood at the time the political advantage which France could gain from the situation. French colonial historiography accords an important place to this episode in so far as Pavie succeeded in saving Oun Kham, who, thankful to his saviour, agreed to put his domain under French protection. Pavie’s biographers would see in this event the founding act of French Laos. As J.L. Gheerbrandt would write in 1949: ‘In this way the gentle Lao land was virtually acquired by gentle France. All that would follow up to the 1893 treaty would be nothing more than the active fulfilment of the word of the donor. At this date and in this place the French Protectorate over Laos was morally established’. It is true that from 1888 French pressure increasingly forced Siam to relinquish her claims over the left bank of the Mekong. Pavie had rejoined Colonel Pernot’s troops who had come from Tonkin to fight against the Black Flags and the Ho, who were spreading terror throughout the region. As such, Pavie came up the Black River and succeeded in rallying Deo Van Tri to the French side.

Having crossed the Kamkeut Plateau and Vinh, Pavie finally reached Hanoi, where he was officially assigned to a new exploratory mission intended to establish the Siamese border along the banks of the Mekong, from Cambodia to Yunnan. He surrounded himself with a good team, recruited in Paris during his short visit there in 1889, and was back in Hanoi and ready to go by February 1890. During their journey, from 1889 to 1891, the Pavie mission crossed nearly 15,000 km, from the north to the south of ‘Indochina’, in the Red River basin and along the length of the Mekong. In those two years, the team wrote up innumerable scientific data, as they described and catalogued everything they saw en route (distances, relief, the navigability of rivers, mineral prospecting, flora and fauna, local history, which they generally learned via the monks, and also housing conditions, local dress, rituals, social customs, etc.). During the mission, Pavie monitored the efforts of the court of Bangkok to establish Siamese positions in what he called the ‘contested territories’ of the Mekong.

Jean-Louis de Lanessan, the new Governor-General of Indochina, agreed with Pavie, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris: an end had to be
put to this situation, one which became explosive in the spring of 1892, when a series of Franco-Siamese incidents broke out at posts in Khone, Outene, Stung Treng and Kieng Kiec.\textsuperscript{30} Despite his appointment as Consul General of France in Bangkok in February, Pavie’s diplomacy had failed to prevent such incidents. The crisis reached its height in July 1893. While French troops were sent to retake several forts between Paksane and Khone from the Siamese, French gunboats sailed to Bangkok. As for Pavie, he sent an ultimatum to the court, asking not just for financial remuneration, but that Siam officially recognize the rights of the Empire of Annam and the Kingdom of Cambodia – both now under French colonial authority – over the left bank of the Mekong and the large islands in the river (we will see later how France used the traditional rights of Annam and Cambodia as a pretext to peel away Laotian territory). Left alone to deal with this crisis by her unofficial British ally, the Bangkok court accepted these conditions in a Franco-Siamese accord on 3 October 1893. From this day, the Laotians, who had no say in this accord passed over their heads, were considered as ‘French protected’ (protégés français). All that remained was to determine precisely which border and statute they would be given.

Pavie, now named Commissioner General of Laos, was also designated President of the ‘Commission for the Delimitation of the Borders of the Upper Mekong’, established in late 1893. In 1894–95, during the height of the crisis with Bangkok, he demonstrated intransigence in the settlement of the territorial disputes and the establishment of the border demarcations. It is well known that at this date, as Pavie was bidding farewell to officials and friends in Luang Phrabang and getting ready to return definitively to France, these questions were far from being resolved.\textsuperscript{31} It would take several more conventions and French treaties with the British, Chinese and Siamese (January 1896, October 1902, February 1904, March 1907 respectively) in order to establish (and that would take over forty years) the borders of French Laos within the Indochinese Union. Pavie continued to participate in these border negotiations until 1905, when he officially retired.

However, in October 1895, Pavie had returned to France and begun a new life. The solitary explorer married (1897), had a son\textsuperscript{32} (1898) and threw himself into the enormous project of writing and publishing his mission reports. Between 1898 and 1919, ten volumes were published in all. Under his direction, a map of Indochina was published in 1899 and would not be surpassed until 1920. Pavie also published a collection of popular stories from Cambodia, Laos and Siam in 1903, and a condensed version of his mission, \emph{A la conquête des coeurs} (The Conquest of Hearts) in 1921. Georges Clémenceau wrote the preface, though he had been a former critic of Jules Ferry (‘the Tonkinois’), who had approved the beginning of France’s colonial adventure in Indochina. This curious point was not lost on Pavie’s biographers, who used Clémenceau’s apparent \textit{volte-face} to illustrate how Pavie’s colonial activities faded in
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comparison to his pacific action, so much so that his work seemed acceptable, even for one of the most intransigent political opponents of France’s faraway adventures.

On 7 June 1925, Auguste Pavie died suddenly in his home at La Raimbaudière in Thourie, near Dinan, where he was buried. And yet if Savorgnan de Brazza, a naturalized French citizen of Italian origin, had died in 1905 and had received the right to a national funeral (some in parliament had even talked about resting his remains in the Panthéon!), nothing of the sort was planned for Auguste Pavie. The man who had fled notoriety since his retirement in France was in the curious position that notoriety was abandoning him just as quickly in return.

ONE MAN’S MISSION: HISTORICAL AND ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS

And yet Pavie had well and truly known fame. Evoking the memory of her husband in 1947, Mrs Pavie recalled the ‘incredible popularity’ surrounding him when they met at the turn of the century, shortly after his return in France: ‘August Pavie could not take a step without someone people turning around when he went by’. This attention was such that Pavie decided one fine day to give up his impressive beard that had always made him so easily recognizable. This recognition was not just spontaneous and popular, but it was also official. From 1888, the government saluted his work as an explorer by making him an ‘Officer of the Légion d’Honneur’. He received other distinctions in 1896: the diplomat was promoted to Plenipotentiary Minister and Commander of the Légion d’Honneur. It is well known that from then until 1919, Pavie devoted himself entirely to the publication of the volumes of the Mission.

But Pavie was not interested in fame. Even if this writer was not exactly a loner, the enormous quantity of his work absorbed him and would cut him off from the public. Although he frequented regularly an illustrious circle of friends (Louis Hubert Lyautey, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, Jules Harmand, Louis Gustave Binger and Parfait Monteil), he did not care much about such mundane matters nor the honours the Société de Géographie conferred upon him in 1903. Pavie shut himself up in his work and hardly got involved in the numerous associations that abounded then in the metropolitan colonial milieu, as if he did not want to be distracted from his grand ambition to put down on paper a life of exploration, one that was full of riches and could be useful to others. In contrast to Brazza, in particular, he refused to take part in administering the territories he had known, and declined multiple offers of consular posts in such places as Japan or Madagascar. His moment of glory passed and his fame was thereafter limited to a small circle of Asia specialists. His withdrawal from the public and political scene, as well as the deep
modesty of his character, explain partly (but only partly) why he did not attract more biographers during the interwar period.

Indeed, there are few bibliographies of Auguste Pavie during this period, compared to the number of publications on other ‘colonial heroes’. One thinks in particular of the numerous articles and biographies of Doudart de Lagrée, Francis Garnier or Admiral Courbet, to mention but a few.39 One only finds two full-length biographies of Pavie, both of which were published relatively late, in 1933 and 1949. Articles on the personage can be divided unequally in terms of time. They are relatively few in number and appear in reaction to political conjunctures. Pavie made the colonial news of metropolitan France in 1893, of course, when the Franco-Siamese crisis reached its height over Laos. Thereafter, the Revue Indochinoise and Géographie popularized in 1903 the work of the exploratory mission, while he continued to take part in the last negotiations over the delimitations of the border of Laos. In 1920, Antoine Cabaton wrote a biographical note of Pavie, relating in greater detail his work in Indochina as a way of paying tribute to the latest volume of the Mission. Several obituaries were of course published in 1925 and a commemorative stamp was published in honour of the ‘pioneer of France in Laos’. But one had still to wait eight years for a colonial writer, one of the most renowned, to pen the first complete biography. It was the famous colonial figure, Albert de Pouvourville, a major author of ‘Indochinese literature’.40 His study contributed without a doubt to popularizing the figure of Auguste Pavie, who had just begun since 1930 to serve as the object of commemoration in Paris, Brittany and Indochina.

This was partly related to changes in Siam. By the early 1930s, Siam would become a news topic in French colonial circles, which were closely monitoring the modernization of the monarchy there and worried by the 1932 overthrow of that monarchy and subsequent nationalist designs on western Indochina. As we shall see, the political evolution of Siam could throw the French discourse on Siam off balance, a very negative one, which had been constructed in the course of the biographical recollections of Pavie. It is also important to recall that the idea of the ‘plus grande France’ celebrated her colonial apotheosis, its ‘one hundred million inhabitants’ as well as the pioneers of its empire. Of course, Pavie was considered to be one of them. In this way, a bust of Pavie was placed in the lobby of the Académie des Sciences Coloniales, founded in 1920 by Paul Bourdaries.41 Anna Quinquaud, winner of the Prize of Rome, completed the work. The statue was unveiled in May 1930 during a ceremony presided over by the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, Alcide Delmont, and in the presence of a surviving member of Pavie’s mission, Pierre Lefebvre-Pontalis.42 In that same year, the city of Dinan renamed one of its streets, ‘Pavie Street’43 and in Vientiane named a square after him. In 1933, an imposing statue of Pavie was erected in this same place in Vientiane, portraying him in full stride, with travel journals in his pockets and his pilgrim’s staff in hand. The
sculptor Paul Ducuing was also commissioned to realize another such statue of Pavie for the city of Luang Phrabang. After this peak in his popularity, this remembering of Pavie faded a bit until the early 1940s. Bernard Bourotte, a professor at the services of Public Education of Indochina, resurrected him in the 1940s, when he published a new biography of Pavie designed to get schoolchildren to meditate on ‘the example of these heroes who achieved for France and her empire a glorious history’. The Indochina ruled by Admiral Decoux during the Vichy period rediscovered its colonial heroes and sculpted a portrait of Pavie in line with the social conservatism of this period. Bourotte’s work repeated some of the old clichés, but stressed above all Pavie’s ‘peasant qualities’ to explain the successful reconciliation with the ‘workers of the rice paddies and those of the mountains [who] saw him as one of them’. Several commemorative stamps were issued in his honour in 1943 and 1944. Pavie was symbolically held up as an ineffective scarecrow to counter renewed Thai expansion into Laotian and Cambodian territory, which had manifested itself since the 1930s and became serious in 1940–41, when the Thais, aided by the Japanese, gained territories in western Indochina at the expense of the French (see also Søren Ivarsson, Bruce Lockhart and Christopher Goscha’s contributions).

The bibliography of Pavie’s life is thus rather incomplete and occurs in terms of the political conjunctures of a larger historical context. One explicative factor undoubtedly played an important role: unlike Cambodia or Vietnam, in general Laos had not been the object of an abundant bibliography during the interwar period, a reflection of the relative indifference of the colonial state for this landlocked territory, which was both demographically and economically weak. This quasi-official uinterest towards Laos would last until the end of the 1930s, squandering its own French ‘heroes’ and, in our view, was detrimental to creating a public realm for remembering Pavie, clearly less attractive to colonial biographers than his explorer counterparts on the other side of the Annamese Cordillera.

But what was the real quality of the biographies on Pavie? How did these diverse writers evoke him and what type of simplistic representations did they make of him and his role in Laos for the period under study? It seems that the historiography underscores, with different degrees of objectivity, four principal and distinctive traits of this man. They appear sometimes alone, at other times together. They are: the archetype of the explorer, the diplomat, the unifier of this Indochinese domain and, above all, the peaceful conqueror.

Pavie is remembered as an outstanding explorer and an avid scientist. Théophile Janvrais in 1903 and Colonel Friguenon in 1925 would praise these traits in their biographies of him. He was part of that group of intrepid discoverers, like Henri Mouhot, Paul Neis, Jean Dupuis and Francis Garnier, some of whom opened the way to colonial penetration in Indochina, like others in Africa. Their exploits built up metropolitan dreams of adventure and
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exoticism. In his biographical sketch, Cabaton reminded his readers of the difficulties of such explorations, and underlined the physical and mental endurance needed by Pavie and his colleagues to tame such a hostile environment. Pouvourville also described the onerous progression of Pavie’s team in the uplands. The stories in Pavie’s Mission did not fail to capture their imaginations with their gripping descriptions of changing climate, fauna and flora (wild beasts, parasites, leeches, etc.) as well as all of the material challenges encountered along the way (transport, provisions, the search for information, scientific studies, etc.).

Despite such feats and the impressive number of kilometres covered by the Mission, French history and geography textbooks used during the 1920s and 1930s rarely mentioned the name of Pavie in their chapters on French expansion in Asia. Jean Dupuis, Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, Francis Garnier and Henri Rivière consistently take precedence over Pavie. It is disconcerting that his name does not occupy a prominent place in France’s colonial pantheon, but it can be explained. For one, Pavie was not ‘the first’ Frenchman to have travelled widely in Cambodia and Laos, and we know how much the colonial imagination loves its ‘precursors’ and its ‘founding fathers’. Thus, in his book L’Indochine par les Français, Jean Ajalbert puts Pavie in the section on the ‘Indochinese Union’, and not in the chapter about ‘Explorations’, aware that other prestigious men had preceded him (not all of whom were French). So short of being ‘the first’, a handful of other writers would hail him as the last in an exceptional line of men, as he who laid the final brick in the Indochinese edifice by bringing Laos into the Union founded in 1887.

Another possible reason why textbooks accord relatively little place to Pavie is the fact that he came out alive. What was a grand stroke of luck to have survived his journeys despite the climate, the animals, the fevers, the lack of food and the local guerrillas paradoxically did not help him to go down in the annals of French colonial posterity. A tragic death can often pluck one from the crowd of the anonymous to lift him or her into that elite club of heroes. His colleagues who fell to violent deaths (Francis Garnier and Henri Rivière), or an insidious one (Henri Mouhot succumbed to fever), left a more lasting impression in the minds of their contemporaries who had no difficulty recalling the names of these heroes. School textbooks would certainly have been able to evoke more easily and for a longer period of time the image of a Pavie massacred by Chinese or Siamese ‘rebels’.

So Pavie’s biographers could not hail him as a martyr, nor as the perfect French pioneer in Laos. In order to get around this problem, several authors would stress another aspect of Pavie. He became, in the words of Cabaton, ‘the precursor in the restitution of Indochina’s intellectual past’. To explain these words, he adds: ‘Thanks to the trust the old King placed in him, it was he who obtained the priceless royal chronicles of Laos, until then stubbornly hidden from all European travellers. For Pavie, it was [he who] fetched them from the
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flames of the Luang Phrabang pagoda where they were kept; these documents, translated with great care by an occasional collaborator and friend of Pavie, P. Schmitt, constitutes still today just about all we know of the past of ancient Laos’.  

57 (On Lao chronicles, see the chapters of Michael Vickery and Volker Grabowsky). In his booklet on Laos for the 1931 colonial exposition, Roland Meyer affirmed how French actions, initiated by Pavie in the region, had helped to return the past to the Lao. This was especially the case given how, on the eve of French intervention, this area had been divided into several principalities and weakened so much that ‘Laos’ was hardly more than a shadow of her former self.  

58 The biographer J. L. Gheerbrandt entitled one of his chapters on Pavie’s life revealingly: ‘A Dying Man Gives Life to a People’. 59 Remarks as these fed the idea that France had ‘awakened’ Laos from a gentle, age-old torpor, and helped its population to become aware of themselves as a historical, indeed national, entity. This of course was to forget the fact that Pavie’s research into the royal chronicles of Luang Phrabang had been primarily designed to find a way to legitimize French colonial rights in the region, where strictly ‘Laotian’ borders had never existed. Pavie would later provide his government with arguments for its territorial claims by establishing the ancient tributary relations of Lao principalities to Annam. Having established a protectorate over the former Vietnamese monarchy and Annam, no one could be upset when the French affirmed that they would maintain the exercise of these traditional Vietnamese rights as a way of justifying her expansion into Laos.  

60 The portrait of Pavie is at least double: behind the explorer emerges the diplomat. Pavie’s biographers preferred to focus on his political activities, though here again not everything was fit to say. Indeed, Louis Malleret was not the only one to pass strangely and quickly over the precise circumstances which led to the signing of the treaty of 1893, even though it was considered as the founding block of French Laos. Paul Doumer, Lucien de Reinaich, Antoine Cabaton and Albert de Pouvorville would not have much to say either about the ultimatum that Pavie delivered to Siam and the arrival of the gunboats in Bangkok intended to force the court to sign the treaty recognizing French claims on the left bank of the Mekong. They chose rather to emphasize Pavie’s skill and psychological finesse in his negotiations and his back-and-forth diplomatic acrobatics with the Siamese in order to underline the way by which he managed to subdue his adversaries: without resorting to force, but rather thanks to his intelligent ‘persuasion’. 62 These biographers were probably not betraying the truth in stressing Pavie’s remarkable sense of dialogue. What needs to be added, however, is that these authors seem to have overlooked other remarkable reasons for appreciating Pavie’s work. Who among them would have noted in the descriptions of the Mission how Pavie viewed the world around him with a real desire to understand the peoples on their own terms? Who would note the near absence of prejudice in Pavie’s writings on the social and religious rites of these areas, their eating, clothing and warrior habits, or the local superstitions
of the people around him? Was this so unimportant that no one thought to mention it? These writers raved about the psychology of the man, about his ‘disarming charm’ and about his humanity. That is fine. But the fantasy of these authors is their belief in the uniquely French quality of the ‘humanity’ which Pavie exemplified. In addition, they based their arguments on a largely abusive and erroneous conviction, which was quite widespread in the colonial milieu of both Indochina and France. For these colonial writers, if Pavie obtained such good results, it was due to the sincerity he showed in his relations with ‘Asians’, whom these writers considered to be ignorant of frankness and lacking in honesty. One finds the same type of worn-out clichés in the writings of Cabaton, Pouvourville and Malleret, with a special place reserved for the Siamese, who of course were necessarily represented as ‘deceitful’ and ‘schemers’.

Such comments served to show that the Laotians, won over by Pavie’s confidence, decided themselves to turn to French protection against the expansionism of their neighbours, and above all Siam. Colonial historiography on Pavie tended to demonize Bangkok and its politics. In a general way, all the works on Pavie criticized the intense defiance of the Siamese commissioners towards the French vice-consul and lingered disproportionately on all the problems they caused Pavie. Once again, no one thought to consider the events from another angle and to put themselves in the place of the Siamese. The latter, on a tightrope between maintaining their independence and succumbing to European colonization, must have been worried by French manoeuvres in the peninsula. But for these colonial writers, there was no need to see the matter from another perspective than their own. They had defined Siam not only as France’s competitor, manipulated in the wings by the English, but also as the enemy, ‘dangerous protector’, of the Lao. There is no denying Siam’s age-old expansionist ambitions in Laos and there is no doubt that the French and the ‘Thais’ were each competing colonizers in the region. The French who spoke of Pavie’s work used the personage in order to accuse the ‘Other’ (the Siamese) of being more colonialist than themselves. The above-mentioned writers smugly pass off the Siamese as the real colonizers in the region, the ones who really had ambitions to build on ‘plans of conquest’ and ‘invasions’, with ‘appetites justified only on greed’. These French writers systematically suggested that their rivals kept their populations under a ‘brutal and hated yoke’. The point was intentionally overstated so that by comparison the French seemed enlightened exclusively by noble and peaceful intentions, which were, of course, just as colonial. They had not ‘conquered’ Cochinchina, it was said at the same time, but that they had only ‘moved in’. In the same way, they ‘became established’ (ils se sont installés) in Laos because its inhabitants had asked for help from the French ‘liberators’ from ‘oppressive’ Siamese colonialism.

Pavie had himself declared some time after the sack of Luang Phrabang in
1887 that he wanted to make Laos into a French nation *with the consent of its inhabitants*.76 Those words have become famous, as much as the constantly repeated ones that end his book, *A la conquête des coeurs*. The very title struck the public imagination, to this day: 77 ‘I had the joy of being loved by the people whom I visited’.78 Like the praise Malleret attributed in 1947 to Pavie’s efforts, the biographers of Pavie reminded all that Laos had become French without violence or the spilling of blood. Malleret had put it best: ‘For it was indeed a conquest that Pavie sought, but the most peaceful of all, since he managed to achieve it without any bloodshed’.79 As such, the conquest was excused and excusable, since it had the consent of the very parties concerned. Pavie embodied the model of an ideal and seductive colonialism, contractual from the start and having no other goal but to fulfil a ‘civilizing mission’. The French continually pursued this dream – to colonize with a clear conscience, without regret or doubt – from their first steps in the peninsula to their final eviction. ‘As for colonial matters, our hands are clean’, wrote Léon Archimbaud, official reporter of the budget for the colonies to the *Chambre des députés*, in 1926.80 If the memory of Pavie was politically useful, it was so because it reinforced this dream and gave it all the appearances of being a beautiful reality. In 1947, this dream still held out hope for the organizers of the grand centenary commemorations of Pavie’s birth. They again stressed that it was thanks to the confidence Pavie earned that Laos ‘gave herself to France’.81 ‘If the Laotians came to us’, wrote André Masson in May 1947, ‘it was done so spontaneously’. Masson clearly established the topicality of Pavie’s work by affirming that it was because of the road he had cleared that the French Union was created on the basis of voluntary admission: ‘Thanks to his comprehensive method, by his “conquest of hearts”, he succeeded in making French the countries he traversed with the agreement of their inhabitants, which is the fundamental base of the French Overseas Union’.82

René Pleven also wished to put a human face on French colonialism when he presided over the commemorations of Pavie in Dinan.83 Aware of the threats of the nationalist movements in Indochina, he wanted to present an exemplary image of France. This was a nation that had colonized justly, since her protection had been solicited from below, demanded and accepted by the local populations. It would be wrong to think that Pleven’s attitude was only Machiavellian. Indeed, let us imagine that he sincerely believed, as did the majority of people working in politics and the colonial milieu at the time, in the profound truth of this statement. In a personal letter to the president of the *Société de Géographie*, René Pleven revealed the object of the centenary celebration of Pavie:

> On this occasion, the committee [of the centenary] aims to create the greatest splendour possible for these celebrations in Dinan. At a time when our splendid achievements overseas are the object of partisan or unjust criticism, we must
draw public opinion towards Auguste Pavie. Once a simple subaltern at the Post Office, he raised himself to the rank of plenipotentiary minister, and through his prestige and his goodness, with the full consent of the local populations, he gave to France the colony of Laos in 1893, which has always remained faithful. 

It is good to hold a national celebration to remind people that a part of our empire was built by peaceful means and with the agreement of the people to whom we pledge our protection.84

One could think that such words had been specifically adapted to the history of French intervention in Laos, where, it will be recalled, French intervention never provoked a movement or a great opposition as was the case in Vietnam with the Căn Vương (Save the King) movement.85 Yet this would be erroneous. It seems important to contextualize René Pleven’s remarks, lest one be too swayed by his confidence in the legitimacy of French colonization in Laos. His words are rooted in an older colonial discourse that presents French intervention in the other three countries of Indochina in a similar way, as a response to local appeals for help, a liberation for the oppressed populations or government being seriously threatened by other ‘foreign’ powers than France. Of course, Plevin and colonial leaders hardly ever thought to call into question or even question their assumptions – which kind of ‘demands’ had been made, in fact? By whom and in whose name? In which exact circumstances? And to what political ends?

NEGLECTED ‘FRANCO-LAOTIAN COLLABORATION’
AND A FORGOTTEN PAVIE

We have examined elsewhere the continued construction of a colonial imagination in Indochina since the end of the nineteenth century, one which was shaped as much by the political milieu of the colony as it was by literary and intellectual ones.86 This imagining was mobilized to absolve France from the fact that she had seized the territories of the Indochinese peninsula and that it was essentially a meticulous rewriting of the origins of that intervention. Based on a core of objective, historically proven facts, an abusive interpretation of these events allowed bit by bit the formation of a justification for the French colonial presence in the area. One particularly widespread idea, among others, was popularized under the mandate of Governor-General Albert Sarraut (1911–19): the idea of the non-premeditation of French colonization.87 Sarraut’s idea would, from 1920, become a credo during the interwar period: ‘France acquired without really being aware of it (pour ainsi dire sans s’en douter) her marvellous overseas empire. Better still, it has done so reluctantly (malgré elle)’.88 According to Sarraut and his followers, France had only responded to
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the calls for help from the rulers or indigenous peoples who ‘gave themselves voluntarily to us, and asked for our protection and tutelage’.89

Several colonial writers, journalists and historians would go back to the past to find events or individuals who seemed to have been the first spokesmen for this indigenous desire to be ‘protected’ by France. Their favourite topics were about the friendships formed in times of trouble, between the French and Asian sovereigns, because these relationships seemed to be part of the initial act of the colonial process started after them and revealed on the other hand the unique, national traits of the French colonial project (humanity, dedication, altruism, etc.). Roland Meyer, following on others, looked into the confidence that the Siamese King Phra Narai had given to a young Greek adventurer, Constantine Phaulkon, in the 1650s, often cited for his love of all things French. In this case, however, one could only redo the historic version with ‘what ifs’ and regret that Franco-Siamese relations had not led to something greater, such as a glorious ‘Franco-Siamese collaboration’ in building colonial Thailand perhaps well into Laos, but from the other direction – and with the French, not against them.

As it turned out, it was a policy of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration in eastern mainland Southeast Asia. And here the French had better luck in re-rooting it in a distant past, thanks to the famous eighteenth century missionary Pigneau de Béhaine. This French missionary and his Vietnamese partner in misfortune, Nguyên Ánh (better known by his royal name, Gia Long), were the subject, not of dozens, but of hundreds of articles during the interwar years. Their adventures were taken up by the eulogists of French colonialism in order to extol the remarkable historical continuity of ‘Franco-Vietnamese collaboration’. This official dogma of the colonial administration during the interwar years saw in their journeys a model and a forerunner to the present.

Pierre Pigneau de Béhaine, Bishop of Adran, was a French missionary who found himself drawn into one of Vietnam’s most devastating civil wars, which occurred in the eighteenth century when the Nguyên lords were challenged by a vast revolt of the Tây Sơn.90 Because Pigneau helped Prince Nguyên Ánh – on the latter’s request – to fight his adversaries and restore him to the throne by recruiting in particular a handful of French volunteers, Pigneau’s role was exaggerated by his French biographers, who ended up considering him as the sole saviour of the imperial Nguyên Dynasty, indeed of all of Vietnam, if not the conscious initiator of the colonial process. Pigneau was given anachronistic political ambitions which did not reflect his real concerns at the time.91 For his biographers, it was a question of proving the thesis evoked above of ‘non-premeditated colonialism’.

In Laos, one did not have to look far into the past to find an exemplary Franco-Laotian friendship. If there is one heroic French act which the biographers of Pavie never forget to remind us in detail, it was certainly the aid he brought to the old king of Luang Phrabang at the time of the sacking of the
city in June 1887 by the Hos. Clémenceau wrote movingly about it in the preface to *A la conquête des coeurs* in 1921. King Oun Kham, grateful for the help that Pavie had given to him and his subjects in escaping from the invaders, solicited French protection thanks to their saviour, Auguste Pavie. This at least is the version of the events provided in Pavie’s memoirs. We will never be able to know truly whether King Oun Kham had not simply tried to establish tributary relations with French authorities in the region as part of a preexisting traditional pattern of diplomacy, a set of relations which did not necessarily coincide with the political conceptions which the Quai d’Orsay had in mind when they talked about the establishment of a ‘protectorate’ over Laos. Given the right combination of circumstances, the Luang Phrabang king could have just as easily turned to the British and their ‘Pavie’, and the following colonial ‘story’ would have adjusted accordingly, the names changed but not necessarily the plot.

These examples help us to relativize the image of the ‘peaceful conqueror’ attributed to Pavie during the interwar years and to resituate the French discourse on the voluntary gift of Laos to France within a more global process of colonial legitimation. One question remains unanswered, however, after this general survey of colonial historiography surrounding Pavie: Why was the latter not the object of a larger number of hagiographies? Why did he not become, like Pigneau, a veritable colonial cult figure between the two world wars? By trying to understand such a difference of treatment, one might learn how France saw her role differently in Vietnam and Laos. The least that one can say is that Pavie was perfectly suited for the job. Like Pigneau, he had immersed himself in the local milieu and evolved in it like a fish to water. He, too, found himself in a position of lending strong support to local rulers in moments of crisis. Pavie knew how to adapt to each situation, changing from military or political consultant to doctor or spiritual healer, such as when he had to lift morale of the royal family of Luang Phrabang. He even had certain advantages over Pigneau: Pavie was fully aware from the outset that his scientific mission had political ends. He never hid the fact that he wanted to extend French sovereignty over the Lao principalities, even if it meant using persuasion, propaganda and force. It was hardly necessary to bend the truth in order that it fit a near perfect image of an ideal colonization. So, why then does Pavie remain marginalized in the French historiography of her ‘colonial heroes’?

We have already mentioned several explanatory factors – the fact that he survived instead of dying a violent but heroic death; his relative discretion upon his return to France; and his absorption in his own publication efforts. To this, one can add other, more fundamental ones. To do so, one must ask to what, exactly, was this colonial need to legitimize in Indochina responding. One then realizes the degree to which this need was immense in Vietnam and much less important in Laos. The French occupation of Vietnam was steeped in blood, following a real war, even if it was referred to as one of ‘pacification’.
Vietnamese monarchy truly witnessed a foreign aggression and did not consent happily to give up its independence, nor to see the existing order crumble to the French. As the pacification drew to a close, a colonial discourse was being constructed that rewrote the history of this intervention in an attempt to smooth over the suffering and bitterness it had caused. It was important to have these things forgotten. Moreover, it soon became apparent to the colonial administration that the Vietnamese would be the driving force of the Indochinese colonial state, not the Lao or Khmers. In other words, without their economic collaboration, as well as the political and intellectual contributions, the Indochinese Union had no future. Justifying 'Franco-Vietnamese collaboration' became a vital necessity for the colonial project in Indochina, especially during World War I, when the French feared that the loyalty of the populations to her would falter. In a way, the war tested the credibility of the message of legitimation, which the government tried to convey to the populations since 1905–1908. For complex cultural and political reasons which we will not try to treat here, Laos and to a lesser degree Cambodia never caused as much ‘trouble’ as Vietnam to the French. Even if one should not accept at face value the myth of the spontaneous Lao gift to France, it is nonetheless clear that French colonialism was installed in western Indochina without too many problems. There was no Lao version of the Vietnamese Cảm Vúng, but rather sporadic revolts among ethnic minorities between 1901 and 1921 (also see the contributions of Martin Stuart-Fox, Bruce Lockhart and Christopher Goscha).

In short, there was not the same urgent need in Laos to construct pseudo-historical myths to validate the idea of immemorial 'Franco-Laotian Collaboration' or to justify the initial, usually violent, act of colonization. Indeed, one looks in vain for such a policy in French colonialism on Laos. The colonial administration was not even interested in advertising the great ease with which the French had established themselves in Laos. Had they done so, the contrast to the situation in Vietnam would have been even starker and not necessarily in the French interest to broadcast. Pavie remained thus a colonial hero of modest size until the end of the 1930s. His memory was only revived when the peaceful situation in Laos was undermined by renewed Thai encroachments in 1940–41, and as France tried to rebuild the Indochinese empire lost to the Japanese in March 1945.

The other side of the coin is something of a paradox. In Vietnam, where the colonial project was born of a much more violent and traumatic shock, 'Franco-Vietnamese collaboration' became in many quarters an appealing idea for part of a Confucian elite willing to bet on a colonial partnership in the 1920s and 1930s. In Laos, however, where the colonial project had been the product of a certain complicity, neither the colonial administration nor the Buddhist elites ever truly moved to create a policy of 'Franco-Lao collaboration' during the
interwar years. One searches in vain for the Lao equivalents of Phạm Quỳnh, Nguyễn Văn Vinh or Bùi Quang Chiểu. Ironically, it was only after World War II, as the French sought to rebuild their Indochinese colonial edifice, that high commissioners would begin to promote the idea of ‘Franco-Lao collaboration’. It was a way of turning the Lao away from new external threats and combating a remarkably similar Vietnamese communist discourse based on anti-colonial collaboration of an Indochinese kind, one which would promote its own version of a ‘special relationship’ with the Lao and find historical moments far in the past with which to ‘prove it’ (see Christopher Goscha’s contribution).
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NOTES

1. The chapter was translated from French by Christopher E. Goscha.
2. René Plevéen (1901–93) had been put in charge of the colonies by the Provisional Government of the French Republic (September 1944) and later served as Deputy from the Côtes du Nord in 1947.
3. The list of the members of honour is provided in ‘Committee of the Centenary of Auguste Pavie, 20 rue de la Boetie, Paris’, p. 1, Archives de la Société de Géographie (Paris), file 4291, box 74.
4. General Azan, President of the Academy of Colonial Sciences, Robert Delavignette, Paul Mus, Amédée Outrey and Paul Rivet.
5. The 1921 edition had long been sold out.
7. My thanks to Mr Vilbert for the information and documentation he provided me on the ceremonies for Pavie from the past and present.
8. This was the title of one of the articles published in Ouest-France and dedicated to the commemorations of 1997. See, for example, the issue of 29 September 1997.
15. ‘The last century saw Brazza in Africa and Pavie in Asia, through entirely peaceful means, […] gave so eminent contributions to the cause of our overseas expansion. And yet, if one […] had reached the pinnacle of fame, it seems that the notoriety of the second does not equal that of the first’. Paul Blanchard de la Brosse, ‘La mission Pavie et l’action pacifique de la France dans la vallée du Mékong’. In Ligue Maritime et
Coloniale Française, La mer et l’empire, 3rd series, Paris: Éditions Ariane, 1945, pp. 54–73 and p. 54 for the citation.

16. He first set out for adventure by enlisting to fight in Mexico, but the army refused to send him, deeming him to be too frail. He had to wait for a new opportunity to come along, this time in Cochin China.


18. See, for example, the introduction to Volume I of the Mission Pavie, 1879–1895: Géographie et Voyages, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1901.


21. The school would be renamed the École Nationale de la France d’Outre-Mer (ENFOM) in 1950, then the Institut des Hautes Études d’Outre-Mer in 1959.

22. This type of raid was common currency since at least the eighteenth century. Examples abound, such as the way by which the Siamese seized Vientiane in 1778 and the sack of Vientiane in 1827, among others.

23. See, for example, the epic story of these events given by Paul Blanchard de la Brosse, ‘La mission Pavie et l’action pacifique de la France’, pp. 54–73.


25. The Ho were Chinese warriors, organized in groups also called the Black, Red and Yellow Flags.

26. This crossing over to the French side had important political consequences, for France could then obligate the Siamese to cede the twelve Thai cantons of the Black River. In exchange for his support, the French recognized the authority of Deo Van Tri over these territories.

27. Exploration at this time did not simply mean discovering unknown territories, but mapping them out and thereby opening them to conquest.

28. 14,400 km from 1889 to 1891, but nearly 40,000 km would be covered during the mission by 1895.

29. In 1887, an ‘Indochinese Union’ was constituted, when the Ministries of the Navy and Colonies took over direction of Annam and Tonkin. Together with Cochin China and Cambodia, these two colonial entities were placed under the authority of a Governor-General. Laos began to be incorporated into this Union from 1893.

30. A Laotian ‘lobby’ had even been created in Paris in the late 1880s, which supported the imperialist projects of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.


32. Paul Pavie died in 1940 without progeny.

34. This anecdote is related by Madame Pavie in her ‘Souvenirs’.
35. The Société de géographie bestowed upon him their prestigious gold medal.
38. The only exception to this modesty: Pavie accepted a seat on the municipal council of Thourie, and became its mayor one year before his death.
42. Henri de Brancion, ‘De Dinan à Luang Prabang: Quatre statues d’Auguste Pavie’, Le Pays de Dinan, vol. 20, 2000, pp. 131–143. A copy of the original statue by Anna Quinquaud, which one can still see in the entrance to the Académie des Sciences d’Outre-Mer (Rue de la Pérouse in Paris), was inaugurated in the English Garden of Dinan in 1947, where it can still be found today.
44. André Charton, director of Public Education in Indochina, who wrote the preface to Bernard Bourrotte, Pavie, Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, no year.
45. See, in particular, chapter thirteen: ‘Pavie, Paysan de France. La conquête des cœurs’. In Bourrotte, Pavie, p. 64 for the citation.
49. Albert de Pouvourville, Pavie, Paris: Larose, 1933, especially chapter two.
50. These manuals can serve as a barometer for evaluating the popularity of this or that colonial or indigenous ‘hero’, and give an idea of the way in which colonial legitimation was transcribed in France. They allow one to see that which public opinion of the time retained about the Empire. They have been recently studied by Eric Savarese, *L’ordre colonial et sa légitimation en France métropolitaine*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998 and Jean-François Guilhaume, *Les mythes fondateurs de l’Algérie française*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992. For easy reference to these manuals, one can consult the *Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique* in Paris.


52. Moreover, Pavie himself had the feeling he was following in the footsteps of his predecessors, to whom he often referred in his works. We know that it was Pavie who found and paid homage to Mouhot’s burial place. See also Loïc-René Vilbert, ‘Auguste Pavie ou le conquérant aux mains nues’, pp. 392–401.

53. He mentions Mouhot, who mapped the layout of Angkor Wat and reached Luang Phrabang, as well as the work of Doudart de Lagrée and Paul Neis in Lower Laos. See Jean Ajalbert, *L’Indochine par les Français*, Paris: Gallimard, 1931. Of course, he forgot to mention the Dutch explorers who reached Laos in the seventeenth century, such as Wuythoff.


55. The title of ‘French pioneer in Laos’ was attributed to him later, on the occasion of the issuing of a commemorative stamp in 1947. By this time, the image of Pavie had become symbolic, something which enhanced his reputation. See below. Moreover, the names of Mouhot and de Doudart de Lagrée had faded from the scene.


60. ‘It was France who first gave rise to all the awakening of Laos’, as one can read in the special edition on Laos published by *Asie Nouvelle*, October 1936, p. 13. This idea was widespread in the colonial discourse that had been constructed since the end of the nineteenth century out of a mixture of scientism and Social Darwinism. This idea of an ‘awakening’ found itself applied more widely to Indochina, indeed all of Asia. Thanks to France and the West, it had been liberated from what was hastily judged to be backward if not decadent societies.


62. ‘Finally Pavie and his collaborators […] brought under our influence by the sole
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64. To cite one more example, see Cabaton: ‘For twenty-five years, all of his diplomacy was based on sincerity and humanity, operating in those countries of the Orient where deceit is political dogma, where ruse is a veritable social virtue. He soon earned the respect and surprised affection of the peoples of these contested zones’. Cabaton, L’œuvre d’Auguste Pavie en Indochine, p. 6.

65. It would have been ill-advised for the French to criticize Vietnamese expansionism in Laos, since they themselves were claiming the ‘traditional rights’ of the Court of Hue to do precisely that in Laos.

66. See, for example, the work of Reinach, Le Laos and of Paul Le Boulanger, Histoire du Laos français: Essai d’une étude chronologique des principautés laotiennes, Paris: Plon, 1931.

67. Based on the expression used by Jean Boy, ‘Auguste Pavie, le conquérant des cœurs’.


69. Note the irony, quoted quite innocently by Malleret: ‘The French took up the Siamese justifications for intervening in Laos (the protection of the population against the marauding Chinese bands) to use it for their own ends’. Malleret, ‘Auguste Pavie, explorateur et conquérant pacifique’, p. 8.

70. Reinach, Le Laos, p. 3.
72. Pouvoirville, Pavie, p. 28.
73. Reinach, Le Laos, p. 3.
75. Reinach, Le Laos, p. 10.
78. This is the symbolic phrase that was chosen for Pavie’s commemorative plaque in honour of Pavie, erected on the façade of his private house in Dinan (rue du Rempart).
81. One of the subtitles to Jean Boy’s article was: ‘We will offer ourselves as a gift


83. This idea would be soon taken up again in an article in Ouest-France, ‘150e anniversaire de l’explorateur et diplomate. Dinan célèbre l’œuvre d’Auguste Pavie’, which tells us that, ‘He incarnated the human face of colonialism’.

84. Letter from René Pleven to De Martonne, 29 October, 1946, 1 page recto-verso, in the Archives de la Société de Géographie, box 74, file 4291. My emphasis.

85. Literally, ‘Save the King’, this anti-French resistance movement emerged in July 1885, led by the Emperor Hàm Ngh´ who had been forced to flee the old imperial capital of Hue. The movement received support from Vietnamese of various walks of life throughout the country.


87. The French discourse assumed that French colonialism had more elevated and noble motives than the British, whose aims were considered to be basely mercantile.


89. Albert Sarraut, ‘La mission civilisatrice de la France’, Nam Phong, published serially from July to October 1925; the citation is from the August 1925 issue, p. 18.

90. For a detailed reconstitution of the life and the action of Pigneau, see Frédéric Mantienne, Monseigneur Pigneau de Béhaine, évêque d’Adran, dignitaire de Cochinchine, Paris: Églises d’Asie, 1999.


The creation of Laos can be traced to the Siamese-French treaties at the turn of the twentieth century. Diplomatically, these agreements established the limits of French and Thai colonial expansion into the Mekong region. As the new colonial possession of Laos came into being, it formed part of two larger and competing spatial layouts that could have potentially superseded Laos as a nation-state. One was that of an Indochina-wide colonial space, which many French colonial administrators dreamed of making a reality.1 Another was that of a Greater Siam – baptized Thailand in 1939 – including part of the territories making up present-day Laos and Cambodia. This captured many Thai nationalists’ imaginations, especially in the 1930s during the high tide of militant Thai nationalism. Caught in this regional crossfire, Laos was a contested space.

This chapter seeks to examine how this idea of a ‘Greater Siam’ or ‘Thailand’, running counter to national boundaries at the turn of the twentieth century, was articulated in Siam between 1900 and World War II. This is a period during which a coup in 1932 overthrew the absolute monarchy, and in so doing opened the way to a nationalist revolution. A few years later, an authoritative military government emerged under Phibun Songkhram, which pushed a militant pan-Thai nationalism and sought to implant a growing sense of national unity to secure political legitimacy.2 Under the premiership of Phibun Songkhram in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the pan-Thai ideology was linked with an irredentist drive designed to incorporate Laos and Cambodia, among others, into a Greater Siam, or Thailand as his government termed it officially in 1939. This nationalist campaign culminated in 1941, when Thai troops attacked the French colonial possessions in Indochina and subsequently annexed parts of Laos and Cambodia with the backing of the
Figure 10.1. Erasing Laos from cartographic representations. Map popularized in Siam in the 1920–30. (Atlas-Geography of Siam)
This military campaign was known as ‘the campaign for a return of the lost territories’.

This chapter is thus a study of Thai nationalist discourse on Laos and how it stressed the sameness of Lao and Thai in geo-historical and racial terms. The idea is to examine more closely how Laos was defined as a Thai space in terms of perceptions of history and race. The first part of this reflection looks at how Thai nationalists incorporated the ‘lost territories’ of the left bank of the Mekong, that is, most of modern Laos, into a wider Thai historical and nationalist geography. The second part then examines how these same Thai defined the Lao, the inhabitants of modern Laos, into a greater Thai space with reference to notions of race. In that connection, it will be shown how the perception of Laos as a separate ethnic or racially defined space was contested with reference to the notion of Suwannaphum, the Golden Land, or Laem Thong, the Golden Peninsula.

THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Direct Siamese involvement in the territories east of the Mekong, which later became known as Laos, can be traced to the late eighteenth century. At that time, the Lan Xang Kingdom, which long had formed the centre of gravity for Lao political power in the Mekong region, had been split into three rival kingdoms – Luang Phrabang, Vientiane and Champasak. In the late 1770s, they became vassals of King Taksin’s (1767–82) newly resurrected Siam. The paradigm of power and interstate relations of the premodern period guided Siamese suzerainty over these territories. This implied that the Lao vassals retained a great measure of autonomy and Siamese intervention was expressed primarily through the naming of new rulers. The Lao vassals could consolidate and expand their own tributary networks, as well as be part of other tributary networks. (See Grabowsky’s contribution). Later, the destruction and depopulation of Vientiane in the 1820s and repeated campaigns designed to depopulate parts of the east bank territories in the 1820s to 1830s represented much more tangible ways of expressing Siamese suzerainty. Still, these endeavours cannot be associated with policies aimed at establishing a geographically bounded state with fixed borders and undivided sovereignties. Rather, within the framework of interstate relations of the premodern period, they represented an attempt to maintain the territories east of the Mekong as a ‘buffer zone’ – or as an ‘overlapping margin’ as Thongchai Winichakul has termed it – through depopulation and continued acceptance of overlapping tributary networks.

Initially, the French focus on the Mekong region followed their expansion into Cochinchina in the early 1860s. This was linked to the hope that the Mekong River could be turned into a commercial route to China. Although the
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Mekong expedition under the leadership of Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier (1866–68) made it all the way to China on the Mekong, the expedition ended the dream of the Mekong as a trade passage. The rapids and cataracts were insurmountable obstacles. The Mekong region north of Cambodia was temporarily removed from the agenda of French colonial expansion. By the 1880s, however, French interest in the Mekong region re-emerged. But by then the territories east of the Mekong, which subsequently became Laos, were, from a Siamese perspective, regarded as Siam’s own domain.

The influence of European colonialism introduced new ideas to the region about fixed borders and undivided sovereignties. This had emerged in the late nineteenth century and from the early 1880s the King of Siam in public statements claimed that the territories that later became Laos were part of Siam. The premodern system of multiple suzerainty and overlapping margins was giving way to notions of exclusive territorial sovereignty and modern territorial rights. Military commanders were sent from Bangkok to the contested zones and a military presence was established there. Expeditions were sent to map out what was perceived to be the authentic and timeless ‘geo-body’ of Siam.

The French response was twofold. One was to increase gradually their presence in the territories east of the Mekong through a number of expeditions, commercial agents and military garrisons. Second, they sought material to establish Annamese (the colonial term referring to the Vietnamese Nguyễn Kingdom) historical tributary rights to the territory east of the Mekong – rights that the French had taken over when a French protectorate over Annam and Tonkin had been established in the 1880s. In the end, the ‘Lao fate’ of the territories on the Mekong was decided outside the Mekong region itself. In 1893 France sent gunboats up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok and forced the King of Siam to sign a treaty whereby Siam relinquished all claims to the territories east of the Mekong. Siamese colonial expansion into the territories across the Mekong was halted and the river was adopted as the border between Siam and the new colonial construct of Laos. For the Siamese elite, French intervention at this point was associated with the ‘loss of territory’. According to Thai historian Thamrong Sak Phertlert-anan, the ‘loss of territories’ was an issue treated with caution among the Siamese elite in the early twentieth century. This was due to the fact that references to this part of Siam’s recent past, when the absolute king was forced at gunpoint to submit to the demands of a foreign power, discredited royal dignity and could potentially be associated with an attempt to compromise the absolute monarchy. Another reason was fear that public treatment of this issue would damage the relationship between Siam and France. This was at least the reason given by former minister of interior and founder of the National Library in Bangkok, Damrong Rachanuphab, when, in 1925, he halted the publication of a book entitled Memoirs From the Time When France Occupied Chanthaburi, 1893–1904, written by a Thai official. Later, Wichit Wathakan, the chief ideologue
of Thai nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, probably had these ideas in mind, when, in a 1940 speech dealing explicitly with the loss of territories in 1940, he noted that people who had previously written about this subject had to conceal many ‘truths’ because of ‘fear for upsetting [people] causing danger for oneself and nation’. However, the 1932 military coup in Bangkok – which toppled the absolute monarchy – paved the way for a more open treatment of this touchy issue in the rapidly emerging nationalist discourse. Indeed, the ‘lost territories’ became a nationalist question. The coup implied, as Thongchai Winichakul has noted, that the wound of 1893 no longer was inferred on royal dignity, but was transferred to that of the nationhood, a stain on the Siamese past. Illustrative of this change, the book stopped by Damrong in 1925 was published in 1936, and three years later an account by the same author of the French occupation of Trat was published. The changing events in Europe and Asia, especially as World War II began in China in 1937, held out the possibility that a new conjuncture would allow Siam to reverse this ‘shame’ in concrete, territorial ways (an issue that will be discussed later).

MAKING LAOS ‘OUR’ SPACE: BELONGING IN HISTORY

In conformity with Thamrongnak’s observation, a study of Siamese history and geography schoolbooks used in the first two decades of the twentieth century shows that many of them are silent about the loss of territories, even though these matters formed an important part of Siam’s very recent past. However, a reading of Siamese school textbooks from the pre-1932 period reveals that the issue of the territorial ‘losses’ inflicted on Siam in the wake of the colonial encounter was not entirely banned from officially sanctioned knowledge about the formation of Siam. In a geography textbook from 1908, for example, students are presented with the following knowledge under the heading ‘something to be remembered’:

The left bank territories of the Mekong used to be a major monthon in our country and people in that locality are ‘Northern Siamese’, whom we once called ‘Thai-Lao’. In year 112 of the Ratanakosin Era [1893] [these territories] fell to France and were integrated into Annam (prathetsarat-yuan).

To characterize the left bank territories of the Mekong as a monthon in Siam is an anachronism, since this term refers to an administrative structure first introduced in 1892–93. However, by invoking this anachronism, the text conveys a clear message: the left bank territories used to be as much a part of Siam as all the monthons found within contemporary Siam, now delimited by internationally recognized boundaries. While the textbook’s author was a teacher at the army’s officer training academy, the book was intended for
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general use in Siam. Indeed, it had received official approval from the Department of Education.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, the fact that the issue of territorial losses had been excluded from other textbooks published by this institution did not imply that this was an issue to be banned from schoolbooks altogether.\textsuperscript{17}

Moreover, the subject of the ‘lost territories’ can be found in another geography textbook on Siam published in 1925 by the Department of Textbooks.\textsuperscript{18} Despite its title, \textit{Geography Textbook}, this book did not focus exclusively on Siam’s geography; it served, too, as a general introduction to various aspects of Siam, including religion, culture, language and history. In several parts of the book, the issue of the ‘lost territories’ figures as an intrinsic feature of the knowledge about Siam passed on to the students. In the section dealing with the different administrative parts of Siam, for example, several references are made to how neighbouring territories now under foreign rule ‘used to be Thai’ (\textit{tae doem pen khong thai}) or ‘used to be under Thai rule’ (\textit{tae doem yu nai khwam pokkrong thai}).\textsuperscript{19} Further, in the part dealing with the history of Siam the issue of the ‘lost territories’ figures prominently. On the whole, this part of the textbook provides an outline of Siam’s history running as a straight spatial and chronological line from the historical centres of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok to the present.\textsuperscript{20} The making of this perception of Siam’s history can be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century and pointed up the emerging of a national history that went beyond dynastic history.\textsuperscript{21} When dealing with territorial fortunes of Siam in the Thonburi and Bangkok periods, the \textit{Geography Textbook} presents a picture of a fluctuating Siam, in which the knowledge about the loss of the territories emerges. It associates the reigns of King Taksin of Thonburi (1767–82) and King Rama I of Bangkok (1782–1809) with a steady process of territorial expansion, with the latter’s territorial control being ‘more extensive than in any period’, including the territories on the left bank of the Mekong.\textsuperscript{22} However, that of one of his successors, King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), appears as follows:

Siam had to withdraw the authority (\textit{thon annat}) it held over Cambodia and give it to France. In addition, France also requested Siam’s territory on the left bank of the Mekong, claiming that this territory used to be a colony of Annam which now was a colony of France. The truth, however, is that the territory in question used to belong to Lao Vientiane, which was a colony over which Siam held absolute rights (\textit{mueang khuen khong thai doi sitthi-khat}).\textsuperscript{23}

In this manner the issue of the ‘lost territories’ was incrementally incorporated into an officially sanctioned knowledge about Siam’s history and geography. There is a shift from ‘forgetting’ to ‘remembering’. One of the first to give a more detailed account of the ‘loss’ was Wichit Wathakan. As mentioned above, Wichit Wathakan emerged as the chief ideologue for the
nationalist regime in the 1930s, especially in his role as Director General of the Fine Arts Department and as a prolific writer of articles, books and plays carrying a highly nationalistic message. Through this, he pushed the issue of the lost territories to the forefront of the nationalist discourse. His first detailed account of the ‘loss’ of territories in a general description of Siam’s history appears in his *A Universal History*, published in the last years of the absolute monarchy. The first edition of *A Universal History* included twelve books, the first of which appeared in 1929 and the rest being published over the next two years. In this large collection, the ‘lost territories’ received unprecedented treatment. Wichit presented a detailed account of the territorial losses to France, dividing this process into five phases, each encompassing various geographical entities. The first covered the loss of a large part of Cambodia in 1867, followed by Sipsong Chuthai in 1888, the rest of the left bank in 1893, territories on the right bank opposite Luang Phrabang and Champasak in 1904 and finally the loss of the Khmer provinces of Siamreap, Sisophon and Battambang in 1907.24

In each case, he enumerated how many square kilometres had been ceded, explaining that the total added up to the size of contemporary Siam. The disappearance of the territories was made more tangible by quantifying the ‘loss’ and placing it in time and space. Further, he presents the text of the treaties between Siam and France, thus rendering very real this part of Siam’s ‘painful’ recent past to his readers.25 Second, Wichit emphasizes how this issue has to be regarded as an integrated part of Siam’s national history. Thus, when dealing with the reign of King Chulalongkorn – the reign during which most of the territorial losses were inflicted – Wichit explains how he finds it important to study this reign both for what was gained and what was lost.26 Here the first point refers to such things as the abolition of slavery, the introduction of a new educational system and the developments in Siam’s infrastructure, all of which signalled how King Chulalongkorn was moving Siam towards a ‘new age’. For this, he called the king a ‘true revolutionary’.27 The second point refers to the ‘loss’ of territories inflicted on Siam. Here, however, Wichit shifts his focus:

With regard to the losses, that is the loss of territory, this is not due to faults of the king or the government of that time. It was a matter beyond control (*rueang hetutvisai*); no one was able to take preventive measures against it. We were forced to give up territory adding up to half of the country due to one reason – namely that we are a small country with inferior strength and we could not withstand a greater power that forced us [to cede these territories].28

In this way, Wichit made sure that the inclusion of this subject would not be regarded as an attempt to discredit the king. Wichit’s *A Universal History* became very popular. Not only was it one of the best selling publications of the era,29 but it was also used as a textbook at Thammasat University until the end of World War II.30 Wichit’s text can be said to have paved the way for a full
integration of the territorial losses into the unilinear historical narrative of Siam as a timeless national body and a similar treatment can be found in textbooks used in the period after 1932 on the geography and history of Siam.31

MAKING LAOS ‘OUR’ SPACE: RETHINKING NATIONAL MAPS

The idea of lost territories was even easier to grasp in various so-called historical maps of Siam popularized after 1932.32 Generally, the occurrence of such maps is associated with bringing the irredentist cause to the forefront of public discourse in Siam in the post-1932 period. At this time, the issue of the restoration of the lost territories became an important political objective for the military government, since it gave ‘an embryonic nation-state its pride and wash[ed] out [the] humiliation it had witnessed in the recent past’, as Thai historian Somkiat Wanthana has put it.33 One such map was the Map of the History of Thailand’s Boundaries, published by the Ministry of Defence in 1935. The map depicted what was perceived as the extent of Siam in the early Bangkok period and indicated the sequence of territories later lost to France and Britain. This map was widely used in schools and military training centres.34

Another graphic representation of the ‘lost’ territories is found in a series of maps published by the Royal Survey Department in 1935–36. They depicted the territorial extent of historical Thai kingdoms through the ages and included the left-bank territories as a part of Siam. The most recent map referred to the early Bangkok period during the reign of King Rama I (1782–1809), which predated the territorial encroachment on Siam done by European colonial powers. Therefore, the territorial losses are not explicitly indicated in this set of historical maps, unlike the map published by the Ministry of Defense referred to above. If a map of Siam in the 1930s was compared with any of the historical maps, however, it was clear that Siam had shrunk in size since the early Bangkok period and thus the tale of the lost territories was implicitly told. Such a comparison can be found in Lessons in the History of Siam – a history textbook used at the military academy – where the boundaries of contemporary Siam had been plotted upon a map of Siam in the early Bangkok period, thereby displaying the changing territorial fortunes of Siam in a recent past.35

These maps all convey the impression that the left bank territories formed an integral part of Siam in a recent past, delimited by boundaries just like the territories making up modern Siam. In the same manner, as the geography textbook from 1908 claimed, the left bank territories – or rather Laos – used to form an important monthon in Siam.36 In 1935, a nationalist group, Khana Yuwasan, published the booklet Siam in the Ratanakosin Era Year 112. They make the same point.37 A map in the book makes this clear by showing the northeastern boundary of Siam before 1893 following the Annamese
Cordillera. In the text, the left-bank territories of the Mekong and the Khorat Plateau are collectively referred to as ‘Siam-Isan’ (sayam phak isan) – that is, the northeastern part of Siam. Initially introduced by the Siamese government in 1900 as the name of one of the administrative entities on the Khorat Plateau, the term ‘Siam-Isan’ or just ‘Isan’ became widely accepted as the designation for the whole of the Khorat Plateau by the early 1920s. By employing this term with reference to a much earlier period, these authors wanted to play up the similarity between the historic region and the one region with the same name in a contemporary Siam, again delimited by modern boundaries. Furthermore, the publication throughout the 1920s and 1930s of various historical documents and accounts related to the suppression of Chao Anou’s ‘revolt’ in Vientiane reiterated the idea of the left-bank territories forming part of Siam’s historical realm of influence.

Another characteristic embedded in the perception of the left-bank territories as lost territories is that the colonial state of Laos is not perceived as a historically constituted state. Such a perception is implicit in descriptions of the ‘lost territories’. These nationalist publications define the major part of the left-bank territories constituting Laos as simply a geographical entity – the ‘left-bank territories’ – and not as a political entity: ‘Laos’. Indeed, the perception of ‘Laos’ as a ‘non-country’ is conveyed in various textbooks discussing the reasons why Siam’s neighbours had to succumb to foreign powers. Take, for example, the book called Lessons in the History of Siam referred to earlier. Here the reader is informed that the Siamese King Chulalongkorn acted wisely by acknowledging the military superiority of the Western powers. He rightly avoided any acts that could possibly have provoked a military confrontation and could have consequently led to the colonization of Siam. Contrary to this prudent policy, Burma and Annam, we are told, pursued a disastrous path of confrontation, while the Cambodian king actually invited French colonialism into his country because he wished to be under French rule. My point here is that no political state called ‘Laos’, with an individual political will, is to be found on the historical scene of colonial confrontation. Nor is the king of Luang Phrabang mentioned. In this way, ‘Laos’ was not a historically constituted state comparable with Siam or Cambodia on the eve of Western colonial expansion into the region in the mid-nineteenth century. As the ‘Thai’ Ministry of Interior put it in a book published in 1940 on the administrative formation of French Indochina:

France got the district [my emphasis] of Laos (khwaen lao) as a protectorate after signing a treaty with Siam and not with a local ruler, since Laos at that time really was a part of Thailand. Therefore, although Laos in reality has the status of a protectorate, it has a lower status than Cambodia, which became a protectorate in accordance with a treaty between France and a local ruler that
still legally rules the country. Accordingly, Laos is only a protectorate ‘in name’ (nai nam); but in reality it has been treated as a colony (dai rap kan patibat chen diaokan ananikhom thae).44

In general, the perception of a continuous history of Laos spanning from the kingdom of Lan Xang to the modern state of Laos is impaired by a major problem of discontinuity.45 What is remembered about the left-bank territories in the narrative structure discussed above is the period that creates the discontinuity: the period when the left-bank territories, which became the colonial state of Laos, did not constitute an independent politically defined entity, but, from a Siamese nationalist perspective, an integrated part of Siam, indeed, ‘Thailand’ by the 1930s (see below).

That the colonial state of Laos from a contemporary Siamese point of view was perceived as an ‘anomaly’, indeed as a ‘non-country’, is reflected in many maps of Siam and surrounding countries that can be found in Thai schoolbooks and other official publications during the 1920 and 1930s. This is the case for a 1934 Reader in Geography. In a section dealing with the neighbouring countries of Siam, students learn that ‘Laos’ is one of the five ‘dependencies’ (prathetsarat) making up the neighbouring French colonial domain.46 However, in its Map of Siam, which includes the adjacent territories, no territorial entity called ‘Laos’ is there.47 (See Figure 10.1). The only territorial entities found on this map are those of Siam, Annam and Cambodia. Similarly, the first lesson in a 1925 Atlas-Geography used at the Collège de l’Assomption in Bangkok outlines how ‘Siam is limited on the North by the Shan States of Burma, and Tonkin; on the East by Annam and Cambodia’ and how the Mekong River separates Siam ‘from the French territories of Annam and Cambodia’.48 It is hard to believe that these are simply repeated accidents in cartography. States always put great care into what they teach their citizens and how they draw their maps. Instead this map confirms the perception of Siam’s geo-political layout as not including a territorial entity called ‘Laos’, but as it actually being an integrated part of the Siamese nation. In the same manner, for the Siamese authorities, Laos is erased from the surface of the earth in an introductory geography book of 1932. In the book it is noted that in the east Siam shares the border with Annam (yuan), which is a French colony, and in the north with ‘Lao-Vientiane and Luang Phrabang which are part of Annam’.49 From this perspective the left-bank territories that became the colonial space of Laos were perceived as having been ceded from being a part of Siam to becoming part of another overall space, that of Annam (itself part of the colonial state of French Indochina). Within the logic of this historical framework, the colonial space of Laos was not perceived as a geo-political entity that could aspire to an independent nationhood legitimated with reference to a historical projection or distinctiveness delineated with reference to history.
Making Laos ‘Our’ Space: Thai Discourses on History and Race, 1900–1941

Suwannaphum or Laem Thong: The Racial Link

Rethinking maps and history in nationalist ways was not enough. Race was also an issue. The people recognized as ‘Lao’ were split into two groups when the Mekong was established as an internationally recognized boundary between the nascent nation-state of Siam and the colonial state of French Laos. For centuries, the elite in Siam had differentiated themselves from the Lao and from the second half of the nineteenth century Western ‘colonial anthropology’ buttressed this differentiation. At that time, the logic of racial classifications provided what was seen as a scientific means to classify the people encountered by the European colonial powers during the high tide of Western colonial expansion. An overall classificatory grid emerged in which the Siamese/Thai and Lao were incorporated as different ‘branches’ of the inclusive Thai race. Whereas race implies classification in accordance with biological characteristics, language and culture were in fact determining.

Subsequently, turning Siam into a modern nation-state was associated with a process of ‘racial-homogenizing’ set in motion by the Siamese state. With regard to the Lao, this process implied that the Lao had to be erased ‘ethnically, historically and demographically from Siam’. Basically, this was achieved, first, by ‘forgetting’ the distinction between the different branches of the ‘Thai race’ living in Siam. Instead, they were grouped together simply as ‘Thai’. At the same time the concepts of ‘Thai nationality’ and the ‘Thai race’ were merged in the term ‘Chat Thai’ whereby the entire population of the country became ‘Thai’. The Lao in Siam were turned into Thai and Siam was turned into ‘Thai-land’ (prathet thai), a term which was being used in Thai language legal documents from the early twentieth century. Officially, in foreign languages ‘Siam’ was the name of the country until it was changed to ‘Thailand’ by the Thai government in 1939, a change that was implemented to merge – also in foreign languages – the name of the country with the projected racial composition of the population: Thai ruled over Thai in Thailand. However, the change of name from Siam to Thailand also was fuelled by the pan-Thai nationalist ideology and the irredentist campaign, which was popularized in Siam during the 1930s, and expressed the desire to expand the country to englobe the various branches of the ‘Thai race’ now living under the colonial yoke in other countries. The change from ‘Siam’ to ‘Thailand’ can be seen as a prelude to the military campaign for a return of the lost territories, which materialized in 1940–41.

As we shall see, this process of turning the Lao into Thai and Siam into Thailand had implications not only for Thai perceptions of the Lao in Siam, but also for the Thai discourse on the Lao in Laos. If we look at schoolbooks used in Siam in the early twentieth century, we can see how the Lao in Laos initially had been singled out from the Thai in Siam. Through the 1930s, however, a new discourse on the Lao in Laos was in the making. According to
this view, racial kindred between the Lao in Laos and the Thai in Siam were stressed. Just as the Lao in Siam had become Thai, the Lao in Laos also became defined as Thai. The notion of an extensive and common Siam-centred ‘Thai space’, including, among others, the French colonial space of Laos, was evolving. A ‘Thai space’ defined with reference to racial kindred within the overall ‘Thai race’ in spite of the fact that an international boundary divided the two spaces.

The book *The Tai Race*, written by the American missionary William Clifton Dodd and published in 1923, stimulated the pan-Thai ideology that flourished in Siam in the 1930s. In this nationalist imagining, presumed origins are important and within Dodd’s narrative the Thai race is in fact older than civilizations normally associated with antiquity – both in an Asian and Western context. As the subtitle of the book reveals, the Thai race is not only the ‘elder brother’ of the Chinese, but according to Dodd, the Thai race was also civilized ‘while our ancestors were still wearing skins and using flint knives’. Equally important is the ‘spatial dimension’ of the Thai race depicted by Dodd. Here I have in mind how Dodd lines up the different branches of the ‘Thai race’, locates them in space, and how the Thai race is quantified with reference to the grand total of people making up this race. In this manner a ‘racially’ defined Thai-space running across state boundaries emerges. The immense extent of the ‘Thai race’, in Dodd’s view, called for a new definition of missionary work:

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

With regard to the ‘broadening effects of the War’, Dodd refers to what he sees as the new perception of the world that had come into being after World War I, which ‘has taught us to pay less attention to arbitrary civil boundaries, and more attention to racial lines’. Although Dodd most probably only thought in terms of missionary work, such statements must have given Thai nationalists food for thought. The book could be read as an important nationalist manifesto. Dodd stressed what can be termed a principle of ‘unity in diversity’ by upholding the distinction not only between the Siamese in Siam and the Lao in Laos, but also between the other branches of the Thai race.

An examination of two texts by Wichit Wathakan provides a glimpse into conceptual changes with regard to the perception of the Lao in Laos, which took place in Siam in the 1930s. In his *A Universal History*, Wichit followed...
the same principle of ‘unity in diversity’ as Dodd. ‘Lao’ and ‘Siamese Thais’ figure as two branches of the overall Thai race associated with two different territories – that of French Laos and Siam. In his 1933 book, *Siam and Suwannaphum*, a shift in the labelling of racial sub-categories emerges. On the one hand, Wichit starts by presenting a racial layout expressing the same principle of ‘unity in diversity’ as in the earlier text. Thus, he divides the overall Thai race into two larger sub-categories: the ‘greater Thais’ (*thai yai*) and ‘minor Thais’ (*thai noi*). The last category then is further divided into, among others, ‘Siamese’ or ‘Siamese Thais’ (*thai-sayam*) and ‘Lao’. Furthermore, Wichit singles out ‘Laos’ (*prathet lao*) as an individual country, which could be used to reinforce a notion of distinctiveness between the Siamese and the Lao. On the other hand, the Siamese-Lao distinction is blurred throughout the text. Wichit points out that the term ‘Lao’ actually should be avoided, as it is a misnomer:

> As for the Lao [. . .] I refer to the group occupying the upper part of the left bank of the Mekong today. In reality, however, we should not call them ‘Lao’ at all. The reason why we call them Lao is that they are under French rule today and the French call them Lao. [Therefore] we also have to call them Lao officially. Actually, our brothers and sisters on the bank of the Mekong are genuine Thais with no less Thai blood than we Siamese (*chao-sayam*). They [i.e. Lao and Siamese] are like a married couple and they [i.e. the Lao] have a history that is intertwined with us Siamese Thais [. . .].

In conformity with this perception Wichit seldom uses the term ‘Lao’ in the text. Even when dealing with the history of the Lan Xang Kingdom – the founding myth of a distinctive Lao history – the term ‘Lao’ is clearly avoided. And yet, Wichit did not apply the term ‘Thai’ to the Lan Xang kingdom either. Instead, he associates the history of this kingdom with names of kings and cities, not with any label signalling ‘racial’ belonging. Finally, when Wichit in the end of the book summarizes the racial composition of mainland Southeast Asia, he only mentions the Thai, Burmese, Khmer, Annamese and Malays. Wichit explains that Lao and Shan are not singled out, since these groups are ‘genuine Thais’. They are included in the Thai-group. In this way the differences within the overall ‘Thai race’ are forgotten and the Lao in Laos have become ‘Thai’. The notion of Laos as a distinct space from Siam defined with reference to race is thus contested. In this text Wichit can be said to have set the agenda for the discourse on Laos as a part of a Thai space and the Lao as Thai, popularized under guise of the campaign for a return of the lost territories in 1940–41. He would go even further as French Indochina began to crumble, going so far as to promote the idea of a ‘Thai’ *Suwannaphum* (Golden Land) or a ‘Thai’ *Laem Thong* (Golden Peninsula).
Suwannaphum is a term that occurs in various Buddhist texts as the name of a region believed to be part of Southeast Asia, to where King Asoka sent missionaries to spread Buddhism in the third century B.C. Wichit latched on to this idea for other reasons. In his *A Universal History*, he used it as a collective term to refer (vaguely) to the region made up of Burma, Siam, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia and Annam. He preferred this term to the one coined by Danish geographer Malte-Brun: ‘Indochina’. No explicit reasons are put forward by Wichit, but we can glean some clues by looking at the connotations associated with the two terms. First, *Suwannaphum* represents an indigenous term as compared with a term coined by a foreign colonial power. Second, ‘Indochina’ implies foreign cultural influences from China and India, which is not implied in Wichit’s term. Third, *Suwannaphum* refers to a ‘precolonial’ space, while the term ‘Indochina’ was, in his view, linked to Western colonial borders, especially since the French had borrowed the pre-existing idea of Indochina to describe their colonial construct made up of Laos, Cambodia and Annam. The term *Laem Thong* is used synonymously with *Suwannaphum* – but is a modern term without the same historical connotations as the latter.

However, in Wichit’s book *Siam and Suwannaphum*, the term emerges as more than a mere regional label. It is employed rather as shorthand for what would have been a ‘greater’ or ‘powerful country’ (*maha-prathet*) encompassing the whole of mainland Southeast Asia if the various races inhabiting this region had been united. In this context, *Suwannaphum* was not linked with a distinct ‘Thai space’. However, Wichit presented some preliminary positions that set the stage for a later ‘Thai-ification’ of this spatial layout. Take, for example, Wichit’s proposition that the Annamese have Thai origins or are of Thai stock. According to Wichit, the Annamese were a Thai group who had originated in southern China and who moved into *Suwannaphum* before the other Thais. Settling on the eastern side of the Annamese Cordillera, they were separated from the rest of the Thai who settled in *Suwannaphum* on the western side of this mountain range: the Annamese Cordillera divided the lives of the Thai and Annamese, who used to be one and the same group, and caused them to split into different lineages. This difference was enhanced by the strong Chinese influence that the Annamese subsequently underwent – according to Wichit, an influence so profound that it ‘completely turned the Annamese into Chinese’. But when dealing with ‘racial classification’, the perceived origin counts. Thus, ‘in reality, if we talk about the lineage in ancient times, the Annamese belongs to the same group as the Thai’. Or:

Due to this reason [the Chinese influence] the Annamese and the Thai, who are friends through thick and thin, belong to the same lineage (*chuea-sai*), had a common life four thousand years ago, but later became very regrettable estranged because of being separated.
Whereas this definition actually moved Suwannaphum in the direction of being defined as a Thai space, this was not a point stressed by Wichit in this context. He simply stressed that the similarities were greater than the differences among the groups of people inhabiting Suwannaphum. However, in many of the plays written by Wichit in the second half of the 1930s the theme of Suwannaphum as a Thai space was widely popularized. In the song Golden Peninsula, included in Wichit’s play The Battle of Thalang, the space of Laem Thong was linked with Siam and the Lao and Shan territories in neighbouring countries. Suwannaphum or Laem Thong were, however, also linked with an even wider Thai space, including not only Siam and the Shan territories in Burma, but all the territories of French Indochina: Laos, Cambodia, and Annam. To define this space as a Thai space involved an inclusion of the Khmers as Thai, which was a major theme in two of Wichit’s plays, Rachamanu (1936) and Phokhun Phamueang (1940).

The play Rachamanu was named after a legendary military commander from the sixteenth century who supposedly played a decisive role in the resurrection of the Ayutthaya Kingdom under King Naresuan and in countering Khmer attempts to break away from Thai suzerainty. The play contains many of the themes which recur in Wichit’s plays – personal love has to be sacrificed for love of the nation and martial qualities are praised. But more importantly, the play was intended to present the audience with two important ‘historical truths’ with regard to the Thai-Khmer relationship, as Wichit put it in his introduction to the play. The first ‘truth’ was that the wars of the past between Siam and Cambodia should not be seen as brutal warfare between two antagonistic ‘nations’ or ‘races’, but between two antagonistic kings. The second ‘truth’, reinforcing the first one, was that the Khmers and Thais were of the same ‘race, religion, and culture’ and are ‘blood relatives’ (yat ruam sailohit). To drive this point home, Wichit made a basic distinction between the terms ‘Khmer’ and ‘Khom’, where Khom refers to the ‘real Khmers’ (khamen thae), who inhabited what became Cambodia before the advent of the Thai people to this region. The term ‘Khmer’ is called an ‘artificial term’ (chue sommut), which a group of Thais that settled in the former Khom territory adopted. To make his point, Wichit further develops his argument along the ‘scientific’ lines of racial classification:

If we follow the fundamental methods used by historians to discuss race (chueachat), namely, face, form of the cranium, food, common diseases, local literature, songs, and music, and compare these for current Thais and Khmers, it is clear that the Khmers of today are Thais. I am prepared to prove this truth to any historian.

In the play itself this contention is neatly presented at the zenith of the action in an exchange between a Thai soldier and the military commander Rachamanu:
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_Soldier_: Khmers and Thais look the same.
_Rachamanu_: Yes, they are Thai like us! They happened to settle down in old Khom territory and came to be called ‘Khmers’. The term ‘Khmer’ is an artificial term and in fact we are all Thai brothers.
_Soldier_: Then we should be friends and not fight each other.
_Rachamanu_: Yes, there will be no reason to fight for a long time. All of us on Laem Thong are of the same stock. [...]. We Thais [thai rao, referring to the Siamese Thais] are the elder brothers. [...]79

The same perception is echoed in the play _Phokhun Phamueang_, which is set in the early fourteenth century and deals with a legendary Thai prince, Phamueang, who fought to liberate the Thais from Khmer suzerainty to establish the first independent kingdom of Sukhothai.80 In the final part of the play the same lesson on the Thai-identity of the Khmers is taught once again as Nang Sikhon – the Khmer wife of Phamueang – asks Nai Man why her husband refrained from enthroning himself:

_Nai Man_: Because [your husband] is uneasy as his wife is of another race (tang chat). To place him as ruler is not right (mo-meng). [...]
_Nang Sikhon_: You are wrong. What a resentful idea. Why does he hold that I am of another race? This is a major mistake. You should be able to see that Khmers are Thai. For ages Khom blood has vanished and of the old Khom only remains the name today. Khmers are of real Thai stock because the Thai are divided into many lineages. The Annamese (yuan-kaeo) and Khmer are Thai through and through. Take a look! On what points do our face and colour of skin differ? For several hundreds of years Thai blood has been running in Khmer veins making them one race. [...].81

The perception of Suwannaphum as a Thai space is also popularized by Wichit in the 1938 song _Thai Blood_. He compares the movement of the Thai in historical times to a stream of blood flowing across the ‘Golden Land’.82 The same notion of the Thai covering Suwannaphum as floodwaters is invoked in the opening scene of the 1939 play _Nan Chao_, presented as a historical lesson describing the movement of the Thai into Suwannaphum.83 The scene culminates with the presentation of a map showing the extent of the Thai race while one of the persons in the play voices the desire for all Thais to be united.84 By means of this notion of a steady stream of Thai flowing southwards from China, Suwannaphum thus emerges as a ‘Thai-land’ or ‘Thai-space’ with a crucial mythical past providing a sense of historical legitimacy for the present ‘flows’. Although the various groups of this ‘Thai people’, including the Khmer and Annamese, were later subjected to different developments, they were linked together in a distant past. That is what counted most. Within this framework Suwannaphum or Laem Thong became synonymous with an enlarged ‘Thai-
space’ or ‘Thai-land’ of the past, one which superseded warfare and antagonisms of a more recent past.

Researchers writing about Wichit and the pan-Thai ideology stress that he was influenced by a French-produced map he saw during a visit to Hanoi showing the extent of the Thai people, including major areas outside of Siam. With regard to the perception of a ‘Thai-land’ of a distant past linked with a water-like movement of the Thais, however, Wichit was influenced by an allegory attributed to the French scholar Louis Finot. Finot described the movement of the Thais from southern China in the following manner:

The march of this remarkable race – supple and fluid like water, seeping along with the same force to take on the colour of all the heavens and the form of all the shores, yet maintaining through its diverse aspects the essential identity of its character and language – spread out like an immense tablecloth over southern China, Tonkin, Laos, Siam and into Burma and Assam.

In Wichit’s interpretation, Finot’s allegory not only delineates the spatial contours of the larger Thai space – including the Khmer – but it also expresses the notion of a basic quality uniting the Thai, despite their differences. The common origins still count and according to Wichit, it was Finot’s parable that he popularized in the song *Thai Blood* referred to above. Wichit also evoked Finot’s metaphor in a speech broadcast on the Thai national radio in November 1940 in defence of the racial kindred between the Thai and Khmer. Through this programme, Wichit not only hoped to reach his ‘fellow Thai’ (*phuean-thai*) in his own country, but also the ‘fellow Thai all over Laem Thong’, including his ‘race-fellows’ in Cambodia.

This perception of racial kindred between the Thai and Khmer, and of the larger space of *Suwannaphum*, was not just a dream for Wichit, it was in fact widely accepted in military circles. In an article published in the journal of the Thai Army, *Yuthakot*, for example, the author praises the play *Rachamanu* for reminding the audience about the racial bonds that exist among all the people inhabiting *Laem Thong*. In his study of Wichit Wathakan, Scot Barmé also refers to a young army captain, Phayom Chulanan, who, in a lecture to military cadets, advanced the notion that the Burmese, Annamese, Khmers and Malays were ‘all descendants from […] original Thai stock’. When *Rachamanu* appeared in 1936, Wichit was hailed in a local newspaper for bringing this ‘new information’ about the racial identity of the Khmer to public attention and was, according to Barmé, ‘urged to continue his research in this area and investigate possible Thai links to other inhabitants of the Southeast Asian mainland’.

While the notion of the wider space of *Suwannaphum* as a Thai space implicitly implied the definition of the Lao as Thai and Laos as a Thai space,
the Lao were brought to the forefront of the public discourse in 1940 when the irredentist cause gained new momentum in Thailand.

DEMANDING THE RETURN OF THE ‘LOST TERRITORIES’

In August 1939, France proposed the signing of a non-aggression pact with Thailand, which was designed to guarantee the territorial integrity of French Indochina at a time when France was confronted with a growing irredentist movement in Thailand and a war with Germany in Europe.92 The Thai government used the occasion to negotiate for an adjustment of the border with French Indochina, proposing that the Mekong River should be adopted as the border, whereby the right-bank territories ceded in 1904 would be returned to Thailand. After several months of negotiations the mutual non-aggression pact was signed on 12 June 1940. According to the Thai, the border should subsequently be adjusted prior to ratification of the pact. Before this could happen France had been defeated by Germany. The new Vichy government in France was, however, no more supportive of an adjustment of the border than the Third Republic and asked for a ratification without territorial adjustments. In an aide-mémoire from the Légation Royale de Thailande in France to the Vichy government, the Thai government made its position clear. The non-aggression pact would not be ratified unless the Mekong was adopted as a border and furthermore it was stated that:

His Majesty’s Government would also be grateful if the French government would be so good as to give them a letter of assurance to the effect that in the event of a change from French sovereignty, France will return to Thailand the territories of Laos and Cambodia.93

The breakdown in the negotiations between Thailand and France fuelled the nationalist cause in Thailand. Throughout October 1940, large demonstrations were staged in most major cities in Thailand in support of the ‘return of the lost territories’.94 It is not always clear whether ‘lost territories’ referred to Laos and Cambodia in totality or just to the right-bank territories of Laos. This ambiguity was no doubt promoted by Thai authorities. A claim to the totality of Laos and Cambodia was, however, reflected in semi-official publications. On the front page of a pamphlet produced by the Department of Information, handed out during the celebration of Constitution Day in December 1940, a map of mainland Southeast Asia shows the border of an enlarged Thailand at the Annamese Cordillera, with the ‘Democracy Monument’ looming large over this entire space.95 Furthermore, a book containing correspondence from 1893 related to the ‘loss’ of the left-bank territories published by the Ministry of Interior and distributed at the kathin festival in Wat Pathumkhongkha in 1940
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contained an ‘historical map’ on the front page. It depicted the ‘boundaries’ of a historical Siam running along the Annamese Cordillera. Likewise, when speaking to military cadets in October 1940, Wichit called for a return of the left-bank territories ceded to France in their totality. As he urged the soldiers:

[W]e shall not limit ourselves to talk just about the frontier or the area opposite Luang Phrabang and Pakse – we shall talk about the left bank of the Mekong River – we shall talk about every piece of territory we have lost to France.

Whatever the territory in question, it was in this context that a new focus was placed on Laos and the Lao. Indeed, by then the Lao were explicitly defined as Thai. In the speech to military cadets, Wichit alluded to both the Lao and the Khmer in the following manner:

[…] we have lost half of our country. This territory really belongs to us. It is not a colony, it is not a foreign territory; rather it is a living place for Thai people of Thai blood, our relatives, who have a way of living, mind and culture being identical to ours; they are truly of our own flesh and blood.

A reading of the newspaper Prachachat, an official publication, for the second half of 1940 reveals how the term ‘Lao’ (khon-lao or chao-lao) never seems to have been used when referring to the people inhabiting the territories making up Laos. Instead, they were simply referred to as ‘persons of the Thai race’ (bukkhon chuea-chat thai), ‘Thais’ (chao-thai or khon-thai) or ‘Thai brethren’ (phi-nong chao-thai). After the territories on the right-bank of the Mekong had been annexed by Thailand in March 1941, the inhabitants in what was called the ‘liberated’ areas were referred to as ‘Champasak-Thais’ (thai-champasak) or ‘free Thai’ (thai-itsara). (See Akiko Iijima’s contribution to this volume). Furthermore, the Lao, Khmer or Annamese soldiers fighting on the French side were typically referred to as ‘local soldiers’ (thahan phuen-mueang).

When in 1939 Siam became ‘Thailand’, this change in the name of the country indicated a conjoining between the name of the country and the projected racial composition of the population. That the same merge, according to the logic of the Thai discourse on Laos and the Lao, did not exist between the geo-political entity of Laos and the ethnic-racial composition of its population, was emphasized by the term ‘khwaen Laos’, which always seems to have been used instead of simply ‘Laos’ whenever reference to Laos was made in public in 1940–41. The term khwaen, being an administrative-cum-geographical label meaning ‘district’ or ‘region’, was employed to remove ‘Laos’ from the orbit of ethnically distinct countries or nations. ‘Laos’ was not a country, but an administrative entity peopled by Thai – not Lao. Phibun clarified this in a speech broadcast over the radio in the end of October 1940:
As for our brethren in *khwaen* Khmer or *khwaen* Laos there may be some people who think that they are of the Khmer race or Lao race that are different from the Thai race. The truth is that ‘*khwaen* Khmer’ or ‘*khwaen* Laos’ have the same ‘characteristics’ (*laksana*) as *khwaen* Krungthep, *khwaen* Lopburi or *khwaen* Chiang Mai, which are only names of geographical areas. The people living in these localities — like Chiang Mai — cannot be regarded as belonging to a different race. They are all Thai people (*khon thai*). Likewise, the people living in *khwaen* Khmer or *khwaen* Laos are not of the Khmer race or Lao race, but are in reality Thai. They are of Thai blood — they are our Thai brethren.104

It is also significant that when the term ‘*khwaen* Laos’ was employed for Laos in Thai newspapers and public announcements by the Department of Information, it was often preceded by the three words *thi riak wa* — meaning ‘that is called’ or ‘so-called’ — indicating that ‘Laos’ actually was a misnomer in the same manner as we earlier in this chapter saw how Wichit connected the term ‘Lao’ with a French invention.105 It was a misleading name, as this territory did not constitute a ‘Lao space’, but a ‘Thai space’.

This message of Laos and the Lao belonging to a wider Thai space was also popularized across the Mekong. Phibun, for example, sent Mo Lam singers to Laos in 1940 for propaganda purposes106 and pamphlets were either thrown out over Laos from Thai aeroplanes or distributed by hand.107 In one such pamphlet, written in Lao, the racial affinities were phrased in the following manner:

Indochinese brothers. We are brothers since we share the same origin, have the same [colour of the] skin, have the same religion, our languages have the same roots, in every respect our way of living is the same. Let us be united as brothers of the same blood and not fight each other.108

Another pamphlet distributed in the Thakhek region in Laos gave a radical and Wichit-like interpretation of the Thai discourse on Laos and the Lao.109 It was construed as a kind of lesson about the true nature of the racial identity of the Lao. It explained how the term ‘Lao’ was a misnomer that had been applied by foreigners and subsequently had obscured the true Thai racial identity of the people known as ‘Lao’. The truth was that they were Thai and previously were united with the Thai in Thailand in one *pays*, and according to the historical lesson propagated in this pamphlet, the Thai in Thailand and in Laos:

became separated only forty-eight years ago [referring to 1893] by the French pirates and barbarians who afterwards taught us to name the people on the left bank of the Mekong Lao. But the truth is that the people on the right bank uphold the same language and say: ‘We are first cousins and have the same blood in the veins’.110
The French colonial space of ‘Laos’ was perceived as nothing but a mirage that only came into existence due to foreign intervention.

CONCLUSION

In March 1990 Thai Princess Maha Cakri Sirindhon, daughter of the current king of Thailand, made an official visit to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR). The visit lasted a week and while in Laos the princess visited Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, Champasak and Savannakhet. Not only was this Princess Sirindhon’s first visit to Laos, it was also the first visit by a member of the Thai royal family to Laos in recent times. Analyzing the symbolic meanings embedded in this visit – manifest both in the places visited, the ceremonies the princess participated in, and the way the princess later accounted for the trip – Charles F. Keyes has discussed how the trip actually constitutes a ‘highly visible and authoritative counter-narrative’ to what he calls a ‘colonizing view’ which has influenced Thai thinking on Laos and the Lao in the twentieth century. While the so-called ‘colonizing view’ implies that the Lao in Laos should be an integrated part of the nation-state of Thailand, the princess’ counter-narrative in fact legitimates the existence of Laos as an independent state – that is, independent of Thailand – and the existence of a Lao national identity.

By returning to a not too distant past, I have sought to outline how a specific Thai discourse on Laos and the Lao emerged in Siam in the first half of the twentieth century. This discourse can be associated with what Keyes calls a Thai ‘colonizing view’ of Laos and the Lao. According to this discourse the colonial state of Laos was perceived as an ‘anomaly’ or a ‘non-country’, since the Lao were presented as part of the same race as the Thai and the territories making up Laos were seen as an integral part of a historical Siam rooted in a distant past. From a Thai point of view, Laos was a Thai space and thereby a contested space. By showing how this discourse on Laos and the Lao was also prevalent in textbooks used in schools in Siam in the period in question, I have suggested how this discourse on Laos and the Lao not only was well established in elite writings but also widely propagated. Laos was certainly contested by the Thais. It was also contested by the Vietnamese and the French, as chapters in this book show.
NOTES


4. I am not concerned with the validity of race as a category for dividing humanity. Rather, I approach race as a social and cultural construct and my concern is how categories of race were applied by Thai nationalists in the 1930s. For a discussion of how the Thai elite appropriated and applied notions of race at the turn of the twentieth century, see David Streckfuss, ‘The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racialist Thought, 1890–1910’. In Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths. Essays in Honour of John R. W. Smail*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, monograph no. 11, 1993, pp. 123–153.


7. In 1904 two territories west of the Mekong were incorporated in Laos – one opposite Luang Phrabang and the other being Champasak.

8. What became Laos can be regarded as a ‘lost territory’ in the sense of being a territory lost by a nascent nation-state trying to establish modern territorial rights in an area where such rights had not existed before, not as a territory ceded by a timeless nation-state, as Thai nationalist historiography claims.


10. Thamrongsa, ‘The Demand for Territories’, pp. 57–58. The seaboard provinces of Chanthaburi and Trat bordering Cambodia were occupied by French troops until Siam had complied with the stipulations in the 1893 treaty.


15. Inthara Prasat, Textbook in Geography, Book One: About the Asian Continent [แบบเรียนภูมิศาสตร์ 1 ว่าที่รัฐประarrison], Bangkok: Rongphim Akson Nit, 1908, p. 162. ‘Yuan’ is the Thai word to refer to what has become the present day state of Vietnam.


17. For another example where references to the loss of territories can be found in publications from the pre-1932 period, see Thamrongsak, ‘The Demand for Territories’, pp. 48–49.

18. Department of Textbooks, Geography Textbook: The Geography of Siam [แบบเรียนภูมิศาสตร์ ภูมิศาสตร์ประเทศไทย], Bangkok: Krom-tamra Krasuang Sueksathikan, 1925.


22. Department of Textbooks, Geography Textbook, pp. 499–500.

23. Department of Textbooks, Geography Textbook, p. 508. For an example of another contemporary publication where the same knowledge is incorporated in the historical narrative, see Souvenir of the Siamese Kingdom Exhibition at Lumbini Park, Bangkok: no publisher, 1925.


27. Wichit, A Universal History; vol. 5, pp. 536, 548.


31. See, for example, Luean Asanan, A Reader in Geography, Book Two (About Siam – According to the New Syllabus) for Secondary School Year Two and Primary School Year Six [หนังสือเรียนภูมิศาสตร์ 2 (ว่าที่รัฐประarrison ตามประกาศใหม่) สำหรับชั้น ป.ที่ 2 กับปีการศึกษาที่ 5], Bangkok: Bamrung Nukunit, 1934; Krasuang Kalahom, Lessons in the History of Siam [แบบสอนประวัติศาสตร์สยาม], Bangkok: Rong Phim Krom Yuthasueksa Thahanbok, 1935.

32. For a detailed discussion of these maps and the perception of history embedded in them, see Thongchai, Siam Mapped, pp. 150–156.


36. Inthara Prasat, Textbook in Geography.

37. Formed during the early 1930s, this group included young Thai journalists, who primarily published books on wars and biographies of foreign political leaders like Hitler. Khana Yuwasan, Siam in Ratanakosin Era Year 112 [สยาม ร.ศ. ๑๑๒], Bangkok: Sammak-nang Khana Yuwasan, 1935. Reference to publications of the group can be found in this book.

38. Khana Yuwasan, Siam in Ratanakosin Era Year 112, p. 130.
43. In fact, it was more complicated than that. For different reasons, even as a part of French Indochina, ‘Laos’ did not exist as a politically constituted colonial sub-state of the IndoChinese Union, much less a national one.
44. Krasuang Mahatthai, *The Administration of the District Laos and Cambodia* [การปกครองเขตจังหวัดละอานและชุม], Bangkok: Railway Department, 1940, p. 15.
47. Luean Asanan, *A Reader in Geography*, without page.
49. *An Introductory Geography: Dealing with Siam in Brief* [เรียนการเรียนรู้เรื่อง การทัศนศึกษาในสิ่งแวดล้อม], Bangkok: Rong Phim Akson Nit, 1932. For another official publication including the same map, see the Ministry of Commerce and Communications, *Siam, Nature and Industry*, Bangkok: Ministry of Commerce and Communications, 1930.
55. See, for example, Department of Textbooks, *Geography Textbook*, p. 77; Kitiyakorn, *Geography of Siam*, p. 51.
67. Actually the French term also includes Indonesia – but this is not mentioned by Wichit. See Wichit, *A Universal History*, vol. 3, p. 30.
70. Wichit, *Siam and Suwannaphum*, p. 38.
71. The same perception is expressed in Khana Yuwasan, *Siam in Ratanakosin Era Year 112*.
72. ‘The Battle of Thalang’. In *The Literary Works of Wichit*, no place, no year, p. 156.
73. ‘Rachamanu’. In *The Literary Works of Wichit*, pp. 23–70.
75. ‘Rachamanu’, p. 25.
76. ‘Rachamanu’, pp. 26–27.
77. ‘Rachamanu’, pp. 26–27.
78. ‘Rachamanu’, pp. 26–27.
79. ‘Rachamanu’, p. 67.
83. ‘Nan Chao’. In *The Literary Works of Wichit*, p. 342.
84. ‘Nan Chao’, p. 343.
89. ‘My feelings when I watched Suphan’s Blood and Rachamanu’ [ความรู้สึกของฉันเจ้าเมื่อเห็นบทละคร suphan’s Blood and Rachamanu], *Yuthakot*, vol. 5, no. 6, 1936, pp. 87–91. See also ‘Our viewpoint’ [ข้อต่างๆของเรา], *Yuthakot*, vol. 46, no. 11, 1938, pp. 172a–172b.
92. For a discussion of the negotiations and the final outcome, see Kobkua, *Thailand’s Durable Premier*, pp. 256–257.
94. See ‘Notice – Demonstrations Concerning the Demand for a Return of Territories Staged All Over the Kingdom’ [รายงานการเรียกร้องด้านโครงการที่จะขอคืนคำราชาณิจจารย์], in Department of Information, The Thai Demand Justice [ทำเนียร์คำราชาณิจจารย์], Cremation Volume for Mr That Vibuncan, Ayutthaya: no publisher, 1941, pp. 231–239.


98. Wichit, Lecture about the Loss of Thai Territories, pp. 2–3.

99. ‘Welcoming Thai from “abroad”’ [ต้อนรับทหารไทยจากต่างประเทศ], Prachachat, 19 July 1940, p. 1–2; ‘The Thai in Indochina’ [คนไทยในอินโดจีน], Prachachat, 20 August 1940, pp. 1, 16.

100. ‘A trip to Champasak’ [จัดทัวร์ไปชิมปะสัก], Prachachat, 15 March 1941, p. 7.

101. ‘Important victory for Thailand in the history of Asia’ [ไทยคว้าชัยชนะในประวัติศาสตร์โลก], Prachachat, 20 March 1941, p. 3.

102. ‘The spirit of the soldier’ [กิจมันทหารไทย], Prachachat, 18 December 1940, p. 2.

103. This is the praxis that can be found in articles in Prachachat throughout 1940. See, for example, ‘Thailand gives an answer to France’ [ไทยส่งคำตอบฝรั่งเศส], Prachachat, 14 September 1940, p. 12; ‘The Thai in Indochina’ [คนไทยในอินโดจีน], Prachachat, 20 September 1940, p. 9; ‘The Thai Government Helps the People in the Mekong Basin’ [รัฐบาลไทยช่วยเหลือประชาชนในแม่น้ำเมก่อน], Prachachat, 21 September 1940, p. 7; ‘The road to peace’ [ทางที่สู่ความสงบ], Prachachat, 4 October 1940, p. 11; ‘History may repeat itself’ [ประวัติศาสตร์ซ้ำๆกัน], Prachachat, 11 October 1940, p. 9.

104. ‘Speech by the Premier to the Thai Public Broadcast over the Radio, 20 October 1940’ [คำปราศรัยของนายกรัฐมนตรีถวายแก่ประชาชนทางวิทยุกระจายเสียง ณ วันที่ 20 ตุลาคม ๑๙๔๐], in Department of Information, The Thai Demand Justice, p. 119.

105. For the inclusion of the words thi riak wa, see articles referred to in note 103. For public statements by the Department of Information, see for example, ‘The government carries on support to the people from the Mekong River basin escaping into the Thai Kingdom’ [รัฐบาลไทยยังคงดำเนินการสนับสนุนประชาชนผู้หนีออกจากแม่น้ำเมก่อนผ่านทางเข้าประเทศไทย], 19 September 1940. In Department of Information, The Thai Demand Justice, p. 292.


107. See ‘Télégramme officiel, Républic à Gougal, no. 4710, Vientiane, 28 December 1940’, file 563 reporting Thai planes over Vientiane throwing out pamphlets, in grouping Cabinet Militaire, CAOM.

108. ‘Pamphlet in Lao, no year’, file 563, grouping Cabinet Militaire, CAOM.


110. ‘Des tracts lancés à Hinboun’.

Each country of the Union, isolated from the others, would not have much of a chance. The interpenetration of the Indochinese peoples is advantageous to all. [...] Vietnam, no more than Cambodia or Laos, cannot live its life independently of the general evolution of the Union. As the racial distinction subsides, the Indochinese Union becomes clearer. That which, even today, some have considered to be a utopian conception, or a myth, is in the process of becoming a living reality. [...] In place of the ancient Annamese expansion towards the south and the west, the French Protectorate has substituted a pacific interpenetration of the peoples of the peninsula, beneficial to their good relations and their collaboration for the better future of the [Indochinese] Union.

– Official Editorial in the Annam Nouveau, 1941

Today, tomorrow, this century and the next to come, the peoples of the three [Indochinese] nations are and will be enjoying solidarity among themselves based on Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism introduced by the Indochinese Communist Party founded by President Hồ Chí Minh, the predecessor of the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist parties in each country.


It is remarkable how adamantly official French and Vietnamese statesmen, writers and historians have believed in the idea of ‘Indochina’, and have refused to give it up. Each group goes back to the timeless past to legitimate the special relations of the contested present. French colonial historiography evokes the famous Bishop Pigneau de Béhaine and his selfless assistance to the future Nguyễn king of Vietnam, Gia Long, during the latter’s bid to reunite the country ‘usurped’ by the Tây Sơn ‘rebels’ in the eighteenth century. Of course, this
colonial (re-)reading of the past was not innocent. Pigneau’s assistance to the king provides a way of rooting France’s colonial ‘politics of collaboration’ deep in the pre-colonial past. France had been ‘called upon’ (appelée) to intervene; she did not conquer. It was ‘destiny’, not force. It was ‘natural’, and it was therefore ‘légitime’. Mgr Pigneau became the precursor to Franco-Vietnamese collaboration. Meanwhile, to the west, the famous explorer of the Mekong, Auguste Pavie, becomes the historic symbol of Franco-Lao ‘friendship’ (amitié/mittaphap), the peaceful conqueror of Lao ‘hearts’ and the saviour of this peuple doux threatened by expansionist Siamese ‘designs’. A statue of Pavie was erected in Vientiane in remembrance of his deeds done for Laos, and French colonial administrators, writers and admirers of all sorts celebrated Pigneau’s assistance to Gia Long well into the late twentieth century. Franco-Indochinese colonial collaboration had to be inscribed into a shared past (see Agathe Larcher-Goscha’s chapter in this volume).

For Vietnamese anti-colonialists this version of the events had to be uprooted, rewritten, denied and sometimes even destroyed. Yet like the French colonialists they opposed, Vietnamese communists continued to believe in ‘Indochina’. The difference, however, was that they justified this special relationship in terms of a double internationalist and anti-colonialist mission in Laos and Cambodia. Where the French ‘colonialists’ had sought out the precursors of early Franco-Vietnamese colonial collaboration, Vietnamese ‘communists’ tried to legitimate their Indochinese revolution by unearthing evidence of historic ‘resistance traditions’ in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and linking them to a wider revolutionary world. They found them, of course, and dubbed them ‘uprisings’ (khởi nghĩa). They became the historical precursors of twentieth-century ‘anticolonial movements’ (phong trào chống thâm dân) in Indochina. Instead of Pavie, the Vietnamese countered with the ‘uprisings’ of Chao Anou against Siamese ‘feudalists’ in 1827–28 and those of Ong Keo and Kommadam, Pho Kaduat, and Chao Fa Pachay against the ‘French colonialists’ at the turn of the twentieth century. In Cambodia, they recovered the proto-anti-colonialist movements of Pokumbo, Sivotha and others. This wider Lao and Khmer resistance genealogy completed a larger Indochinese pantheon commanded by the Tây Sơn brothers and their ‘general uprising’ against Gia Long, Pigneau, and the Siamese. This Indochinese resistance past was linked, in turn, to a wider twentieth-century internationalist communist genealogy with the October Revolution of 1917 as the starting point, followed by the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930, the August Revolutions of 1945 and the final revolutionary victories in 1975.

This final chapter shifts our view from the French ‘colonialist’ and Thai ‘nationalist’ representations of the Lao past to a Vietnamese ‘internationalist’ attempt to interpret Lao history and to make it an integral part of a larger Indochinese revolutionary story led by the Vietnamese. This communist historiography on Laos is revealing, for it shows how the arrival of yet another
layer of historical experience, ‘communist internationalism’, backed up by virulent anti-colonialism, led this eastern neighbour to recast Lao history and historiography in yet another direction.

VIETNAMESE INTERNATIONALISM AND KEEPING THE INDOCHINESE FAITH

While Vietnamese communist historians have relied upon full-blown nationalism and anti-colonialism to construct their own nationalist historiography, they have often drawn upon internationalism to justifying their construction of a larger Indochinese revolutionary historiography for Laos and, in more complicated ways, Cambodia. Despite the violent breakdown in Asian communist solidarity in 1977–79, from an official point of view the Vietnamese continue to consider the Lao past as the success story in their historically-ordained Indochinese internationalist mission.

However, if much has been written on Vietnamese nationalism over the last fifty years, surprisingly little research has studied Vietnamese faith in international communism, how this shifted pre-existing perceptions of Vietnam and its place in the world or how it has impacted upon Vietnamese historiography. While it is impossible to discuss this matter in detail here, it is nonetheless essential to understanding how Vietnamese communists could be ferocious nationalists on the one hand and fervent internationalists on the other, convinced of their internationalist right to evangelize communism to all of Indochina. Let us thus make a brief detour into the past in order to pinpoint this internationalist shift in Vietnamese communist thinking and better understand how the Vietnamese came to believe so strongly in the reality of ‘Indochina’.

The French creation of a colonial state called ‘Indochina’ from 1887 spelled the end of the formerly independent state once known as ‘Đại Nam’ and briefly as ‘Vietnam’. The Nguyễn monarchy was hobbled and its army dismantled in favour of a colonial one. The French ran its diplomacy, not the Vietnamese. For those Vietnamese who continued to believe in an independent Vietnam, they were forced to go abroad to keep it alive or risk imprisonment, marginalization or worse. French Sûreté repression pushed this imaginary Vietnamese nation and the handful of nationalists backing it deep into Asia. Those nearby independent Asian states – China, Thailand and Japan – became crucial refuges. These Vietnamese nationalists admired Thailand and especially Japan. Meiji rulers had shown that an Asian state could modernize in Western ways, without having to be colonized directly by a foreign ‘civilizer’, implicitly undermining Western colonial justifications for creating and running colonial states across the region. The Japanese military defeat of the Russians in 1905 was a turning point in Asian anti-colonialism. Chinese, Thai, Indian and
Vietnamese nationalists flocked to Japan in the wake of this reassuring Asian military victory. They were convinced that independent Meiji Japan held the keys to a modern Asian future. Phan Bội Châu, the most famous Vietnamese anti-colonialist at this time, began sending Vietnamese youths to Japan to study modern ideas as part of his ‘Go East’ (Dồng Du) movement. Following a series of Japanese decisions to expel Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese anti-colonialists in favour of Tokyo’s own imperial ambitions in Asia, many Asian anti-colonialists relocated to southern China where the Chinese Republican Revolution of 1911 had opened up new possibilities or at least raised new hopes of a special relationship with China, but this time a ‘new’ and fully independent Chinese Republic that would support their opposition to the French.

Though very limited, these early Asian connections were important in that they brought Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese intellectuals together as part of a wider mental attempt to make sense out of Western (and Japanese) imperial domination and how to go about reversing this painful state of events. Anti-colonialism and nationalism provided a common basis for examining wider Asian problems. While nationalist priorities still dominated outlooks and inter-Asian anti-colonialist actions were anything but coordinated, this wider Asian view of the region, its past and possible future marked a small but important shift.

The October Russian Revolution of 1917 and the emergence of communism in the Soviet Union in the following years had an even greater impact on many Asian anti-colonialist intellectuals. For one, communism, based on the credo of Marxism-Leninism, provided a seemingly coherent explanation for European imperial domination and offered a way out of Darwinian subjugation for the semi- and fully colonized of Asia. More importantly for our purposes, it also offered an internationalist outlook that integrated the Asian anti-colonialist cause into a wider, world revolutionary movement based in Moscow and claiming historical continuity with the French Revolution. Lenin’s theses on colonialism helped even more to explain how the expansion of European capitalism had led to their exploitation and the domination of large parts of the world. Marx offered an historical and economic analysis that promised an eventual world revolution based on class struggle and exulted proletarian internationalism as a modern identity extending beyond national or colonial frontiers. Moscow seemed to make good on all this, when Lenin founded the Comintern (Internationalist Communist) in 1919 to promote and support revolutionary parties across the globe. European communist advisors soon landed in southern China and elsewhere to help build communist parties in Asia. With their aid, the Chinese Communist Party came to life in 1921 in Shanghai in this wider internationalist context, while the ‘Vietnamese Communist Party’ was born in early 1930 in another Chinese port city, Hong Kong. Hồ Chí Minh, the father of this nationalist party, was simultaneously an
early member of this wider internationalist communist movement. A few months later, however, following internal criticism for his ‘nationalist’ tendencies, the party was renamed the ‘Indochinese Communist Party’ in order to conform to Comintern orders that communist parties in European colonies correspond to the colonial states they were opposing – Indonesia and not Java, Indochina and not Vietnam and so on. The Indochinese colonial entity carved out by the French in 1887 thus delimited the internationalist responsibility of Vietnamese communists, and not the narrower nationalist one patriotic Vietnamese anti-colonialists had been imagining to that point. To my knowledge, no Lao or Khmer was ever consulted about this new internationalist model or the Vietnamese de facto right to run it. Unlike the Vietnamese, Chinese, Indians and Koreans, there were few, if any, Khmer or Lao running these revolutionary networks between Moscow, Paris and Shanghai before 1945.

It is easy in this post-communist age to write off internationalism as naïve revolutionary hocus-pocus or to push the realpolitiks of the Sino-Vietnamese-Khmer break of the late 1970s deep into the timeless past to ‘prove’ it. However, a growing body of evidence both for Chinese and the Vietnamese communists shows that they could take it seriously and, at different conjunctures, did, using it as an operating model for their actions, their foreign affairs and their perception of the region and the world. Nationalism and internationalism were not always mutually exclusive.\textsuperscript{11} It could appeal to the Vietnamese and the Chinese for a variety of reasons. As noted above, international communism offered a badly needed explanation of imperialism and how to oppose it. It linked countries or rather their anti-colonialists, organizationally and ideologically, to a common struggle. Despite real contradictions, the Comintern provided important aid and training. All alone in the colonial desert, internationalism offered a ray of hope, something which was in great demand in the 1920s and 1930s. It was also a source of legitimation for local communists in terms of their in-country power and influence, their relations with Moscow and their acceptance by the larger, approving brotherhood. A lack of internationalist spirit was, in many instances, as dangerous for a ‘Bolshevik’ as an absence of nationalism was for an anti-colonialist. And the threat of internationalist excommunication could be as damning for a communist leader as it was for a Catholic missionary. Hồ Chí Minh, like Mao Zedong, Tito and others, knew something about the difficulties of being both a nationalist and an internationalist.\textsuperscript{12}

Vietnamese communists, however, were in a very tricky situation from the start, for the internationalist model demanded by the Comintern, ‘Indochina’, did not coincide with the pre-colonial monarchical state called ‘Dai Nam’ and the one nationalists had been imaging in the form of ‘Vietnam’. The Vietnamese were in a unique position in that their internationalist mission charged them
with making revolution and communism in all of Indochina – not just Vietnam. Even non-communist Vietnamese competitors allied with the French could believe in the reality of the French model of Indochina.13

If many Vietnamese communists believed in internationalism and their Indochinese mission, hardly any Lao or Khmer did. Before 1945, the Vietnamese were largely alone in their bid to spread the revolutionary word in western Indochina, relying almost entirely on Vietnamese émigrés to build their bases along the Mekong. After World War II, Vietnamese communists were most focused on preventing the return of French colonialism to Vietnam. The Vietnamese continued to dominate revolutionary, military and diplomatic affairs in and for western Indochina. While they did their best to keep the internationalist flame alive in Laos and Cambodia, it flickered at best as the DRV struggled to hang on nationally against the French Expeditionary Corps.

The Chinese victory of October 1949 changed all this. Not only would Chinese and Soviet ‘internationalist aid’ help the Vietnamese attain their military victory over the French in 1954, but Beijing and Moscow’s diplomatic and party recognition of the DRV/ICP put Vietnamese communists on the world map and back in the internationalist fold (from which communists had been severed by World War II). The price of this legitimation, however, was that Vietnamese nationalist communists had to show their real internationalist colours as authentic communists. This was no small matter, for Hồ Chí Minh himself had come under suspicion, again, in Moscow for what were seen as his less than internationalist actions. His dissolution of the ICP in November 1945 had not impressed purists in the French and Soviet communist parties, and it remains a sticky point in Vietnamese revolutionary historiography to this day. While the ICP had never been dissolved in reality, it had to be resurrected publicly. This occurred in 1951, when it was announced and renamed the Vietnamese Worker’s Party, linked publicly to the internationalist world, and obligated to adopt more communist policies. Land reform was one major result.

The intensification of the Indochinese internationalist model was the other. Vietnamese communists had already increased their revolutionary activities in Laos and Cambodia by creating revolutionary governments for both countries and set to work creating respective parties. All of this was in tune with the 1930 internationalist Indochinese model opposing French colonialism and promising to bring eventual socialist transformations to all three countries.

There is no need to delve into the details here; this subject has been covered elsewhere.14 What matters is that Vietnamese communists could be internationalists and nationalists, or at least be obligated to execute the Indochinese revolutionary mission in order to be a part of the larger internationalist world and the communist ideology to which they had most certainly subscribed. In the early 1950s, Vietnamese communists made no effort to conceal the fact that they saw themselves on the Indochinese cutting edge of
world revolution in Southeast Asia. This would be mitigated during the war against the Americans. The Geneva accords held the Vietnamese to relocate their Khmer internationalist allies to Hanoi and support Sihanouk’s ‘neutrality’ to the detriment of the Khmer Rouge. In northern Indochina, however, Vietnamese communists maintained a strategically close relationship with Laos and were deeply involved in the Pathet Lao’s military, diplomatic, economic and party affairs. (See Figure 11.1).

Figure 11.1. Picture at the Laotian Revolutionary Museum in Vientiane celebrating the conference of the ‘Lao-Viet-Khmer Allied Front’ held in 1951 in northern Vietnam. (Photograph by Christopher E. Goscha)

In short, the Vietnamese brought communism and internationalism to Laos, not the Lao. And Vietnamese internationalism, like French colonialism or Thai nationalism, has its ways of representing the past, especially the Lao part of this Vietnamese Indochinese internationalist model. Vietnamese internationalism is even more unique in that Vietnamese communists believed, not unlike many of their French colonial opponents, in the reality of Indochina. As Lê Duẩn told Kaysone in the trying days of July 1961:

...
We would like to repeat the words of President Hồ, ‘The Vietnamese Worker Party, although facing many difficulties and hardships, still must use all efforts to help the Laos revolution. That is an international task and also a task of the Vietnamese revolution as well’.16

Security was obviously a top priority for the Vietnamese as the second war for Vietnam heated up and Laos became crucial to supplying the southern forces. Indeed, if ideology was important in the Vietnamese shaping of the Lao past, security concerns continued to play a critical role in Vietnam’s perception of Laos. The violent breakdown of Asian internationalism in 1978–79 and the start of the ‘Third Indochinese War’ confirmed it yet again.

SECURITY AND INDOCHINESE LEGITIMATION

Following the communist victories in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975, Vietnamese communists naturally saw the ‘historical’ validation of their Indochinese revolutionary line, first assigned to them by the Comintern in 1930. However, the ‘Indochinese brothers in arms’ had little time to celebrate their 1975 victories, let alone to begin writing an official history of the Indochinese Revolution. Indeed, Asian trust in Vietnamese Indochinese internationalism had already begun to waver, badly. By 1979, xenophobia and nationalism of the worst kind ripped it apart. In an extraordinary turn of events, Vietnamese troops pushed Pol Pot’s murderous Khmer Rouge into eastern Thailand to protect their southwestern flank. Vietnamese ‘internationalist volunteers’ ended the Khmer Rouge’s butchery, occupied the country and began rebuilding a Cambodian state and returning an ‘authentic’ (chân chính) Khmer revolutionary party to the ICP fold. However, this Vietnamese military occupation of Cambodia triggered a ‘punitive’ Chinese attack into northern Vietnam in February 1979. And all of this cost the newly unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam dearly in regional isolation from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as ostracism from the West and Japan.

Asian communists now refocused the sights of their propaganda machines on each other. ‘Betrayal’, ‘perfidy’, ‘hegemony’, ‘invaders’ and ‘historical expansionism’ became the new slogans volleyed back and forth across the borders and via the loudspeakers. While the Khmer Rouge carved out of the timeless past a virulent anti-Vietnamese discourse to rally the ‘real’ ‘Kampuchea’ to their outrageous, half-baked Maoist cause, Vietnamese communists resurrected their own version of deluded identity politics based on an ‘historic’, ‘eternal’ opposition to Chinese ‘expansionism’. Revealingly, Vietnamese communists accused the Chinese of ‘betraying’ the internationalist movement, implicitly insinuating that they were not authentic communists. The
Vietnamese and the Soviets were instead the true and legitimate upholders of the internationalist faith.\textsuperscript{17}

Meanwhile, with the Vietnamese army on the move in all of western Indochina, the Chinese and the Thais had no trouble forgetting past ideological, Cold War differences in order to oppose Vietnam’s ‘historic’ dream of ‘swallowing’ Indochina whole via a ‘federation’. The Thais and Chinese, looking into Vietnam’s Indochina from the outside, countered this Vietnamese ‘imperialist’ domination by propping up the Khmer Rouge.\textsuperscript{18} Thousands of miles from Moscow and Cuba, and with hardly any reliable friends abroad, Vietnamese communists turned \textit{inwards} into Indochina and westwards towards their reliable Laotian allies and Kaysone Phomvihane in particular.\textsuperscript{19} Other than a handful of leftover Cambodian ‘radicals’, between 1979 and 1989 Laos was just about all the Vietnamese had left of their internationalist brothers.

Like the French (see the opening quotes to this chapter), the need to establish founding myths was strongest when the present order was under real threat. The military isolation of French Indochina under the Japanese in the early 1940s and that of the Vietnamese Indochinese bloc in the 1980s are two good examples. The propaganda of each period is replete with buzzwords like ‘special’, ‘collaboration’, ‘real’, ‘harmony’, ‘union’, ‘destiny’ and ‘heroic’. They appear systematically in all sorts of museums, fairs, book titles, travelogues, conference themes and countless editorials. Meanwhile, the ‘enemy’, that indispensable Other, is carefully portrayed as the external threat necessitating greater internal ‘solidarity’ (\textit{solidarité/doàn kêt}).

The Vietnamese latched on to Laos like never before. The official plot played up the heroic struggle of the Lao people, and pushed the origins of national liberation back to Fa Ngum before focusing on the anti-colonial movements of Ong Keo and Kommadam. It then turned to the Pathet Lao’s brave struggle against the French ‘colonialists’ and the American ‘imperialists’, all of this in ‘great solidarity’ with the Vietnamese. Anti-colonialism, national liberation and internationalism serve as the legitimating pillars.\textsuperscript{20} Throughout the 1980s, state-solicited travelogues and poetry were employed to hammer home these special historical ties. Xuân Diệu, official spokesman and arguably one of Vietnam’s most famous poets, penned verses extolling Laos and her friendship on behalf of the party. A high-ranking Vietnamese party leader, Nông Quốc Chân, published a travelogue of Laos pressing home similar themes of solidarity.\textsuperscript{21} In the educational domain, the ‘Friendship School 80’ was built in Vietnam in 1980 to train Lao, Khmer and other ethnic (‘Vietnamese’) minorities in Indochinese solidarity and collaboration. By 2000, it had graduated 2,110 Lao, 1,046 Khmers and 690 ‘Vietnamese students of ethnic minority groups’, not to mention ‘thousands’ of teachers.\textsuperscript{22}

Far from an accident, the policy of ‘special relations’ (\textit{quan hệ đặc biệt}) between the Lao and Vietnamese was born in this combined security and
ideological conjuncture. It was officially sealed in the ‘Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation’ (Hiep Uoc Hieu Nghiep vua Hợp Tác), signed by Phạm Văn Đồng and Kaysone Phomvihane in July 1977. The two parties’ papers, Nhân Dân and Pasason, heralded this treaty as an historical event. And it was. For one, the Vietnamese army was able to station thousands of troops in Laos. This treaty reflected the importance of Laos in Vietnamese security thinking in Indochina, as well as the only remaining buoy in the meltdown of Indochinese internationalism.

That the security threats to Hanoi at this time were ‘special’, there can be no doubt. However, this insecurity had a direct influence on the official meaning given to Lao-Vietnamese collaboration and Lao history. From this point, the myth of timeless ‘Special Vietnamese-Lao Relations’ appeared in the official Vietnamese discourse and began to sink deeper roots towards the past. As an editorial in Nhân Dân put it following the conclusion of the treaty in 1977: ‘These special relations have become the invincible strength in the long struggle against invaders […]’. Speeches delivered during the signing ceremonies began to invoke Hồ Chí Minh’s internationalist legacy and underscored the historical importance of the ICP for both nations. The founding of the party was the ‘real’ source and Hồ the spiritual leader. Cultural and historical excursions were carefully organized for both sides in Laos and Vietnam. Articles, often penned by famous Vietnamese correspondents (Thếp Mới for example), extolled the new relationship. Turning to the past, Phạm Văn Đồng told his Lao listeners that the ancient Lao King, Fa Ngum, was truly a ‘patriotic hero’, the precursor of the current Lao state. Setthathirat and Chao Anou were exemplary of a patriotic tradition opposed to (Siamese) foreign invasion. In 1978, the ‘Truth Publishing House’ in Hanoi followed up with a special compilation of articles on the new Lao-Viet relationship. It came complete with poems, peppered with references to Hồ Chí Minh as the founding father of Indochinese communism.

During the ‘Lao-Cambodian-Vietnamese Summit Conference’ of February 1983, Vietnamese communists did their best to create a new Indochinese reading of the past to fit the explosive present. Top level leaders from the three countries met in Vientiane to discuss concretely the Indochinese nature of their relations. ‘Special relations’ had to take on real form in military, political, diplomatic and economic terms. As the official version of this conference put it: ‘The spring of 1983 represented a political event affirming the development stage of the relations of solidarity, and co-operation between the three countries of Indochina’. In ‘historical terms’, Hoàng Quốc Việt argued, this Indochinese summit marks a turning point in the progress of the revolution of the three countries, consolidates and strengthens the Vietnamese, Lao and Kampuchean special relations in the new stage of their revolution. At present, the strategic task of
the revolution of the three Indochinese countries is to successfully build socialism in each country and firmly defend themselves, thus contributing to maintaining and consolidating peace and stability in Southeast Asia and the world.31

It was also during this meeting that Vietnamese communists did their best to anchor the idea of Indochinese friendship and struggle in ‘History’. It was a crucial question of revolutionary legitimacy and justification for the present. It was much more complicated than an imperialist pipedream to ‘colonize’ Indochina. In many ways, Vietnamese communists – many of whom had once been closer to their Chinese ‘brothers’ (now considered to be ‘hereditary enemies’) than to a Kaysone Phomvihane or a Red Prince like Souphanouvong – were doing their best to retake the internationalist moral high ground against the Khmer Rouge and its Chinese backers. Or, as Hanoi’s Truth Publishing House summed it up officially:

The solidarity among the Vietnam, Lao, and Cambodian peoples has a long history and has come through many tests. Of particular importance is from the moment President Hồ Chí Minh founded the Indochinese Communist Party – the predecessor (tiền thân) of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, the Cambodian People’s Revolutionary Party and the Vietnamese Communist Party, [and the basis of] the alliance of struggle and solidarity among the three countries and the basic factor in the defeat of every enemy and in the regaining of independence [and] freedom of each country.32

In 1982, General Hoàng Văn Thái announced in the Communist Review that the ‘special relationship’ had been extended to all ‘three nations of Indochina’ (ba dân tộc Đông-Duơng). History, geography and security rendered them inseparable.33 Vietnamese leaders went even further in 1983, declaring Indochinese ‘solidarity’ an inviolable ‘law’ (quy luật).34 Socialist Vietnam’s historiography on Laos since 1975 has thus intensified its efforts to legitmate the ‘Lao Revolution’ (cách mạng Lào), the politics of the ‘special relations’ signed into being in mid-1977, and to push the origins of both revolutions as far into the past as possible.

THE MYTH OF THE LAO REVOLUTION OF AUGUST 1945

A remarkable example of Vietnamese historians’ efforts to legitimize revolutionary relations with Laos is the myth of interconnected Vietnamese and Lao revolutions in 1945. The best example of this is to be found in an article published by party historian, Trần Xuân Câu, on The Lao August
Published in the party’s *Historical Studies* in mid-1975 – before Lao revolutionaries actually took power – the author argued that a veritable ‘general uprising’ and ‘Revolution’ had occurred in Laos in August 1945, culminating in the formation of the first Lao Issara government on 12 October of that year. Like other Vietnamese writers, Cậu opened his argument with the ICP and the favourable changes brought about by World War II. To underscore the Indochinese model, he cited the ICP’s decision to launch an ‘Indochinese’ uprising in all of Indochina in 1940. In February 1941, he continued, Hồ Chí Minh returned to northern Vietnam to direct the Viet Minh and ‘to lead directly the revolutionary movement of Indochina’. The Japanese overthrow of the French on 9 March 1945 and the subsequent defeat of the Japanese by the Allies in August opened the way to the Lao Revolution. This revolutionary process began, according to Cậu, on 23 August in Vientiane. This was a ‘mass revolution’ that had been in preparation for a long time under the direction of the ICP. It assured Laos’s independence and unification for the first time. Moreover, Cậu concluded, this Lao revolution had been an anti-imperialist, anti-feudalist and even a limited ‘democratic’ one.

This is not the place to try to prove whether there truly was a Lao revolution in 1945 or not. An outpouring on the part of Vietnamese émigrés in Lao urban centres perhaps. A Lao revolution I doubt. In any case, what interests me most here is Trần Xuân Cậu’s discussion of the ‘Properties and Historical Meaning of the Lao Revolution of August 1945’, an excellent example of how official Vietnamese historians have gone about recasting the Lao past in new ways and in their way. The fact that the Vietnamese published this text in July–August 1975, thirty years after the Vietnamese ‘August Revolution’, revealed an obvious political desire to link the Indochinese revolutions of 1975 to those of 1945. As Cậu summarized it:

Based on the documentation currently available, one can say that the process of the ‘General uprising in Laos’ began at the end of August 1945 and continued until the end of October 1945. The victory of the uprising in the major cities, such as Vientiane, Savannakhet, Thakhek, Xieng Khouang and many other towns at the end of August 1945, had a great and determining effect on the victory of the General uprising and the formation of an independent government on 12 October 1945, the national holiday of independent Laos. The General uprising in Laos was a rising up of the people’s masses following a process of long preparation. […] The direct result of the General uprising was that it brought independence and unity to Laos. […] Laos was a feudalist colonial country. The Lao Revolution had two important inter-related strategic tasks, an anti-imperialist one and an anti-feudalist one. The Lao revolution of August 1945 was a revolution of national liberation within a feudalist colonial country. Its aim was to throw off the ruling yoke of the invading imperialists and their lackeys.
REVOLUTIONIZING THE INDOCHINESE PAST

With this established, Trần Xuân Cầu then places the Lao revolution next to the Vietnamese one and even among the internationalist offspring of the 1917 October Revolution. It was important to establish revolutionary continuity and to validate the existence of two August Revolutions ‘in Southeast Asia’. (See Figures 11.2 and 11.3.) As Cầu insisted on putting it in his last sentence:

Figures 11.2. and 11.3. Establishing revolutionary continuity: Plates at the Laotian Revolutionary Museum in Vientiane commemorating the ‘August Revolution’ in Laos (Photographs by Christopher E. Goscha)
11.4. Symbol of timeless Indochinese revolutionary and anti-colonialist origins: Hồ Chí Minh’s bust in the Laotian Revolutionary Museum in Vientiane (Photograph by Christopher E. Goscha)
REVOLUTIONIZING THE INDOCHINESE PAST

In internationalist terms, the Lao Revolution of August 1945 is one of the biggest revolutions among the movements of struggle for national liberation in Southeast Asia, a concrete example of the advances of world revolutionary forces after World War II. It developed solidly and continuously over thirty years. The victory of the Lao Revolution has made an influential and positive contribution to anti-imperialist movements in Southeast Asia and has brought the Lao nation into the ranks of the vanguard [Indochinese?] nations of this region.39

Missing from this explanation, however, is any mention of the overwhelming role played by Vietnamese émigrés in the ‘Lao uprising’, the lack of Lao in the ICP at the time, the indirect role of the ICP or the nationalist view of one of the most important Lao nationalists of the time, Prince Phetsarath. To this day, Vietnamese and Lao historiographies have each had a hard time finding a place for contending views of the past and personalities who do not fit so nicely into this revolutionary reading of the past.

LEGITIMIZING AN INDOCHINESE PAST: THE CULT OF HÔ CHÍ MINH AND THE ICP

If Uncle Hô serves as the founding father of the current Vietnamese nation, Vietnamese and Lao official historians have also used ‘President Hô Chí Minh’ to legitimize their internationalist project in Indochina.40 In many ways, the fine line Hô walked during his life between nationalism and internationalism has allowed his followers to use his name and life to serve both Vietnamese nationalist and internationalist causes.41 When it comes to linking Hô Chí Minh to Laos, Vietnamese internationalists have no problems today advancing him as the founding father of the ‘Indochinese Communist Party’, forgetting that he had first formed the Vietnamese one and been criticized for it by those claiming to be more devout internationalists. What concerns them most, however, is using Hô’s sacred image and his early role in bringing communism to Indochina to legitimize and to root the Lao past in its Indochinese context and with the Vietnamese communists. No one is better poised to serve this cause than Hô himself. Together, Hô and the ICP are considered as the ‘predecessors’ (tiến thân) of the Lao, Khmer and Vietnamese communist parties and governments.42 Like Pigneau de Béhaine for the French colonialists, Hô Chí Minh becomes the symbol of timeless Indochinese revolutionary and anti-colonialist collaboration. It is no accident that President Hô’s bust figures prominently in the Laotian Revolutionary Museum in Vientiane to this day. (See Figure 11.4). Again, this idea of ‘predecessor’ was carefully selected and extended to Laos and Cambodia around 1980 in order to establish the legitimacy of the ICP in official revolutionary historiography and in the present.43
During the 1980s, scores of articles recast Hồ as the father of Indochinese communism and played up his internationalist background. He is depicted in missionary, almost messianic terms, bringing the communist message across the Mekong to Laos from Moscow via Udon Thani for the first time in 1930.44 A high-profile conference on Lao-Vietnamese relations in Hanoi in 1991 used the memory of Hồ and his thoughts to validate Vietnam’s correct relations with Laos. Ranking government and party members of both countries were on hand to give their official blessings. Pictures of Hồ’s famous meeting with Prince Souphanouvong in 1950 remind us of the special relations binding the leaders of the two countries. Trần Xuân Cầu appears again to extol special Vietnamese-Lao relations in an introductory essay.45

The political context of this ‘Lao-Viet conference’ was clear with the first paper, perfectly entitled Nguyễn Ái Quốc, The One who Initiated the History of Special Relations of Solidarity. Invoking scientific objectivism (khách quan), the author ‘proves’ that Hồ Chí Minh was the ‘first’ to identify the historical roots of Vietnamese-Lao collaboration in their common opposition to colonialism, capitalism and in the tailoring of Marxism-Leninism to patriotism (the official shibboleth on Hồ). The message of the author comes through beautifully in the last two lines:

The essence of the special relations among the three Indochinese countries is one of a tight relationship between authentic patriotism and proletarian internationalism, within the special historical circumstances of the peoples of the three countries. We can therefore affirm that Nguyễn Ái Quốc was the main person who initiated the history of special relations of solidarity among Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia.46

Like Pavie and Pigneau, Hồ is used to give meaning to or to validate new versions of the present.47 In the same way, ‘Hồ Chí Minh Thought’ (tuDUCTION Hồ Chí Minh) has also been an important method, as in so many other domains in Vietnam today, to legitimize Lao-Viet ‘special relations’. In 1993, Phạm Sang, a rising Vietnamese party historian, published an article entitled: President Hồ Chí Minh and the Revolutionary Line of National Liberation in the Countries of Indochina.48 This author used Hồ Chí Minh’s ‘thought’ to transform him into the ‘great architect’ of the ‘present day victories of Indochina’.49 This is hardly surprising: Phạm Sang wrote his thesis on Hồ Chí Minh and the Lao Nationalist Liberation Revolution at the Research Institute of Marxism Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh Thought.50 He aims to show that Hồ Chí Minh was the founder of Lao-Viet ‘special relations’ and, as a good internationalist, grafted communism to Indochina. Though he links the Lao revolution to its Russian ancestor, he sees Hồ Chí Minh’s spreading of communism (truyểN bÁ ch∪ nghjà mác Lènín vào Lào) as the founding moment in the Lao revolution.51 To Phạm Sang, Hồ
Chi Minh ‘combined internationalist and nationalist tasks by helping the revolution of our friends [the Lao’]. Missing, again, is any mention of other Lao visions of the future, not linked to Hồ Chí Minh or to the Vietnamese. Indeed, few, if any, Lao are present in the internationalist founding myth of the ICP.

The cult of President Hồ even spills over into Lao historiography. In 1990, in true brotherly fashion, the Lao Social Sciences Committee published a collection of speeches and articles of ranking Lao and some socialist foreigners to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Hồ Chí Minh. Lao contributors underscored the special influence Hồ had had on them or their country’s past. They all reaffirmed the special relations binding the two sides in the past (see below).

**OFFICIAL VIETNAMESE HISTORIOGRAPHY ON LAOS**

If observers have anxiously awaited the publication of the complete official history of Laos, the Vietnamese have not let this keep them from studying and writing abundantly about this country. A forthcoming bibliography of Laos, compiled by Bernard Gay, mentions 425 Vietnamese articles, books and theses on Laos published between 1975 and 1996. This number is a minimum. Moreover, if Westerners lament the paucity of scientific interest in Laos, scores of Vietnamese writers have reflected at length on Laotian history, society, economics, anthropology, ethnology, diplomacy and military history for at least two decades, if not longer. For the reasons outlined above, Laos clearly occupies a special place in Vietnamese historiographical priorities. Several Laotian historical works, including Sila Viravong’s history of Laos, have been translated into Vietnamese by the Social Sciences Committee in Hanoi. Former Vietnamese cadres and military personnel active in Laos and Thailand between 1940 and 1989, such as Lê Duy Lương and Văn Linh, have deposed their private memoirs there and have written on Lao history. Dáng Bích Hà, another expert on Laos, is the wife of General Vô Nguyên Giáp and the great-niece of a famous Vietnamese revolutionary who was active along the Mekong in the 1910s and 1920s. The former head of the Southeast Asian section, Phạm Đức Dương, speaks Lao fluently and has recently authored a Lao-Vietnamese dictionary. Indeed, many high ranking social scientists working on western Indochina today honed their anthropological, ethnological and linguistic skills during the Indochinese wars. Several of them were involved in rebuilding Cambodia politically, militarily and ideologically and in improving scientific contacts and cooperation with Laos. Western intelligence and military officers, at ease in Asian languages and marked by their wartime experiences, were not the only ones to convert to academia when the wars were over. All of this had an important, if little studied, impact on how Vietnamese officials went about writing the history of Indochina, and of Laos in particular.
The *Outline History of Laos*, published by the Social Sciences Committee in Hanoi in 1978, provides us with probably the first official Vietnamese communist history of Laos before the outbreak of the ‘Third Indochinese War’ in late 1978–1979. As its preface makes clear, this history was designed to celebrate the recent ‘great victory of the Lao revolution in 1975’. It was also designed to legitimate special Lao-Vietnamese relations. Following on the 1977 Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation, the Social Sciences Committee lauded the ‘great special co-operative relations’ between the two parties, governments and peoples based on ‘authentic proletarian internationalism’. This was official, not critical, history. Several state historical institutes contributed to the research for this preliminary history of Laos.

As in Vietnamese revolutionary historiography, these Hanoi-based authors divided the history of Laos into three major periods running straight towards the ‘revolution’ of 1975. The first part covers the development of Lao history from earliest times to the advent of French colonialism in the late nineteenth century (40 pages). The overriding theme is identifying and tracking the formation of the Lao nation. This section takes off in the fourteenth century with the formation of Lan Xang in 1353, when Fa Ngum ‘united the country’ for the first time. According to this version, all the small Lao principalities were increasingly united under an increasingly organized ruling system. Buddhism flourished, but the peasants were still subject to ‘feudalist’ oppression via taxes and corvée. For the Vietnamese, Lan Xang and Fa Ngum serve as the origins of the modern Lao nation.

The unification of the land of Lan Xang during the time of Fa Ngum is an extremely important historical watershed in terms of the historical development process of the Lao homeland. From this point, the Lan Xang country evolved strongly and wrote many glorious historical pages.

Strangely, the only mention of Lan Na in the text sends us to a footnote indicating that it was once ‘a Thai Kingdom in northern Thailand today’. It does not appear again. The Thais and Burmese do. Turning to the expansion of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, Vietnamese historians consider this the ‘Resistance against the Invading Army of Ayutthaya’. Despite the section titles, *The Outline History* provides a fairly straightforward synthesis of ‘pre-colonial’ Lao history. Notably missing, however, is any sort of theoretical Marxist discussion of the sort occurring in Vietnam over problems of periodization, primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, etc.

The second part deals with Lao history under the French from the end of the nineteenth century to the ‘General Uprising of 1945’ (see below). It covers 100 pages, of which 40 are dedicated entirely to ‘The Lao People’s Movements of Struggle against the French’. This section sets out the dichotomy between ‘colonialism’ and ‘revolution’. As in Vietnam, French colonialism in Laos is
painted in black and white, binary terms. Exploitation is the major theme. The French are responsible for both excessive capitalist exploitation and colonial underdevelopment. They failed notably to develop the education system and to build a road network.63 The Outline History deplores the French division of Laos into different parts, considering it unnatural, but tells us nothing of the different ruling families that existed before the French or of that ‘Laos’ on the other side of the Mekong that was by no means so tightly or nationally ‘unified’ in ‘pre-colonial’ times. Instead, we learn that Laos was incorporated incrementally into the Indochinese Union in 1887 and became a virtual colony in spite of its complex juridical status. If the Vietnamese had focused on Laos’s difficult relations with the Thais before 1893, no mention is made of the leading, collaborative role played by the Vietnamese in the French colonial regime in western Indochina. Indeed, Lê Duy Lương, one of the authors and main contributors of documents to this book, had himself taught under the French in the Lycée Pavie and had written one of the first textbook histories of Laos in 1934, in both Lao and French.64

Several ‘uprisings’ are celebrated at great length as examples of anti-colonialism, nationalism and revolutionary potential. While the authors admitted that the documentation was scattered, lacking and amassed unsystematically, this did not stop them from identifying three main ‘uprisings’65: those of Pho Kaduat in Savannakhet from 1901 to 1903; Ong Keo and Kommadam in southern Laos from 1901 to 1937; and Chao Fa Pachay in northern Laos from 1918 to 1922.66 The question of millenarianism never came up in this patriotic conversion of the past.67 But the legitimacy of the ICP did and Kaysone is cited approvingly.68

The third and final section treats the period of ‘resistance’ between 1945 and 1975. As in Vietnam, it is divided into two periods, one against the French ‘colonialists’ and the other against the ‘US imperialists’. By far the longest section (almost 150 pages out of 339), the two themes are ‘national independence’ and ‘socialism’. This double struggle was directed by the Lao party which scored victories in 1945, twice at Geneva in 1954 and 1962, and finally during the successful ‘general uprising’ that brought Lao communists to power in 1975. In short, anti-colonialism and ‘resistance’ history (pp. 73–303) dominate Vietnamese historical writing on Laos. The People’s Army’s new military dictionary carries special entries for the ‘Lao and Cambodian Resistances against the French’ and the Americans. They are part of a larger Vietnamese ‘Resistance’ historiography spanning large swaths of time and space.69

In 1981, as the VCP tried to rebuild the ICP past against all regional odds, many of the same authors of the Outline History published a special collection of essays on Laos in English that gives us a good idea of the official view the Social Sciences Committee wanted to communicate.70 The first article, penned by Phạm Nguyên Long, introduced the master plan of Vietnamese nationalist-
internationalist revolutionary historiography. Entitled *The Lao People’s Traditional Struggle for Independence and National Unity*, this article made it clear that ‘the thirty years of struggle against French colonialism and American neo-colonialism’ constituted the most important period in ‘Laos’ centuries old history’. Social scientists and historians in particular had the duty ‘to turn to the past and search into the depth of history’ in order to understand that ‘the great, historic victories of the Lao people are the results of a combined strength which has existed since the birth of the nation’. As in *Historical Studies*, Vietnamese revolutionary historians had to establish Lao national unity firmly in antiquity. Long returned to the fourteenth century.

The first independent, united state of Laos come into being in the middle of the fourteenth century, as a very important landmark. It was the natural outcome of a long process of convergence beginning in the eleventh century. In the four centuries in between, there had been a gradual rallying of the ancient muang existing along the Mekong River, between the Truong Son Mountains on the east and the Phanhaphay on the West, from Sipsong Pan Na to the Lippi Falls.71 Citing Kaysone yet again, he argued that the Kingdom of Lan Xang was, from the outset, ‘based on a continuous struggle against factional feudal lords for national unity, and against aggression by feudal cliques in neighbouring countries, for national independence’.72 Fa Ngum, Long argued, was ‘an outstanding hero, gathered all parts of the country into a whole and founded the glorious Lan Xang Kingdom’.73 While Long admitted that the mueangs making up Lan Xang retained ‘many distinctive traits’, he stressed that by the seventeenth century ‘Laos’ had experienced ‘a full political, economic and cultural development of the Lan Xang kingdom’.

Of course, this monolithic reading of the past overlooks the complex mosaic of upland states at the time. By trying to force a line from the fourteenth century to present day Laos, Long clearly had to forget that a good chunk of ‘Laos’ was always on the right bank of the river. Also absent is Thailand’s role in consolidating these upland kingdoms in a competing Thai nationalist sense in the nineteenth century, in opposition to France’s creation of Indochina.74 Applying crude Marxist theory, Long transformed the Siamese into ‘feudalists’ (*phong kiên*) and decried the exploitation of Lao peasants by ‘landed classes’. The present was simply weighing in too heavily in the late 1970s and 1980s for more nuanced studies.75 What counted most was wedding Marxism to nationalism for the Lao, based on the Vietnamese conception of internationalism, itself looking towards Soviet historical schools for help. In the early nineteenth century, Long argued, Chao Anou picked up the glorious banner where his Lan Xang predecessors had left it, that is, by unifying the country against the Siamese: ‘Typical of the struggle for national independence and unity in this period was the uprising led by Chau Anou who, as soon as he
became king (1804), set about rebuilding the country and restor[ing] national unity in preparation for a liberation war in 1827–1828. But the uprising was unsuccessful partly because of the betrayal of the secessionist forces’. Long did not elaborate on these ‘secessionist forces’ and discontinuities.

Perhaps most importantly, Lao history also had to be traced ‘back’ to the ICP, the forefather of the present Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. Lao origins were nationalist and internationalist. The ICP linked the two, as already noted. As he put it:

Under the leadership of the Communist Party of Indochina from 1930 and that of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party from 1955, the struggle for independence and unity was promoted to a higher state, with independence and unity closely linked to [Soviet-led] democracy. This accounted for the many victories of the Lao revolution: the revolution in August 1945, the Declaration of Independence on Oct 12, 1945, the victory over the French, the victory of the twenty-year war against US aggression, and the foundation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in December 1975 [...]".77

In the same collection, Đặng Bích Hà weighed in with an article on the Lao Peoples’ Revolutionary Party during the war against ‘American aggression’. The main idea was to maintain continuity in the Lao peoples’ revolutionary march towards victory: ‘From August 1975, the Lao army and people rose up in insurrection, mutinied, smashed the junta of the comprador bourgeois feudal clique on the payroll of [American] imperialism.’ Đặng Bích Hà praised the ‘correct’ line of the Lao revolution, its ability to take advantage of the propitious moment and to go towards real democracy as it joined the internationalist communist world. The Vietnamese revolution is presented in similar terms. She concluded by stressing its position within the ‘Indochinese revolution’ and its special relations with Vietnam. In her mind, ‘this solidarity is a fine sample of proletarian internationalism based on Marxism-Leninism and is now in full play in this new revolutionary stage’.

The other top writer on Indochina in this collection was Nguyễn Hoàng. Reading the present straight back into the past, Hoàng barely hid the official line he was pushing. In the opening section of his article, entitled The Special Ties between Vietnam and Laos Stem from the Traditions of Solidarity and Mutual Aid between the Two Sister Peoples, he writes:

Let us go back to faraway times in the history of our two countries for a deeper understanding of the Vietnamese-Lao relations in the past century. Vietnam and Laos are two sister nations living side by side from time immemorial. The farther back we explore the past and the more we scrutinise the nationalities of ancient stock, the more stands out the fact that the inhabitants on both sides of the Indochinese cordillera (Phu Luong) share some common foundation."
Hùng then tried to find as many ‘anthropological origins’ shared between the Vietnamese and other groups such as the Mon-Khmer and the Lao. He searched out similarities in dike building, water systems, languages and several cultural features. Missing was any mention of the fact that Vietnam is not Theravada, or that it has been influenced in its political thinking by Confucianism, Chinese models of government and was much more open culturally to Catholicism than any other mainland Southeast Asian country, save the Philippines. ‘In brief’, Hùng wrote, ‘even before the period of [the] formation of independent States, owing to their similarity in many respects, the peoples of Vietnam and Laos [had] already cultivated a mutual understanding […]’.81

Another way of forging this special relationship in the past was to evoke the timeless Chinese menace, something which fit nicely with the SRV’s current foreign policy problems.

Through almost 20 centuries of struggle against the Chinese feudalists’ attempt to assimilate our nation and against successive wars of aggression, the Vietnamese people have always tried to get nearer the Lao people and other neighbour[ing] peoples […] so as to be able to further consolidate and develop their national culture and ‘ever victorious’ capacity in the face of the acts of the ‘celestial Emperors’.82

On the western front, far from an accident, Hùng evokes a joint Indochinese struggle against Siamese aggression.

At the beginning of the 19th century, a major event marked the relations between our two countries: the Lao national hero Chao Anou chose to rely entirely on Vietnam to build the forces of resistance against the Siamese aggressors (1827–1828). On their part, broad sectors of the Vietnamese people and the progressive elements in the royal court wholeheartedly backed Chao Anou. However, the top rulers in the Nguyen court, whose nature was hostile to the people, showed the white feather before the common enemy and fought shy of the obligation to assist Chao Anou’s insurrection. And this was one of the causes of the failure of the Lao people’s effort to do away with Siamese occupation.83

The absence of any mention of historical Vietnamese expansion into Laos is obvious. Vietnamese historiography on Laos is over-politicized.
REVOLUTIONIZING THE INDOCHINESE PAST

THE BORROWING OF THE VIETNAMESE HISTORICAL MODEL IN LAO HISTORIOGRAPHY

Vietnamese revolutionary historiography directly influenced official history writing in Laos (see also Bruce Lockhart’s contribution to this volume). Judging from his numerous post-1975 writings and speeches, Kaysone Phomvihane was the leading Lao proponent of the application of the Vietnamese model to Laos. Peering into his Indochinese looking glass, Kaysone makes it clear where the roots of authentic Lao-Viet collaboration lay:

In this atmosphere, pervaded with the spirit of great solidarity among the three nations, we think of President Hồ Chí Minh, who brought the beacon of Marxism-Leninism to the Vietnamese, Lao and Kampuchean nations. He was the respected and beloved leader of the Indochinese revolution and the great architect who unremittingly built and nurtured the special solidarity among our three nations throughout his life. President Hồ Chí Minh will forever remain in the clear-sighted cause of solidarity and with the beloved nations of Laos, Vietnam and Kampuchea! [applause]84

In March 1979, even as regional communists were still fighting it out, Kaysone published one of the first official outlines of the Lao past based closely on the Vietnamese model. Translated almost immediately into Vietnamese and published by the Truth Publishing House in that year, Kaysone laid out the Lao historical line. Naturally, he started at the beginning in order to affirm that the ‘Lao nation possesses a history of a thousand years of building and safeguarding the glorious country’.85 Lan Xang was the national precursor of Laos. On the colonial period, Kaysone continued that the Lao people never stopped struggling against foreign domination. He cited the heroic ‘uprisings’ of Pho Kaduat, the thirty-six-year ‘armed uprising’ of Ong Keo and Kommadam, the Hmong in northern Laos (1918–22), the uprising of the Thai people in Sam Neua (1916) and so on. Turning to internationalism, he explained the importance of 1917 and the October Revolution for Lao history. It opened the way to the liberation movements, including the three countries of Indochina. His idea was to link Laos to the ‘original’ revolution, that of October 1917. Then, following Hồ Chí Minh’s steps from Moscow to Indochina in the late 1920s, Kaysone established Hồ as the first Indochinese missionary to arrive in Laos. As he wrote in another document:

Comrade Hồ Chí Minh, the prominent soldier of the communist movement and internationalist workers, was the first to propagate Marxist-Leninism into Indochina, he was the one who formed the ICP in 1930. The birth of the ICP marked a new stage in the history of the revolutionary movements of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. From now on, under the leadership of the ICP, the
After a brief though necessary mention of the Japanese ‘fascist’ occupation, he comes to 1945: ‘In co-ordination with the August Revolution of the Vietnamese people’, a people’s ‘uprising’ took power from the Japanese and announced the independence of Laos on 12 October 1945. This was ‘the first time our people became the masters of their land and their destiny after more than 100 years of living under the yoke of slavery and the division of our country. That victory opened a new era […]’. The 1945 to 1950 interlude is a blank. Kaysone jumped instead to 13 August 1950, the official founding date of the ‘Lao Resistance Government’ and a Lao Front. The next important date was 22 March 1955, when the Lao People’s Party was born, the forerunner of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. For the second Indochinese war, the American ‘imperialists’ replaced the French ‘colonialists’ as the primary enemy. The scenario was more or less the same as the Vietnamese one – a straight line to the uprisings of 1975 and the completion of the Lao revolution in the double spirit of patriotism and internationalism.

To my knowledge, the 1990s did not see Lao official historiography break with the Vietnamese model, at least not in public. On the occasion of the Lao national day in 1991, a high level, official conference on Lao-Vietnamese relations was held in Hanoi (see above). Instead of using the word ‘special relations’, though, officials coined an apparently new phrase: ‘Lao-Viet, Viet-Lao relations’. Then Vietnamese party General Secretary, Đỗ Mười, and Khamtai Siphandon, then President of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, both confirmed in their opening remarks the importance of Hồ Chí Minh and the ICP in establishing the origins of this special relationship. Both called for ever greater and eternal cooperation between the two countries. The Lao side repeated its gratitude to the Vietnamese for all that they had done for the Lao revolution. The very structure of the conference and the book reveal the common historiography Vietnamese and Lao officials are pushing on the past. The first section treats ‘President Hồ Chí Minh and Vietnamese-Lao/Lao-Vietnamese Relations of Solidarity’. Various authors, many of whom we have met above, listed Hồ’s actions in relationship to the Lao revolution. They list the events in Hồ’s life related to Laos. Each links the person of Hồ to a long history of Vietnamese aid to the Lao, to Souphanouvong, etc. Missing again is mention of more complicated chapters of Lao-Vietnamese revolutionary relations. Even the late Sisana Sisane, one of Laos’s more critical official historians, joined in to celebrate Hồ’s legitimizing role in Indochinese and Lao history. The next section documents the important events in Vietnamese-Lao relations in the political, military, diplomatic and economic domains among others. Cooperation in the resistance against the French and the Americans dominates. The last section deals with less political historical, cultural and
economic relations, but all are designed to promote special relations between the two sides.

The Vietnamese exert remarkable influence over the making of this common past, something which they would never concede themselves to their internationalist big brother, the Chinese communists. From the late 1970s, Vietnamese universities and party schools promoted the Indochinese line in the masters and PhD topics Lao and Khmer students and researchers undertook in Vietnam. Again, this is hardly surprising. From 1979, following the Khmer Rouge catastrophe, the origins of Cambodian and Laotian communism had to be re-linked to the ICP, to Hồ Chí Minh, and in the revolutionary movements and governments created by Vietnamese communists for Cambodia and Laos in 1950–51 and 1955. Anything else was heresy, to be banished from revolutionary memory. Losing no time, the ‘Pol Pot clique’ was purged from this Indochinese communist story as a terrible deviation. All three revolutions had to be put on the right historical track running to 1930 or at least to the revolutionary parties and resistance governments of the early 1950s, before the withdrawal of the Vietnamese from Cambodia in 1954 allowed Pol Pot to rise to power by 1975.

Several Lao theses defended after 1979 leave no doubt as to Vietnamese attempts to keep the Lao past on the correct internationalist track. Bunam Lau Phay-Dang Blia Zo, for example, defended a masters degree in the National Institute of Higher Political and Hồ Chí Minh Studies on the importance of Vietnamese revolutionary experiences for the Lao People’s Party. In 1991, Xing Thoong Xing Ha Pan Nha defended a thesis at the University of Hanoi on the vital importance of Vietnamese military aid to the victory of the Lao revolution between 1945 and 1954. This Lao author explains in his introduction the importance of ‘Lao-Viet relations’ and their ‘special’ historical significance. Citing an internal report of Nouhak Phoumsavan, he agrees that without Vietnamese aid the Lao revolution would not have succeeded. More interestingly, he argues that not only was Vietnamese aid justified on ‘internationalist’ grounds, but also on ‘nationalist’ ones (something which Pham Sang had argued). Again, the politicization of these dissertations is only too clear. As this Lao author put it, his thesis aimed at developing ‘special friendly relations between the Vietnamese and the Lao’. To this author, ‘foreign’ historians writing on Laos, such as Arthur Dommen, Grant Evans and Martin Stuart-Fox, cannot understand the importance of Vietnamese aid to Laos. Apparently, internationalism allows him to place the Vietnamese historians writing on Laos in another, special category. They are not quite ‘foreigners’ themselves. Notably, this Lao author has played an important role in writing the third volume of the recently published Lao official history. He treats the colonial and resistance periods. The impact of the Vietnamese model is clear.

Following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese made similar efforts to bring the Khmer revolution back into the Indochinese fold. The
current Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, entered the ‘Nguyễn Ái Quốc Institute’ in Hanoi for correct Marxist-Leninist training and undertook a doctoral dissertation on the ‘betrayal’ of the true Cambodian revolution. He defended it successfully in 1991. In so doing, Hun Sen put the Cambodian revolution back on the right, pre-1954 Khmer revolutionary road, aligned historically with the Vietnamese model. He acknowledged the founding role of Hồ Chí Minh and the ICP in 1930 as the predecessors for the Khmer revolution. And he stated the importance of internationalism. The main themes of his thesis are: ‘Revolution and the Betrayal of the Revolution’ and ‘The Revolution Must be Remade’. Hun Sen’s thesis was praised by the jury for its ‘solid theoretical grounding’. While this most certainly does not make him a ‘Cambodian with a Vietnamese mind’, as Khmer hyper-nationalists of the worst kind still allege, his formation in the most important Vietnamese party school places him squarely within the larger Indochinese lineage of the ICP. Son Ngoc Minh, considered to be the founding father of the ‘real’ Cambodian revolution of 1950–51, was trained in the Nguyễn Ái Quốc School’s southern equivalent, the ‘Trúong Chinh Institute’. Already in the early 1950s, before the Lao and the Khmers got down to it, Vietnamese party historiography had already begun casting Lao and Khmer history in revolutionary Indochinese terms.

Again, it was a question of legitimizing the newly declared revolutionary governments. No one knew that internationally bargained accords in Geneva in 1954 would divide Indochina into two halves and allow Pol Pot and his followers to take the Cambodian revolution down a radically different path than the internationalist one first laid out by the Comintern in 1930 and reapplied by the Vietnamese from 1950. And it is no accident that Pol Pot, once in power, rewrote the founding of Khmer communism. This is why getting those birthday parties ‘right’ became and remains such serious business in official memory-making circles. And herein lies the full historical significance of the famous *Livre Noir*, published by the Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea in 1978. It was designed to de-link Khmer communism from its ICP historiography by ‘delegitimizing’ the Vietnamese version of ‘the facts and proofs’ of the past. Recasting Vietnamese internationalists as Minh Mạng-minded colonialists was key to affirming the ‘new’ Khmer nationalist discourse that Democratic Kampuchean communists wanted to build. In many ways, the battle over the past had begun before the communist brothers went to war against each other. In June 1991, on the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the ‘first’ Cambodian revolutionary party, Chea Sim penned an historical essay for the Vietnamese party’s historical review designed to establish the ‘right’ revolutionary vision of the past, in alliance with the ICP and the Vietnamese version.
CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined how Vietnamese communist historiography and its advocates organize knowledge on Laos within an Indochinese framework in order to legitimate the present by establishing a communion with the past. It is hard to say which way Vietnamese writing on Laos will go in the coming years. Some recent historical studies seem to have abandoned the party’s heavy political line in favour of more innocuous (safer?) cultural and linguistic studies. But the official Vietnamese reading of the Lao past still persists. It appears that Vietnamese communist authorities, fearful of losing their bearings in a seemingly pervasive non-communist world, have gone back to the past to renew their ‘special ties’ with Laos (and even with communist China and what remains of ‘authentic’ Khmer revolutionaries).

In the last few years, Vietnamese leaders have made a concerted attempt to jump-start historic Lao-Vietnamese collaboration in the political, juridical, commercial, military and security domains. To keep that remembering on the right track, the VCP has even sent cadres from the ‘Hồ Chí Minh Museum’ westwards to train their Lao counterparts running the ‘Kaysone Phomvihane Museum’. Construction was completed on 13 December 2000, in commemoration of Kaysone’s birthday. Vietnamese ‘companies’ contributed as much as 50 per cent of the funds needed to build this museum, a fairly accurate reflection – in my view – of their contribution to the Lao remembering of the past. In all, the Hồ Chí Minh Museum granted 2,100 relics to its Kaysone counterpart, including documents, over 800 photos and at least 650 metres of documentary films. The construction of a 17-m-high statue of ‘Vietnamese volunteer soldiers and Lao army men’ in southern Laos, officially called the ‘Laos-Vietnam Militant Solidarity Monument’, reinforced this special vision of the past. A remarkably similar ‘Vietnam-Cambodia Friendship Monument’ exists today in Cambodia. Vietnamese officials, like their counterparts the world over, lay wreaths at the foot of each monument to remember their shared past.

SRV officials will undoubtedly try to hold on to ‘their’ special Indochinese relationship with Laos as long as they can, or at least until the gap between reality and myth becomes too wide to bridge. Already larger geopolitical, regional changes are dissolving Indochina into Southeast Asia and the world, whether the SRV likes it or not. Young Lao, like their Vietnamese counterparts, are going to the United States, France and, yes, even to Thailand to study. Old time Vietnamese-trained Lao cadres will retire. While new, Vietnamese-educated ones will take over, this growing number of non-Vietnamese educated Lao elites will also be there and their numbers will grow, as will their demands. It will be a slow process, but it, too, is already underway. And as Laos moves out of Vietnam’s Indochinese orbit and into ASEAN’s ‘Southeast Asia’ or whatever world it chooses, new ‘pasts’ will emerge to make
sense of the ever changing present. As they do, Vietnamese should not be shocked or hurt or bitter when Laos decides to take its own, more independent path towards writing the past – just as the Chinese or the French should not take umbrage when the Vietnamese decide to go it alone. Special relations never last forever. They are always reinvented to meet the needs of the present rather than to reflect any sort of historical ‘reality’ in the past.
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NOTES

5. The statue of Pavie was torn down following the Allied defeat of the Japanese in 1945. Nice photos of Vietnamese pulling down French colonial monuments, often during the Trần Trọng Kim period, can be found in the journal *Trung Bạch Chủ Nhật*. It is possible that in mid-1945 Việt Kiều nationalists in Laos tore down parts of the Pavie statue erected in 1933 by the French, not the Lao themselves.
6. See Bruce Lockhart’s contribution for the Lao revolutionary equivalent.


15. Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina?*, Part II.

16. ‘Excerpts of the content of a meeting on July 1961 between the two Central committee’s delegations of the two parties’. In *Indochina is a battlefield* (Collection of materials about the relationships between the three Indochinese countries in the anti-American and saving-the-country cause), The Institute of Military History, 1981.


18. Unfortunately, we have no study of the propaganda and words used by the Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese communists during this period.


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32. The Lao-Cambodia-Vietnam Summit Conference, p. 4. My emphasis.
37. Judging from the absence of official Vietnamese historical writing on Cambodia in 1975 and 1976, things must have already been very bad between Vietnamese and Cambodian communists associated with Pol Pot.
40. In the official Vietnamese documents I have examined concerning western Indochina, I have found no reference to ‘Uncle Hồ’. It is always ‘President Hồ Chí Minh’ (Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh). It would seem that ‘uncle’ is reserved for the Vietnamese.
42. ‘The Spirit of Great Friendship between the Vietnamese and the Lao’, p. 45.
44. Nguyễn Tài, ‘Remembering the Day I Escorted Uncle Hồ from Thailand to Promote the Building of Revolutionary Bases in Laos [Nhớ lại Ngày đưa Bác Hồ từ Thái Lan sang Gây Đầu Cơ Sở Cách Mạng ở Lào]’, Tạp Chí Cộng Sản, no. 12, December 1986, pp. 80–82.
46. Nhi Đại, ‘Nguyễn Ai Quốc Initiated the Historical Relationship of Special Unity [Nguyễn Ai Quốc – Người Dân Đấu Lực Sự Quan Hệ Đoàn Kết Đặc Biệt], in *Vietnamese-Lao, Lao-Vietnamese Relations* [Quan Hệ Việt-Lào, Lào-Việt], Hanoi, Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia [formerly, Sự Thật], 1993, pp. 4–5. This collection represents the official publication of the conference, superseding apparently the less complete version published by *Tạp Chí Khoa Học*, 2 December 1991. See the previous note.

47. Keen on historicizing the SRV’s ‘new’ relations with Thailand in the 1990s, Vietnamese have even begun to use Hồ Chí Minh’s time in Thailand around 1930, ‘forgetting’ that Hồ was working for the Komintern against the monarchy, Phibun Songkhram and Pridi Phanomyong. See Nguyễn Thị Giang and Nguyễn Viết Hồng, ‘A Number of Aspects on Nguyễn Ai Quốc-Hồ Chí Minh’s Time in Siam (Thailand) [Vài nét về Nguyễn Ai Quốc-Hồ Chí Minh đối với Xiêm (Thái Lan)], *Nghiên Cứu Đông nam á*, no. 2 (15), 1994, pp. 95–96, especially the last sentence.


52. Phạm Sang, ‘Hồ Chí Minh and the National Lao Revolutionary Movement’, p. 75.

53. President Hồ Chí Minh and His 100th Birthday [Hồ Chí Minh 100 ปี], Vientiane: Social Science Committee, 1990. Celebrating this sacred occasion were Nouhak Phoumsavan, Phoumi Vongvichit, and Kaysone Phomvihane, etc.


55. Who took over Lao affairs in the early 1950s for the Party, see Goscha, ‘Le contexte asiatique’, section Indochine.


57. Hoài Nguyên, an eminent Vietnamese researcher on Laos, was originally a ‘internationalist volunteer’ in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia during the Franco-Vietnamese war. He had working relations with the highest level members of the Laotian government and party. He then turned his wartime knowledge of Laos and Cambodia to academic goals at the University of Hue, where he wrote widely on western Indochinese cultures. Hoài Nguyên, *The Land and People of Laos* [Lạo Đất Nước-Con Người], no place: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1995 and Hoài Nguyên, ‘Some Thoughts on the Vietnamese Volunteers in Lower Laos during the Resistance against the
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French [Đòi Nét về Quản Tinh Nguyễn Việt Nam ở Hà Lào trong Kháng Chiến Chống Thục Dân Pháp]. In Vietnamese-Lao Relations, pp. 132–137.

59. Đặng Bích Hà, Outline History of Laos, p. 36.
60. Đặng Bích Hà, Outline History of Laos, p. 42. Recently, Vietnamese historians have returned to the question of Lan Xang and the reasons for its rise and fall. See Nghiên Cú Lịch Sử, no. 2 (273), 1994, pp. 66–70.
61. Đặng Bích Hà, Outline History of Laos, p. 37.
63. Đặng Bích Hà, Outline History of Laos, pp. 90–103. An article in Nghiên Cú Lịch Sử in 1994 on this same period in Laos maintained this line. See Nghiên Cú Lịch Sử, no. 6, 1994.
64. Lê Duy Lương and Blanchard de la Brosse, A Lao History/Chronicle [LámândKhruñ], Vientiane: Imprimerie gouvernementale, 1934.

65. Paradoxically, they relied almost exclusively on French colonial literature to make their anti-colonial points.
70. History and Culture of South East Asia, Studies on Laos, Hanoi: Department for South East Asian Studies, Social Sciences Committee of Vietnam, 1981.
71. Phạm Nguyên Long, ‘The Lao People’s Traditional Struggle for Independence and National Unity’. In History and Culture of South East Asia, Studies on Laos, p. 2.

75. Few Marxist interpretations in Vietnamese or Lao can match that of Jit Phumisak’s critique of sakdina.
76. Phạm Nguyên Long, ‘The Lao People’s Traditional Struggle for Independence and National Unity’. In History and Culture of South East Asia, Studies on Laos, p. 4.
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85. Kaysone Phomvihane, Several Major Experiences and a Number of Matters on the New Direction of the Lao Revolution [Một vài kinh nghiệm chính và một số vấn đề về phương hướng mới của cách mạng Lào], Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, p. 10. Also see the collection of his articles entitled: 25 Years of Struggles and Victories of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party [25 năm chiến đấu và thắng lợi của cách mạng Lào], Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, 1980.


88. Kaysone, 25 Years of Struggles, p. 15.

89. Kaysone, Several Major Experiences, pp. 14–16.

90. Vietnamese-Lao, Lao-Vietnamese Relations.


93. I cannot identify this apparent Lao writer from the Vietnamese transcription.


95. This is Singthong Singhapannya.


98. Goscha, ‘Le contexte asiatique’. Indochinese section. Lao party officials continue to take ‘refresher courses’ in the Hồ Chí Minh Institute.


108. The ‘Viet Nam Museum of Ethnology’ has recently announced plans to create a new exhibit by 2005 that will ‘profile the national characteristics of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members’. See Vietnam News Service, 27 July 2001. The SRV’s museums will soon reflect the double tracks of current Vietnamese historiography on a revolutionary Indochina and non-ideological Southeast Asia.

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