

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

By Guest Editors: Ian G. Baird¹ and Christine Elliott²

The Fourth International Conference of Lao Studies (4ICLS) was held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) in Madison, Wisconsin, in the United States, from April 19–21, 2013. The conference was organized by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Center for Lao Studies (CLS), based in San Francisco, California.

4ICLS brought together over 250 scholars, students and community members from around the world with various interests related to Lao studies. During the conference, a total of 38 panels and 120 individual presentations addressed a wide range of topics.

As with past international Lao studies conferences, 4ICLS defined “Lao studies” broadly so as to include not only scholarly research related to ethnic Lao people, but also peoples from all ethnic groups found in Laos, including but not limited to the Hmong, Iu-Mien, Khmu, Lue, Lamet, Tai Dam, Brao, Akha, Jrou and Brou. The government of Laos presently recognizes 49 major ethnic groups and over 160 subgroups (Lao Front for National Construction 2005). In addition to these groups, the conference covered ethnic Lao peoples (and speakers of other Tai languages) living in other countries in Asia such as Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam and China. Research presentations related to people from all the ethnic groups found in Laos but who live in other parts of the world, including former refugees and their descendants and other immigrants to North America, Europe and Oceania, as well as those with roots in Laos but who now identify as Lao Americans, Hmong Americans or simply Asian Americans, also contributed to the conference.

This is the second special issue of the *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) that includes papers presented at 4ICLS. The first issue, which came out in March 2015, included a short introduction, much like this one, and eight full-length research articles focusing on a wide range of topics. This issue contains this introduction and seven additional full-length research papers, all of which passed through a rigorous double-blind peer-review process (two or three reviewers per paper). We are grateful for the helpful feedback provided by the many prominent scholars who agreed to serve as referees. Their comments were crucial for ensuring the quality of the final published papers. We also thank Rebecca May for her expert support in copyediting the papers.

This special issue explores two important but considerably different areas within Lao studies: upland peoples and Tai linguistics. The first group includes four papers

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related to upland peoples from Laos, all of which rely on ethnography as their primary method of study. The first paper in this group discusses the people from the Kim Mun ethnic group in northern Laos, the second considers upland ethnic minorities in Xekong Province in southern Laos, the third examines people from the Phounoy ethnic group in the far north, and the fourth relates to Lao Hmong people living at the Wat Tham Krabok Buddhist temple in Saraburi, central Thailand.

The second focus of this special issue is Tai linguistics, particularly Lao language varieties and other related Tai dialects. There are three articles in this group. The first deals with the history of “r” in the spoken and written Lao language. The second discusses the relationship between the language of “Lao Khrang” people in central and northern Thailand—people who were originally from the Luang Phrabang area in Laos—and the variety of Lao currently spoken in Luang Phrabang today. The third relates to the language of ethnic Phuan/Phouan people living in northern Cambodia.

The first paper, written by Jacob Cawthorne, a PhD candidate in the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne in Australia, examines the ritual life of ethnic Kim Mun people in northern Laos. The Kim Mun, also known as the Lanten, Man or Lao Houay, are a particularly small ethnic group in Laos, one with a language in the Hmong-Mien family and closely related to Iu Mien. This article represents a particularly important contribution to the literature. As one of the article’s referees pointed out, there has been very little recorded about the Kim Mun, and virtually nothing has been written about their ritual life. The paper also indicates that for academics working on Taoism, there is research to be done in Laos, something that is not always recognized by either Lao or religious studies scholars.

The second paper was authored by Dr. Yves Goudineau, who has recently taken up the prestigious position of director at the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in Paris, France. He was previously the head of the EFEO in Chiang Mai, Thailand and Vientiane, Laos. His paper, which examines the politics of ethnic categorization in the particular context of Xekong Province in southeastern Laos, is based on his keynote address at 4ICLS. The paper makes an important contribution to understanding the politics of multi-ethnicity in contemporary Laos in a time of rapid social change and with the assimilation of minorities into the ethnic Lao mainstream. Crucially, it illuminates the ironies associated with the Lao PDR government’s official discourse regarding multi-cultural heritage preservation.

The third paper is written by Vanina Bouté, an associate professor at the Université de Picardie in Amiens, France, who is also affiliated with the Centre Asie du Sud-Est (l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales [EHESS]). Based on extensive interviews as well as an analysis of primary source documents, her paper examines the formation of what came to be considered the “Phounoy” ethnic group in northern Laos’ Phongsaly Province and their relations with lowland society, thus engaging with debates surrounding “Zomia” and particularly the engaging but controversial book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, by James C. Scott (2009). Bouté argues that the example of the Phounoy shows how this group, over time, developed symbiotic relationships with the Lao majority, illustrating instances of integration, not solely resistance, in response to the development of the Tai Muang in the region. In this sense, it adds to a growing body of new research demonstrating that upland and lowland societies in mainland Southeast Asia have generally benefited much

more from interactions with each other than Scott suggests (see, for example, Jonsson 2010; 2012; Baird 2013; Lee 2015).

The fourth paper that addresses upland peoples is written by David Chambers, a PhD candidate in geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and deals with the relationship between ethnic Hmong people originally from Laos and the Wat Tham Krabok temple, an unusual Theravada Buddhist temple in Saraburi Province, central Laos. As a geographer, Chambers is particularly interested in spatiality, and as with Bouté's paper, he is also interested in engaging with Scott's ideas about "Zomia" (Scott 2009). His contribution is unique, however, in that Chambers specifically uses the concept of anarchism to examine the Hmong who lived at Tham Krabok during the 1990s and early 2000s until the period during which over 15,000 Hmong were allowed to immigrate to the United States in 2004–2005, and the unofficial Hmong refugee camp was closed down. As one of the reviewers, a prominent scholar of Hmong Studies, wrote when assessing the value of the paper, "The ethnographic detail is rich and interesting and useful in a historical and theoretical sense."

Although the first four papers deal with upland ethnic minorities, the other three papers are concerned with Tai linguistics, particularly Lao language varieties within Laos and related Tai dialects used outside of Laos, in neighboring Thailand and Cambodia. These three papers not only add to our knowledge of Tai linguistics but also show the historical connections and cross-linguistic influences among Tai language groups, which are spread throughout mainland Southeast Asia but centered mostly in present-day Laos and Thailand.

The first of these papers, and the fifth paper in the special issue, is written by Garry Davis, a professor of linguistics at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Davis examines the historical development of the Lao language pertaining to the letter "r," an often controversial letter in Lao, one that was stricken from the written language after the Pathet Lao gained control of Laos in 1975, but which has now been reinstated, and is once again being used more widely within Laos (Chamberlain 2009). Although controversy has surrounded use of "r" in written form in modern times, as Davis explains, "...the [r]-sound is, and has been, exceedingly rare in the Lao language for decades if not for centuries." Davis' paper builds on work by Enfield (1999) and traces linguistic evidence beginning with Lao inscriptions to show how the use of the Lao "r" changed over time in relation to "h" and "l" in both speaking and writing, and how its development has also been affected by cultural and religious traditions and cross-linguistic influences that include borrowings from Pali-Sanskrit, Khmer and Thai. As the title of Davis' paper suggests, it fills gaps in our knowledge of how these changes may have taken place and shows how comparisons of Tai languages such as Lao and Thai can further our understanding of their linguistic development.

The second paper related to linguistics, and the sixth paper in the issue, is written by Varisa Osatananda, an associate professor of linguistics at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. She examines the language of the ethnic "Lao Khrang" people, a Tai dialect spoken by a small ethnic group found in central and northern Thailand, but originating in the Luang Phrabang area of northern Laos. Osatananda is not only interested in comparing the tonal systems of these two Tai varieties (Lao Khrang and Lao spoken in Luang Phrabang) to determine their similarity (linguistic proximity), but is also interested in how Lao Khrang is perceived by speakers of Luang Phrabang Lao in terms

of native versus non-native accent (perceptual proximity). Osatananda's paper adds to a small but growing body of work examining linguistic data gathered within Laos and contributes to existing research that analyzes connections among various Tai language groups in mainland Southeast Asia. Such work is particularly urgent because regional dialects such as Lao Khrang are much less commonly spoken today by the younger generation.

The third paper related to linguistics, and the seventh and final paper in the collection, is written by Thananan Trongdee, an assistant professor at Mahasarakham University in Mahasarakham Province, northeastern Thailand. Trongdee analyzes the language of the ethnic Phuan/Phouan people living in northern Cambodia, a previously unstudied linguistic group in Cambodia. As with the Lao Khrang paper, this study examines a Tai ethnic group, the Phuan/Phouan, who were forcibly moved in the 18th and 19th centuries from what is now Laos and resettled into an area that was at the time under the control of Siam. Using both linguistic data and historical records, Trongdee builds the case that some of the so-called '*Liao*' (or "Lao" in the Khmer language) in northwestern Cambodia are actually Phuan/Phouan who were first forced to move to Siam from their home in Xieng Khouang, in Laos, and then later sent as laborers by the Siamese government to Battambang in Cambodia, which was under Siamese control at the time. In addition to contributing an original linguistic data analysis concerning a Tai dialect spoken in Cambodia, this paper is, as one reviewer pointed out, "a significant contribution to our knowledge of the [Phuan/]Phouan depopulation by the Thai military in the 19th century and of the extent of the dispersal in its wake," and is a good example of the how the fields of history and linguistics can be mutually supportive.

Ultimately, the seven papers included in this special issue, along with the eight included in the first special issue that emerged out of 4ICLS, constitute a considerable amount of new peer-reviewed and now published knowledge related to Lao studies, broadly defined. We hope readers find the papers of interest.

We are now looking forward to the Fifth International Lao Studies Conference (5ICLS), which will be hosted by Thammasat University in July 2016.

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