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Call for Article Submissions for the JLS:

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

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

Language: Lao and English are the main languages, other languages are welcomed. Please check with the editors first before submitting articles in other languages not listed here.
IVS Volunteers in Rural Laos, 1956-1969

Frederic C. Benson

(Dedicated to the Memory of Galen S. Beery, IVS 1959-1967, who died on October 11, 2016)

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a short introduction to the origins of International Voluntary Services, Inc. and a brief overview of its rural development program in Laos from its beginning in 1956 through to its Task Force activities following the Kong Le coup d’état in 1960; its subsequent key role in USAID's Cluster, Forward Area and Non-Cluster Area programs; and its withdrawal from field positions outside provincial capitals during 1969 which led to IVS’s disengagement from most rural development activities. During this period IVS volunteers served fifty different locations throughout Laos.

1953 - Origins of International Voluntary Services, Inc. (IVS)

The Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA) was established on September 8, 1950. Its function was to oversee the technical cooperation programs authorized by Point Four, a foreign aid program originally enunciated by President Truman and later expanded by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles who encouraged government-private sector cooperation. (Rodell 2010)

Shortly thereafter, on November 24, 1950, TCA's International Development Advisory Board brought the volunteer program concept to the Administration’s attention in the form of an IVS program statement entitled “Testing the People to People Approach.” (Clark 2010; Andrews 1970) After considerable discussion within the TCA, the “volunteer” concept was finally approved in 1952 and IVS’s charter was recorded on February 17, 1953. (Beery 1969)

1 Presentation given at IVS Reunion in Knoxville, Tennessee on October 5, 2016
2 See National Archives http://archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/469.html#469_3.
3 The primary purpose of “Point Four” of President Truman’s 1949 foreign policy address was “to help the peoples of the underdeveloped areas to utilize their human and material resources more efficiently and to raise their standards of living.” (United States House 1949: 2-3) The United States and other free nations have a clear-cut and immediate concern in the material progress of these people. It arises not only from humanitarian impulses but also from the fact that such progress in the underdeveloped areas will advance the cause of freedom and democracy in the world, expand mutually beneficial trade, and help to develop international understanding and good will. (United States House 1949: 1)
4 IVS’s 1953 Mission Statement: “International Voluntary Services is a private, non-profit organization designed to promote ‘people-to-people’ cooperation in improving health, productivity and living standards and fostering better understanding among peoples. It is a mechanism for uniting the energies of individuals and private organizations, and of providing program direction and administrative services for Foreign Service projects. Some IVS projects are sponsored and supported entirely through private contributions and others may be operated in cooperation with governmental or international agencies.” (Shirk 2003: 1)
The following year, on January 8, 1954, John S. Noffsinger was appointed executive-director by IVS’s Board of Directors. (Rodell 2010) Noffsinger was committed to creating a “non-sectarian humanistic service organization.” Funded by USAID\(^5\), IVS volunteers would be given two-year contracts to work in ‘people-to-people’ community development, agriculture, and education projects, and would expect them “to learn the culture and language and live at the same level as their co-workers.” (Rodell 2010)

Subsequently, on June 30, 1955, TCA’s aid program was transferred to State Department’s International Cooperation Administration (ICA)\(^6\), which established United States Overseas Missions (USOM) in select countries where aid programs were initiated. In 1961, ICA was replaced by USAID, the United States Agency for International Development. Hereafter, in this paper I will refer to the aid agency as USAID.

1955 - The Introduction of the U.S. Aid Program in Laos

Soon to be appointed the first US ambassador to Laos, Minister Charles W. Yost, arrived in Laos on September 22, 1954. (Rust 2012:14) Several months later, the operations of USAID’s mission to Laos got underway on January 1, 1955 with a skeleton staff that relied on technicians borrowed from other missions. With the advent of independence following the 1954 Geneva Agreements and the withdrawal of colonial France, Laos was immediately faced with the problem of raising funds to defray the costs of governmental operations. (United States House 1959a: 7) Accordingly, the United States began supplying direct assistance to the inexperienced Laotian regime through supporting agencies that included USAID which provided economic and technical assistance.

During the years that followed, the United States fully supported (with third country assistance) the entire Laotian economy, including the Lao military, with the objective of assisting Laos to become a neutralized, stable and independent state and to prevent it from coming under Communist control.\(^7\) (USAID 1962: 115–116). (Benson 2015: 28-29)

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\(^5\) TCA was subordinated to the Director of Mutual Security on June 1, 1953, and on August 31, 1953, its functions were transferred to the Foreign Operations Administration. Subsequently, on June 30, 1955, the aid program was transferred to State Department’s International Cooperation Administration (ICA). United States Operations Missions (USOM) were established as ICA’s administrators of aid programs in countries that were active programs were established. In 1961, USOM became the U.S. Agency for International Development. (National Archives)

\(^6\) See National Archives [http://archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/469.html#469.7](http://archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/469.html#469.7)

\(^7\) Statement of C. Douglas Dillon, Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs: “The principal objective of our foreign policy in Laos has been to assist the Royal Government to overcome Communist efforts to overthrow it from within. Our basic policy has been to encourage the establishment of the strongest practicable non-Communist government, and the development of the broad popular support which such a government would require in order to defend and strengthen its independence. Specifically, it has been and is our policy to assist the Royal Lao Government in reducing the internal Communist threat by the extension of economic and military assistance working with the Royal Lao Government we have carried out joint projects in the fields of administration, public works, village improvement, health, agricultural improvement, and information.” (United States House 1959b: 3)
1956 - IVS Enters Laos: Xieng Khouang Development Project

During the next five years leading up to the Kong Le coup d’état in August 1960, the United States aid operations undertook a variety of aid-related programs to establish rural self-help activities on a permanent long-term basis.  

With great emphasis being placed on rural development, in November 1958 the Royal Lao Government (RLG) established the Commission for Rural Affairs (CRA), and with assistance from USAID set up the Rural Self-Help Project to lay the groundwork for a national service that would coordinate rural activities throughout the Kingdom of Laos under the “Development of the Rural Economy” program. (Mann 1964: 168; Wing 1964: E18; etc.)

It was against this backdrop that IVS entered Laos. In April 1955, USAID Laos conducted a survey, and based on its findings approached IVS which, in turn, recruited W. Wendell Rolston, a retired Iowa farmer, who traveled to Laos on June 30, 1955 to undertake a more specific feasibility study together with USAID technicians (on loan from USAID Thailand). The team explored the Boloven Plateau in southern Laos and the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province in northern Laos in search of ways to “better the educational, health and agricultural programs, as well to improve the living standards of Laos.” (Rolston 1956: 1)

For various reasons, it was agreed to locate and develop an area on the Plain of Jars and the proposed project was drawn up and submitted to USAID in Washington on September 1, 1955. It was subsequently cleared and approved on October 26. (Rolston 1956: 2) In the meantime, IVS negotiated the terms of a contract with USAID, a process that was completed and signed by both parties on February 3, 1956. (Rolston 1956: 2)

Known as the Xieng Khouang Development Project, the first group of seven IVS team members arrived at the project site at Phonesavanh beginning March 1, 1956. The project’s counterpart was the Lao Ministry of

8 The assistance included the Village Improvement Project from 1956 through 1957, the Village Development Field Service Project during FY57 merged into the Rural Self-Help Project beginning in November 1958, an undertaking which placed US Community Development Specialists in six provincial capitals to survey the feasibility of such activities. Its successor was the Rural Self-Help Project in FY59. (Department of State 1959: 32; Wing 1964: E17- E18) In FY 1957 two projects were initiated which were directed at counter-Pathet-Lao subversion activities. The first of these was Civic Action, which undertook a rural leadership, development and information program to disseminate information to stimulate civic awareness and to explain, encourage and assist self-help local improvements of all sorts. The second project, Operation Brotherhood, provided teams of Philippine doctors and nurses who brought basic medical services to remote rural areas. (Department of State 1959: 32). With regards to Civic Action, The RLG formally expressed its interest in programs to impact at the village level when in December 1956 it created the national Commissariat for Civic Action. This consisted of four parts: the headquarters research section, Civic Action School and field teams. Two months later, Lt. Col. Oudone Sananikone was named to head the commissariat, and on 25 April 1957 USOM and the RLG signed an agreement initiating the first civic action program. (Wing 1964: E15)

9 These are a few of the reasons for this decision: 1) The need for developing provincial leadership; 2) The area had been overrun by the Viet Minh in 1952 – 1954 who destroyed livestock and buildings; 3) The receptive attitude of the governor of the province, Chao Saykham; 4) The adaptability of this area to livestock and upland crops; and 5). The potential for development of crops for food, other than rice. (Rolston 1956: 1-2)

10 The first team included W. Wendell Rolston, Frances Rolston, Clyde Searl, Carl Coppock, Frank
Education, and it was hoped that the undertaking could be done “through a teaching and demonstration program, emphasizing the self-help process.” (Rolston 1956: 1)

Although the Xieng Khouang Development Project began as a model farm and a community worker’s training project, both of these activities were discontinued in 1957 because the area was found to be unsuited for a farm site and because the Royal Lao Government (RLG) preferred to concentrate on other activities. (Bowman 1959, 1) Indeed, during its first several years of service in Laos under contract to USAID, the agency's administration in Laos changed hands several times and the direction and aim of IVS was altered with each change.\(^\text{11}\) (IVS 1959: 1)

A new IVS Project Agreement with USAID dated June 25, 1957 called for the transition from a strictly agricultural project to a village development project and outlined the steps that were to be taken to implement the project. (IVS 20 January 1959: 1)

In mid-1959, IVS shifted its team\(^\text{12}\) headquarters to nearby Lat Houang, a location where IVS had carried out successful community development projects.\(^\text{13}\)

\textbf{1959 - First IVS Education Team}

In response to the long-standing request by the head of USAID’s Education Division in Vientiane, the first IVS education team of nine\(^\text{14}\) arrived in Laos in August 1959. They were to work at the National Education Center.\(^\text{15}\) (Maxwell 9/3/16 email; Russell 1959: 1) The IVS Educational Team was covered by a USAID contract different from that of the IVS Rural Development Team and is not covered in this paper. (Beery 1966: 7)

\textbf{1960 - Voluntary Agency for Rural Development Administration (VARDA)}

In early 1960 (January 27 – February 5), IVS’s Executive Committee member

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11 For a while it was thought that it might be expedient to move IVS from under the direction of the Ministry of Education, where it had been since IVS arrived in Laos and place it under the Ministry of Rural Affairs. Inasmuch as the Assistant Minister of Education was in accord with the thinking of the new ministries, and since the Director General of Education had always championed the IVS and gave it great support, no advantage could be determined that would warrant such a change at that time. (IVS 1959: 2)

12 Team members as of mid-1959 included Dean Bowman, E. Walter Coward Jr., A Wayne McDonald, William L. Johnson, and Anna Zachweija. Richard Bowman replaced Johnson (who was transferred to Vientiane) in August and in October John F. Boyd Jr. arrived to serve as Chief-of-Party. Lawrence Ulsaker arrived in December and brought the team back to full strength. (Bowman 1959: 13)

13 The IVS headquarters in both Phonsavanh and Lat Houang was shared with all USOM, USIS, and Embassy personnel when they had business in the area. (Bowman 1959: 13)

14 Team members included Chief-of-Party H.L. Fry and Mrs. Fry, William L. Johnson (relocated from Lat Houang), Nancy Johnson, Dorothy Heieie, Rose a House, Dayton L. Maxwell, Dwane Hammer, and Marion E. Carnes. (Snyder 1959: 1)

15 The National Education Center was established under Royal Ordinance No. 164 of June 30, 1958, within the frame of Sisavang Vong University. Royal Ordinance No. 203 of the 13 September 1957 was issued concerning the creation of Sisavang Vong University. (Council 1959)
John H. Reisner visited Laos as part of IVS’s annual inspection. Prior to his departure from Washington, various conferences were held to discuss the request from USAID Laos through Washington to increase the number of IVS teams in Laos by eleven. Following the 1958 changes in the Royal Lao Government and a meeting with US Ambassador Smith in Vientiane, the request to IVS was reduced to seven additional teams. The tentative target date for signing the contract between USAID Washington and IVS Washington was April 1960. (Reisner 1960: 7)

The ensuing contract entitled Voluntary Agency for Rural Development Administration (VARDA) provided for seven teams of seven members each, with team leaders directing activities under a chief-of-party in coordination with USAID’s Rural Development Division, the objective being to benefit isolated agricultural villagers. (Beery 1965, 8)

The subsequent Interim Report for the Annual IVS Board Meeting on Laos stated that “anyone wanting to work for IVS should be led to believe that they could be a government employee in the strictest sense of the word. The present success of the team in Laos is due to the fact that at last it has been shown that IVS is USAID, and that because of the relative independence of IVS it can do a better job in the field.” (IVS 1959: 4-5)

1960 - Kong Le Coup d’état Sparks a Civil War

The only progress made during 1960 following the signing of the VARDA contract was the basic planning and development of operational policies. Before new IVS teams could be recruited and placed throughout Laos, Lao Army Captain Kong Le staged a coup on August 9, 1960 against the rightist government and occupied Vientiane. Kong Le invited Prince Souvanna Phouma, a former prime minister, to form a Neutralist government which was put together in November. In December, the Battle of Vientiane took place and Kong Le’s Neutralist forces were forced by the political right led by General Phoumi Nosavan to withdraw to the Plain of Jars, where they joined forces with the Pathet Lao and aligned with North Vietnam and received support from the Soviet Union. (see Stuart-Fox 2008: 167)

16 There were twelve provinces in Laos in 1958: Sam Neua, Phongsaly, Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Vientiane, Borikhane, Khammouane, Savanakhet, Saravane, Attopeu, Champassak. (Halpern 1961: 38).

17 Following May 1958 elections, conservative CDNI (Committee for the Defense of National Interests) was formed and targeted Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma who resigned on July 22, 1958 and was succeeded by Phoui Sananikone who formed a new government on August 18, 1958, which, unlike the November 1967 expansion of the RLG’s cabinet to include two Pathet Lao ministers, excluded members of the NLHX. The Sananikone government was destined to last eighteen months. (Goldstein 1973: 143-144) During the months leading up to the May 1968 election, Ambassador Parsons conceived Operation Booster Shot, an activity which was a village aid program targeting the population in remote areas that would airdrop aid by air. The program took the form of more than 90 work projects, as well as the dropping of some 1,300 tons of food. It apparently took an emergency situation to evoke the only aid program that took account of the real needs of Laos. When the emergency was over, the program was abandoned. The lessons which should have been learned were promptly forgotten. (United States House 1959a: 46)
1961 - Emergency Action Taken Following the Battle of Vientiane

Following the Kong Le coup, the RLG’s Commission of Rural Affair’s operations were thrown into turmoil. [Mann 1964: 168-169]

Although most Americans (including IVS personnel) were evacuated to Bangkok during the latter part of 1960, on January 10, 1961, USAID was reorganized with a Task Force established in Laos and a Support Group in Bangkok to cope with the existing conditions of hostilities and limited security in Laos. [USAID 1962: 116]

Three categories of sub-projects became the responsibility of the Task Force: Relief and rehabilitation, Rural self-help, and Sub-projects of provincial significance. [USAID 1962: 137]

By the time USAID launched the Task Force Program, the tours of duty of only a few of the original IVS Xieng Khouang team were still active. Furthermore, only a small number of new IVS volunteers were scheduled to come to Laos in 1961. Nevertheless, IVSers from both the VARDA and Education groups who were in place during 1961 played an important role as members of the task force, especially in the refugee relief sub-project. One of the key figures in the relief program was Edgar “Pop” Buell, a retired Indiana farmer who joined IVS and went to Laos in mid-1960 where he joined the Lat Houang team before being evacuated with his colleagues to Bangkok following the coup and returning to Laos to join the Task Force team.

It was not until late 1961 that USAID personnel, with IVSers in the foreground, were able to return and pick up threads of disrupted, disorganized programs. [Beery 1966, 7-8] IVS volunteers then began to arrive in force, and during 1962, teams were positioned in major Lao provincial capitals including Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Ban Houei Sai, and Pakse. Supplementing the small group of new IVSers who arrived in 1961, approximately fourteen new volunteers came to Laos in 1962. [Beery 1964: 42-43]

USAID’s Task Force program continued until mid-1962. [USAID 1962: 146]

During the latter half of 1962, the original Rural Self-Help project resumed as a sub-activity under the original “Development of the Rural Economy” program established with CRA in November 1958. [Mann 1969: 1-A]

The other sub-activities introduced were Rural Public Works, Well-Drilling, and Support for the Commission for Rural Affairs. [Mendenhall 1965: 168]

Under the Rural Self-Help sub-activity, USAID community development advisors and

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[18] “One of the admirable contributions to the activities of the task force has been that of the IVS/VARDA group. The refugee relief sub-project in particular owes a large measure of its success to the efficiency and dedication with which these people have performed the tasks assigned to them. They have travelled continuously to remote villages and settlements to evaluate the spot refugee needs and to organize a system of distribution and control of relief supplies. Members of the group have visited and lived, sometimes for days on end, in villages surrounded by the enemy. Some of these places are only accessible by foot trail which has meant that they have had to make several two and three day hikes to reach them.” [USAID 1962: 134-135]

International Voluntary Service volunteers were in a position to stimulate village initiative and self-expression and help to establish a rapport between villagers and local officials on the one hand and provincial and central government officials on the other. (Mendenhall 1965: 168)

During the following years, the Development of the Rural Economy activities provided the essential framework for the input of USAID resources into the Mu Ban Samaki Cluster Program, Forward Area Operations, and Non-Cluster activities. These programs were designed to make substantial contributions to the revitalization of those rural areas of Laos containing the majority of its people and the strengthening of RLG-Population relations by the introduction of new methods of agriculture, improved public health practices, improved transportation, public works and education facilities in rural areas. (Mendenhall 1965: 168)

1962 - Geneva Accords

Following a cease-fire that was agreed upon on May 3, 1961 by the three conflicting forces in Laos (Pathet Lao, Neutralist, and Rightist factions), the Geneva conference signed an agreement in July 1962 that established the neutrality of Laos. (see Stuart-Fox 2008: 119-120) However, shortly thereafter the Accords began to unravel culminating in the Second Indochina War with the Neutralists parting ways with the communist Pathet Lao. (Benson 2014)

1963 - Cluster (Mu Ban Samaki) Program

Beginning in 1963, activities shifted in emphasis from scattered, difficult to supervise activities to those concentrated in manageable areas. To this end, the Cluster Program was introduced on September 29, 1963. (Mann 1964: 142) A “cluster” was a grouping of villages selected for improvement based on its “visibility” to other rural villages as well as for economic, social and political-strategic reasons.

Cluster activities—most of which were self-help projects—were channeled through the RLG in each of the areas in cooperation with USAID Area Coordinators (ACs) or Community Development Area Advisors (CDAAs). This staff, in turn, was assisted by members of IVS, Operation Brotherhood (whose primary contributions were medical services) and USAID technicians. (Mann 1964: 121, 123)

Initially, the RLG with US assistance carried out a pilot rural development program staffed largely by IVS volunteers in six rural areas of Laos, including Muang Phiang, Phone Hong, Borikhane, Kengkok, Lakhonepheng, and Houei Kong. While security was an issue as the Geneva Accords started to unravel, the Lao military provided security within the cluster areas.

The location of Rural Self-Help Cluster Village activities were organized into areas. Area A was based in Luang Prabang under the oversight of the USAID Area Coordinator (AC); Area B was based in Sayaboury and managed by the USAID Community Development Area Advisor (CDA); Area C based in Vientiane under a CDA; Area D was headquartered in Paksane under CDA; Area E in Savannakhet under the AC; and Area F based in Pakse under the AC. (Mann 1964: 147)
By approximately mid-1964, roughly ninety direct hire USAID personnel spent at least half of their time on the Samaki Cluster Program, and of the 53 IVS/VARDA personnel in Laos, about 31 spent full-time on cluster work, of which 21 lived in the cluster areas. (USAID 1964a: 6)

In addition to the six clusters established in 1963 and 1964, by the end of 1965 new cluster programs were launched in Xieng Ngeun (Luang Prabang Province), Vang Vieng (Vientiane Province), Ban Keun (Vientiane Province), and Ban Nong Bok (Khammouane Province), each of which were staffed by IVSers. (Mann 1964: 121) In 1966, Ban Lao (Borikhane Province), Lahanam (Savannakhet), and Khong Sedone were added, and in 1967 Pak Cadinh (Borikhane Province) and Paksong (Sedone Province) joined the group. Finally, Done Talat became a cluster in 1968.

**Mid-1960s - Role of IVS in Rural Laos Expands**

By the mid-1960s, the number of IVS team members in Laos grew as a result of increased programs and stepped-up recruiting. Between July 1963 and June 1964, IVS had placed volunteers in thirteen locations outside Vientiane, including the six clusters and seven non-clusters. However, as of July 1964, IVS rural development was still far below contract strength of 72, partially due to IVS Washington's preoccupation with staffing of IVS teams working with USAID Vietnam. (Beery 1966, 8)

The original VARDA contract anticipated seven teams of seven IVS’ers, each with a Team Leader directing activities and maintaining liaison with the IVS Chief-of-Party and USAID personnel. However, this concept changed after the initiation of the cluster village work and the placing of additional USAID men in the field to provide support and direction. (Beery 1964, 4) While the VARDA contract expired on May 15, 1964, it was extended for six months while a new contract was being readied.21 (IVS 1964b)

To meet its expanding engagement throughout Laos, in May 1964 IVS divided Laos into northern and southern regions for administrative purposes. Furthermore, the two regional leaders worked out programs with USAID and the RLG. (Beery 1964: 4, 6, 27; IVS 1964a) To free up IVS for more important work, USAID assumed full logistic support, a function previously borne by IVS Vientiane. (Beery 1964: 4; IVS 1964a)

During this period IVS worked more closely within the framework of the USAID Mission under the general direction of USAID field personnel, and many remote IVS field positions became more accessible and communications with Vientiane improved. Although security was still an issue, the RLG regained control over wider areas. And finally, increased engagement by the Royal Lao Government in rural areas led to enhanced working relationships with IVSers’ RLG counterparts. (Beery 1966: 8)

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21 Information about the new contract is presently not available.
1965 - Forward Area Program

While cluster programs were put into operation at sites throughout Laos, it became clear in early 1965 that in more isolated areas recently cleared of dissident Pathet Lao troops there should be limited short-term but beneficial programs provided to the villagers to convince them of the good intentions of the RLG and the American government to stand behind them and perform necessary government functions. Two-man Forward Area Teams (FAT) were staffed by a combination of IVS and USAID direct hire or contract personnel who were supervised by USAID’s Deputy Assistant Director of Rural Affairs Loren Haffner (known as “Haff”), who was a retired Marine colonel. The IVS chief-of-party retained administrative control over FAT’s IVS personal.

Under the direction and leadership of Loren Haffner, Forward Area operations were initially set up in 1965 in Xieng Lom (April), Muang Kassy (June), and Dong Hene (July – Dong Hene later became a Cluster site in 1966). Later, in 1966, Forward Area sites were opened in Muang Soui (January?), Muang Met (October), Hong Sa, Ban Nakhua (October), Muang Phalane (October), Nam Bac (December), and Muang Mun (December). Later, in 1967, new Forward Area Teams were sent to Dong Kasene (February), and Saravane (July).

By the end of 1967 the Forward Area Program had reached its maturity with only eight of the twelve original positions still active. Loren Haffner, who came to Laos in January 1965, finished his tour in August 1967. Although he returned to Laos again in May 1969 there is no indication that any new Forward Area field positions were established after his return.

Security was of concern in selecting Forward Area locations and posting IVS and USAID personnel at these sites. As Haffner pointed out, “it should be noted here...that regardless of precaution taken at any time or place, no persons or area in a war situation such as in Laos can be assured positive safety against attack.” (Haffner 1967: 2)

1960s - Non-Cluster Activities and Locations

Non-Cluster activities included assistance to self-help activities begun in earlier years and the possible initiation of new activities only on the basis of extreme need and urgency justifying the diversion of resources from Cluster and Forward Area activities. This included occasional enlargement of existing clusters to encompass outlying villages. (Mann 1964: 121, 140) These locations included, over time, provincial capitals Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Ban Houei Sai, Paksane, Savannakhet, Pakse, as well as rural areas including Muang Nane (Luang Prabang Province), Sam Thong (Xieng Khouang Province), Ban Done (Vientiane Province), Ban Thouei (Borikhane Province), Ban Thana, Nam Thone and Song Hong (Khammouane Province), Phakhania and Saraphoum (Savannakhet Province), and Khong Island (Sithandone Province). These Non-Cluster locations served areas that were not covered by Cluster or Forward Area Programs, although in some instances they may have become sub-clusters of a larger cluster.
1968 - Rural Activity Programs Mature

As development activities in both the original clusters of villages and forward area locations progressed over time, in some cases the boundaries of both were extended to include additional villages. Most clusters and some forward areas were expanded to include entire muangs, thereby engaging the district chiefs, or chao muangs, to become the local leaders of the community development programs. (USAID 1968: 727-728) In some areas—mainly in the Pakse region—simple rural marketing and credit cooperatives were established. (Mann 1964: 062-26) In many locations a wide range of development-related training programs were conducted for villagers and RLG personnel. (Mann 1964: 062-25)

Following the RLG’s territorial losses to the Communists beginning in 1968, the growth of the rural development programs in Laos waned as advances were made by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese and USAID’s attention was increasingly drawn toward providing refugee relief and resettlement assistance to the large numbers of people displaced by the war. Furthermore, in some instances, the point was reached where the original clusters were no longer distinguishable as separate entities within the overall development program. (Ramsey 1976: 194)

1969 - IVS Withdraws from Rural Laos

During much of this period of accelerating war activities both IVS and USAID employees became more security conscious. Pathet Lao forces roamed the countryside and it was almost impossible to determine when and where they would appear.

Three American IVSers and three Lao IVS Field Assistants were killed in ambushes during the first eight months of 1969. Prompted by the assassinations, the administration of IVS Laos and its members were forced to re-examine what IVS was doing in Laos and whether or not their service should be continued. (IVS 1970: 5)

The issues of immediate concern involved two fundamental areas: security, on the one hand, and involvement with the American presence and programs in Laos, on the other. With regards to security, IVS decided that no volunteer should continue to live or work in a situation where he or she had to be unduly concerned about their personal security or where they were exposed to an abnormal amount of danger. (IVS 1970: 5)

Furthermore, in most cases IVSers based in select rural villages were the only American representatives present at those locations and there was concern amongst some that being an “American” automatically linked them to other US agencies thereby compromising their role as volunteers with an apolitical private organization.22

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22 Datelined Sam Neua, August 10, 1969, the Pathet Lao News Agency broadcasted on August 11: “Guerrillas in Vientiane Province in a waylaid [sic] on August 5 on Highway 13 from Vientiane to Paksane
After a lengthy series of meetings, the volunteers’ consensus was to propose two alternative courses of action to the IVS Board of Directors. (IVS 1970: 7) The Board’s immediate response was to schedule a visit to Laos by a committee of their members to review the situation first hand. (IVS 1970: 7)

However, before a final decision could be reached by the Board, IVS Laos decided to withdraw IVSers from all rural areas located outside provincial capitals either because security was a prohibiting factor or the close identification with the USAID program was perceived to be incompatible with the values and ideals of IVS. By January of 1970 there were no volunteers stationed anywhere in Laos other than in provincial capitals. (IVS 1970: 7)

Conclusion

Days after the American Mission (including IVS) withdrew from Laos in June 1975, USAID’s acting director, Gordon Ramsey, was asked: “After all these years, all the expenses, and now to have it all end so ingloriously, was it worthwhile?” Mr. Ramsey’s response was, “I think we’ve done a hell of a lot of good things for this country.24 Maybe we did them wrong, but the results are here.” (Simons 1975: A18)

__killed two American spies disguised as members of the International Voluntary Service in Laos and two puppet officers accompanying them. This, together with the well-deserved punishment inflicted on American advisors and puppet troops stationed at Thalat on July 24 has caused alarm among the US and the Vientiane puppets. To hide the obvious crimes of the US spies in Laos, the US State Department on August 6 claimed that they were engaged in economic development projects of benefit to the Lao people. But the Laotian people and the world’s people have long seen what role the American Peace Corps or International Voluntary Service have played in Laos and other parts of the world. To punish the US spies engaged in activities against the independence and peace of the Laotian people lies within the legitimate right of self-defense of the Laotian people.” (Pathet Lao 1969: 80)

23 The two alternatives presented to IVS’s Board were: (1) that within a specific period of time IVS should be phased out of Laos, and (2) that IVS would remain in Laos, but that certain changes must be made to better ensure the safety of the volunteers and to establish a more independent role for the organization. (IVS 1970, 7)

24 Following the evacuation of Americans from Laos in 1975 USAID’s “Termination Report” stated that “the Rural Development program was perhaps the single most important contribution of AID in the development of local leadership and in assisting to improve the living standards of the rural populace. (Ramsey 1976: 221)
References


Section One, USAID, Vientiane, October.


Sagnier, Thierry J. The Fortunate Few: IVS Volunteers from Asia to the Andes. NCNM Press, Portland, OR.


International Voluntary Services (IVS) Field Stations in Laos 1956-1969

- Cluster Field Station
- Forward Area Field Station
- Non-Cluster Field Station

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* Forward Area Village
** Cluster Village (Mu Ban Samaki Program)
*** Forward first, changed to Cluster later
IVS Volunteers Who Lost Their Lives in Laos

Mike Murphy – 7/25/66 Muang Kassy (Luang Prabang Province) – Drowned in the Nam Lik River near Muang Kassy.

Fred Cheydleur – 3/25/67 at Phakkania (Savannakhet Province) – Assassinated while sleeping in his house at night. Lao Field Assistant Chantai Onphom was also killed.

Marty Clish – 4/6/67 Western Luang Prabang Province – Plane crashed between Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai.

Chandler Edwards – 5/5/69 Done Talat (Champassak Province) – Jeep ambushed near Ban Soukhouma

Art Stillman – 8/5/69 Near Ban Thouei (Borikhane Province) – Jeep ambushed while traveling with Dennis Mummert. Lao Field Assistant Khamdy Sirichanhome was also killed.

Dennis Mummert – 8/5/69 Near Ban Thouei (Borikhane Province) – Jeep ambushed. Lao Field Assistant Praseuth Vongsila was also killed.

Lao Field Assistants were killed together with Fred Cheydleur (Chantai Onphom) as well as with Art Stillman and Dennis Mummert (Praseuth and Khamdy).

Lao IVS Field Assistants

Recognition should be given to Lao Field Assistants who emerged as a corps of skilled, conscientious community development workers. Working members of the IVS team, they often had to steer a precarious course between military and civilian officials, and in so doing some lost their lives. Within this group there were a select number of “Special Field Assistants” who worked independently serving in places where no regular IVSers were available or able to go. (Yoder 1969: 155-157) Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive list of the Lao Field Assistants who worked with IVS over the years.


International Voluntary Services’ Executive Directors (1953-2002)

John Rigby, 1976-1980
Objectives of the Mu Ban Samaki Cluster Program

The general objectives of the Village Cluster Program:

1) Develop a series of village centers of RLG-US activity where it is deemed important to consolidate or extend RLG services and influence.

2) Provide and develop a series of RLG services and facilities designed to ameliorate village life, though without necessarily immediately raising cash income or increasing the participation of the population in the money economy (schools, dispensaries, home gardens to increase home consumption, wells, etc).

3) To a limited extent provide a series of services and basic commodities, particularly in the agricultural, livestock and irrigation fields designed to increase participation in the market economy and raise cash income. For isolated areas the development of intra-cluster roads plus all-weather road connections to the main highways are essential elements.

4) Provide an organization and a concentrated receptive audience to conduct information programs designed to increase the identification of villagers with the RLG.

5) Provide a training ground for agricultural and veterinary extension agents, fundamental education workers, and primary school inspectors. The cluster area programs constitute a basis for increasing the competence of the workers assigned to these areas and training centers for workers to be assigned to other areas.

6) Through involvement of the Chao Khouengs, Chao Muangs, Tassengs, and Naibans increase the participation of local officials in village affairs and in the process strengthen local government.

7) Provide opportunities for effective civic action programs and closer identifications between military and police forces and the civilian population.

Symbol of the Cluster Program

Source: (USAID 1964b: 221)
Cluster Programs
(July 1963 through December 31, 1966)

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**Major Physical Accomplishments**

- Schools built/repairs: 124 (268 rooms)
- Dispensaries: 37
- Wells drilled: 116
- Wells dug: 103
- Roads built (km.): 153.5
- Bridges: 45
- Airstrips: 2
- Irrigation systems: 9
- Water storage/flood control dams: 7
- Villages with vegetable gardens: 142
- Training centers/multipurpose bldgs.: 7
- Villagers trained in formal sessions: 1,048
- Soldiers: 233
- Markets: 7
- Bulletin boards: 119

**Location and Population**

- **Luang Prabang Province**
  - Xieng Ngeun – 27 villages, 4,237 population

- **Sayaboury Province**
  - Muang Phieng – 17 villages, 12,500 population

- **Vientiane Province**
  - Vang Vieng – 69 villages, 14,750 population
  - Phone Hong – 77 villages, 21,748 population
  - Ban Keun – 34 villages, 16,000 population
  - Thadeua – 15 villages, 10,000 population (a joint RLG/UN/USAID venture)

- **Borikhane Province**
  - Borikhane – 39 villages, 5,921 population
  - Pak Cadinh – 31 villages, 4,592 population

- **Khammouane Province**
  - Nong Bok – 70 villages, 26,000 population

- **Savannakhet Province**
  - Kengkok – 101 villages, 38,000 population
  - Dong Hene – 192 villages, 42,700 population
  - Lahanam – 117 villages, 37,000 population

- **Sedone Valley Development Program**
  - All of WapiKhhamthong Province, and parts of Sedone and Savane Provinces – 650 villages, 142,000 population

- **Attopeu Province**
  - Houei Kong – 44 villages, 5,162 population

Source: (Sweet 1967: 586)
Forward Area Programs  
(July 1965 through December 31, 1966)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Forward Areas</th>
<th>9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Villages</td>
<td>149*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>83,000*</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Major Physical Accomplishments</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dispensaries built/repairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wells drilled</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wells dug</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water Supply systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irrigation systems built/repairs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehouses built</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crematories built</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roads built (km.)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldiers trained in Social Service</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Villages with vegetable gardens</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

** These figures are estimates and not all inclusive. Several of the Forward Areas were not yet completely defined.

Location and Population

**Luang Prabang Province**
- Nam Bac – 10 villages, 5,000-8,000 population
- Muang Kassy – 16 villages, 16,000 population
- Muang Met – Statistics included in the Muang Kassy totals

**Sayaboury Province**
- Hong Sa – 51 villages, 21,000 population
- Xieng Lom – 32 villages, 13,000 population

**Xieng Khouang Province**
- Muong Soui – 13 villages, 11,000 population

**Khammouane Province**
- Ban Nakhua – 7 villages, 4,500 population
- Dong Kasene – 14 villages, 11,000 population

**Savannakhet Province**
- Ban Houei Mun – 6 villages, 4,500 population

Source: (Sweet 1967: 587)
## International Voluntary Services (IVS) Field Stations in Laos, 1956-1969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Field Stations</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Grid Coords</th>
<th>Lat - Long Coords</th>
<th>IVS Start Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>L-54</td>
<td>TH 0302</td>
<td>19-54N - 102-10E</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Muang Met*</td>
<td>LS-158</td>
<td>RA 1085</td>
<td>18-50N - 102-51E</td>
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<td>Nam Bac*</td>
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<td>Hong Sa*</td>
<td>LS-62</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Muang Phiang**</td>
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<td>Sayaboury</td>
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<td>QB 8630</td>
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<td>Xieng Lom*</td>
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<td>Lat Houang</td>
<td>LS-09</td>
<td>UG 0944</td>
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<td>Muang Soui*</td>
<td>L-108</td>
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<td>Sam Thong</td>
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<td>Ban Thalat</td>
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<td>Phone Hong**</td>
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<td>TE 4388</td>
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**Note: Ban Keun, Ban Thalat, and Phone Hong became North Nam Ngum Area**

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<th>Province</th>
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<td>Pak Cadinh**</td>
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<td>UF 5934</td>
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<td>Ban Nakhua*</td>
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<td>Ban Thana</td>
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<td>Nam Thone</td>
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<td>Nong Bok**</td>
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<td>WD 7988</td>
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<td>Song Hong</td>
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<td>Thakhek</td>
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<td>Dong Hene**</td>
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<td>Houei Mun*</td>
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<td>Lahanam**</td>
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<td>WD 5844</td>
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<td>Phakhania</td>
<td>LS-303</td>
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<td>Saraphoum</td>
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<td>VC 9550</td>
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<td>Savannakhet</td>
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<td>Wapikhamthong</td>
<td>Khong Sedone**</td>
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<td>WC 8524</td>
<td>15-36N - 105-48E</td>
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<td>Lakhonepheng**</td>
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<td>Muang Wapi</td>
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<td>WC 9833</td>
<td>15-40N - 105-55E</td>
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<td>Houei Kong**</td>
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<td>15-08N - 106-32E</td>
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<td>WB 8473</td>
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<td>WA 8960</td>
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</table>

Note: The Wapikhamthong clusters became Sedone Valley Development Program.

* Forward Area Village
** Cluster Village (Mu Ban Samaki Program)
*** Forward first, changed to Cluster later.
# IVS/Laos Volunteer Postings at Rural Field Stations, 1956-1969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Houa Khong Province</th>
<th>Sayaboury Province</th>
<th>Sayaboury Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ban Houei Sai</td>
<td>Maxwell, Dayton (1959-61, 62-64)</td>
<td>Yetley, Mervin (1963-65)</td>
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<td>Flipse, Joe (1962-64)</td>
<td>Taylor, Dr. Bill (1961-63)</td>
<td>Yetley, Elizabeth (1963-65)</td>
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<td>Cunningham, Michael (1963-64)</td>
<td>Maxwell, Craig (1962-64)</td>
<td>Candea, Elizabeth (1965-68)</td>
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<td>Carlson, Gustav (1962-63)</td>
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<td>Candea, Randall (1965-68)</td>
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<td>Sayaboury Province</td>
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<td>Hong Sa*</td>
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<td>Flanagan, Michael (1967-69)</td>
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<td>Thompson, MacAlan (1966-68)</td>
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<td>Archer, James (1966-70)</td>
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<td>Lewis, Jerry (1966-68)</td>
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<td>Tufts, Tom (1968-75)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steiner, Ken (1968-70)</td>
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* Forward Area Field Station  ** Cluster Field Station

**NOTE:** The dates in parenthesis represent the duration of their time in Laos with IVS. Some volunteers were located at more than one rural position during the course of their term with IVS.
# IVS/Laos Volunteer Postings at Rural Field Stations, 1956-1969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Luang Prabang Prov.</th>
<th>Luang Prabang Prov.</th>
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<td>Thompson, MacAlan (1966-68)</td>
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### IVS/Laos Volunteer Postings at Rural Field Stations, 1956-1969

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<th>Vientiane Province</th>
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<td>Vang Vieng**</td>
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NOTE: Vientiane city is excluded from this listing. Many IVS volunteers were temporally posted in Vientiane at one time or another.
**IVS/Laos Volunteer Postings at Rural Field Stations, 1956-1969**

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**Nam Thouei**

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### IVS/Laos Volunteer Postings at Rural Field Stations, 1956-1969

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**Phakhania**

Chaydleur, Frederic (1965-67)
# IVS/Laos Volunteer Postings at Rural Field Stations, 1956-1969

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<td>Stone, Jane (1969-71)</td>
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July 1, 1965

Cold, disembodied statistics cannot even begin to picture the true extent of accomplishments of the International Voluntary Services' dedicated volunteers serving in Laos.

The best testimonials to their success perhaps could be the thick wads of cotton twine bracelets adorning their wrists when they leave after their tour of duty - the traditional ceremonial way in which the Lao people express their gratitude and extend well wishes for the future.

I say without reservation that this Mission's Rural Development Cluster Program, based on the self-help approach, would not have gone this far without the very active participation of the IVS team.

The main purpose behind the presence of IVS here is to bridge the "last six inches" in the extension of American diplomacy in this part of the world, and I believe that its "person-to-person" approach has contributed greatly toward that end.

Those among us who fear that the American pioneering spirit is dying or dead can take heart on perusal of this IVS/RD annual report - a straight-forward, factual chronicle of young American men and women venturing into a strange land, and meeting and overcoming strange situations.

Charles A. Mann
Director, AID/Laos

Source: (Beery 1965: 4)
Letter from Prince Souvanna Phouma Prime Minister of Laos

1966 makes the tenth year that International Voluntary Services has served the people of Laos. Its first team of seven people in Xieng Khouang has expanded to people in 30 different locations.

The young men and women of IVS have given two years of their lives as volunteers to work with and for the people of Laos. The economic and social improvements which are bringing Laos into the realm of the developing countries are due, in part, to the work of IVS in agriculture, health, education, construction, home economics, and community development.

IVS is truly an international organization with people of six different nationalities serving in Laos - all with a single purpose - to help our people of Laos to have a better way of life. These young people learn the language of our country, respect our customs and traditions, and work and live side by side with our people. They really become a part of the communities in which they live. Through their work and their daily associations with the people of Laos, they are building an essential bridge of understanding and trust between the peoples of the world.

Because of the work which IVS is doing and has done, I wish to express the gratitude of the people of Laos and my own personal gratitude. We hope that IVS will be able to give us the benefit of their service for many years to come.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Prince Souvanna Phouma
Prime Minister
Royal Kingdom of Laos

Source: (Beery 1966: 3)
Animistic Relations in Nature: Spirits in the Natural World and the Underlying Process and Worldview that Influence Daily Life in Contemporary Hmong Society

Danny Vincent DeSantiago

Abstract

Hmong are an ethnic group from East and Southeast Asia who have a rich tradition of animism. Animistic worldviews are often recognized for their inherent human-environment relationships. While notable literature exists on the Hmong culture, those that explore their intricate beliefs about nature and provide a more recent account are scarce. This essay presents novel documentation on the spirit-associated relationships with nature of Hmong in contemporary society. In addition, the essay also explored the diverse ways in which those spirits influence daily activities and the animistic worldview that drives them. Methods were based in ethnography, narrative inquiry, and grounded theory approaches using in-depth interviews, unstructured interviews, and participant observation in Thailand and California. The results revealed numerous nature-related spirits for Hmong in both urban and traditional settings. However, data also suggests possible decreases in the knowledge and practice of historically described beliefs which I suggest result from modernization and geopolitical factors. I argue the Hmong’s dynamic correspondence with the spirit world drives various degrees of daily life influences. These influences are driven by a collection of emotional and physical factors that are engendered by an animistic worldview characterized by intimate relatedness and personhood attributed to the spirits.

Keywords: Animism, Spirits, Nature, Nature relationships, Traditional worldview, Hmong, Modernization, Thailand, California

Introduction

Nature has often influenced the development of humanity’s spiritual worldview. Many indigenous animistic worldviews have long been recognized for the inherent human-environment relationships they cultivate. Over a century ago, Edward Burnett Tylor published his esteemed work, Primitive Culture (1871), that put forth some of the first anthropological thoughts about indigenous belief systems. Although now considered misconstrued\(^1\), it paved the way for numerous scholars to develop more comprehensive understandings of this long-misunderstood system. Since then, countless others have completed intriguing literature on animistic cultures, that in turn, have derived valuable epistemes of those peoples and human society as a whole (Bird-David 1999; McCoy 1982; Oswell & Maposa 2010; Petersen 2001; Rappaport 1984, 1999). One such animistic culture is the Hmong: an ethnic minority from East and Southeast Asia.

\(^1\) Science & English Literature Educator

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Although well-studied, much of the nuances and contemporary state of their intricate spiritual practice remains undocumented and understudied. Out of this gap, I began the investigation with an open-ended question: What spiritual entities constitute Hmong beliefs about nature? However, a secondary question evolved: How does the spiritually animated environment in Hmong worldview influence daily life activities?

This essay revealed that numerous nature-spirit relations manifest themselves in both contemporary traditional and urban lifestyles. Forests, plants, animals, and entire landscapes are animated by spirits even in the most urban settings. The Hmong’s dynamic correspondence with the spirit world drives various degrees of daily life influences. Some are as subtle as a word spoken, while others are as pronounced as one fearing to leave home. I argue these influences are driven by a collection of emotional and physical factors that are engendered by an animistic worldview characterized by intimate relatedness and personhood.

Animism has been an ambiguous term in anthropology and is largely debated. A commonly reiterated definition is as such: the belief of divinity in natural phenomenon and objects (Hunter & Whitten 1976: 12). This definition, as Nurit Bird-David argues, is based on the archaic “Tylorian representation” that the only true knowledge is that of science, and thus animists childishly misunderstood the world (Bird-David 1999: S68). This idea of animism as a failed science steams back to Hume’s Natural History of Religion where he argues animism simply represents the natural tendency for humans to conceive all beings like themselves. In addition, historical anthropological approaches to animism have been grounded in the “principles, philosophies, and conclusions of modern science,” (Swancutt 2019: 1) as opposed to the experience of animists themselves. Despite this, the concept of animism has made a comeback in scholarship.

Scores of late literatures have made compelling revaluations and revivals of animism as an alternative ontology to the world (Swancutt & Mazard 2018; Brightman, Grotti, & Ulturgasheva 2012; Pedersen 2001; Arhem & Sprenger 2016; Astor-Aguilera & Harvey 2018; Harvey 2014). A compelling understanding is found in Bird-David’s (1999) concept of Relational Epistemology, which describes animism as a composite relationship between the human and non-human persons (S77-79). Katherine Swancutt identifies two seminal themes found in the animistic traditions of the world: (1) the spiritual immanence that encompasses beings and things in the world, as opposed to the transcendence view commonly found in theistic religions; (2) the attribution of personhood to entities in the world where beings or things are understood as people just like humans due to the souls or spirits within them (Swancutt 2019: 2). I argue that the findings are consistent with the personhood and relational concepts described in the aforementioned neo-animism literature (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Swancutt 2019). There is no agreed definition of animism, spirits, and other various terms to define the spiritual entities of the rich indigenous traditions of the world. Therefore, this essay will use these terms interchangeably to describe the spiritual phenomenon of the Hmong experience.

Notable literature exist that describes Hmong spirit-nature relationships. Depending on the type, the Hmong refer to spirits as Dab, Neeb, or Dab neeb. The sacredness of space and land has been recognized in Asia for centuries. This concept known as geomancy, is defined as a system of “conceptualizing the physical environment which regulates human ecology” by selecting auspicious environments (Yoon 1980: 341). The Hmong hold strong geomantic beliefs, as Tomforde (2006) has highlighted in a term...
she calls *Cultural Spatiality*, which describes the Hmong socio-cultural and cosmological identity to a landscape that she argues exist in both the physical and mental space. Landscapes also play an important role in the afterlife. It is essential for those passed and still living to select suitable burial grounds for the deceased (Her 2005). Tomforde (2006) identifies this concept as *Looj mem*: a Hmong term that describes the spiritual quality of land. I have found these concepts to be a prominent experience in the Hmong’s nature-spirit relationship.

Nicholas Tapp is considered one of the primary authorities on Hmong culture and spirituality. His manuscript, *Hmong Religion* (1989), describes a great deal of Hmong spirituality and cosmology. He provides detailed accounts of various spirits of the cosmos, the home, and in regard to this essay’s topic: spirits associated with nature, to a lesser degree. Huang & Sumrongthong (2004) provide comprehensive accounts about the guardian tree spirit: *Ntoo xeex* and its value to Hmong society, whereas other sources also elaborate on the hostility and misfortunes brought by spirits (e.g. Lee & Tapp 2010). The natural world is animated with countless spiritual entities protecting and sometimes harming the Hmong. These spirits are fundamental in the Hmong’s engagement with the world. Shamanism is a vital aspect of the Hmong spiritual experience. A shaman (*Txiv neeb*) is one who has the power to communicate between the Earth and spirit realm (Conquergood 1989: 6). Their purpose is to interact with the spirit world (*Yaj Ceeb*) when necessary to maintain balance and harmony for physical and mental health (Gerdner 2012: 4). In relation to this article’s central claim of spirit-nature relations, shamanism is often strongly associated with nature (Eliade 1988: 339; Fournet 2020: 15). Shamanism provided valuable insight into notable Hmong spirit-nature interactions, which were largely absent in literature.

While there are other scholars who have researched, to a degree, Hmong spiritual entities (Chindarsi, 1976; Leepreecha 2004; Her 2005; Lee 2005; Lor, Lee, & Yang 2013; Gerdner 2015; Piraban 1990), much of the nuances and changes of this enigmatic epistemology and ontology in the contemporary world remain undocumented both in and outside of Asia and do not elaborate on how the unique relationship influences Hmong in daily life. Most notably, few elaborate on the distinct nature relation in Hmong spirituality. In addition, this literature provided valuable data on historical animistic beliefs to aid in evaluating how Hmong traditional beliefs have potentially evolved over the years.

This research is based on fieldwork in both urban and traditional environments of California and Thailand (October 2015–July 2016). The findings are divided into four parts that each describe spirit nature relationships that emerged from the data: Spirit Relationships in Landscapes; Spirit Relationships in Animals, Nature Relationships in Shamanism, and Spirit Relationships in Agriculture and Ethnobotany. Acculturation and globalization have radically changed Hmong society, and thus, old traditions come in conflict with the new world around them. These realities generate a dynamic evolution of traditions and beliefs trying to adapt and assimilate and thus warrants further research to fully understand the ramifications. In this regard, this research hopes to raise awareness about the diverse spiritual beliefs that are fundamental to understanding Hmong social and cultural structure.
Methods

Conceptual Framework & Positionality

This research is based on narrative inquiry (Patton 2014) and ethnographic work in Thailand and California (October 2015-July 2016) using unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, and participant observation with a total of thirty-four participants. However, the project also adopted grounded-theory approaches to address the secondary objective. In terms of positionality, I disclose that I share no affinity (biological or social) to the Hmong community prior to this project. Reflexive practice (Paulus, Lester, & Dempster 2013) was done in analytical memos to be mindful of potential bias. For example, analytical notes were taken after correspondences and transcriptions to distinguish what was seen in the data, what was not seen, and my interpretations. This allowed me to avoid subconscious assumptions of participant responses based on literature and pre-conceived notions. Patterns and themes were identified from the raw data themselves. In addition, I identified expectations for many interview questions beforehand to analyze in comparison to the raw data. This allowed me to be cognizant of potential bias encroaching in what participants actually said.

Participants & Field sites

Field sites were chosen to be able to draw on perspectives from both traditional and urban environments. Thailand sites (N=23) were in the Chiang Mai province at two villages located in the Suthep-Pui National Park: Doi Pui and Kun Chang Khian. Doi Pui is frequently visited by tourists while the latter is more remote in the nearby mountain where few tourists find their way. Farming both cash crops and subsistence is the primary occupation of almost everyone in the sites. Participants in California (N=11) were recruited from the following organizations and events: Annual Hmong New Year Festival (Sacramento & Stockton, CA), Hmong Story 40 Event (Fresno, CA), National Hmong American Farmers (Fresno, CA), Hmong Student Association of Berkeley (Berkeley, CA), and two Berkeley farmer markets (Berkeley, CA).

Participant demographics were heterogenous because this work intended to describe the contemporary Hmong experience as a whole. Previous studies have shown that spiritual practices are commonplace regardless of age, sex, or degree of acculturation (Plotnikoff et al. 2002). For this reason, I concluded specific age and gender demographics were not of significance to the objectives. I obtained a diverse sample of participants in age (18-70), status (college students, working adults, farmers, herbal healers, and shamans) and living situations (traditional villages and urban environments). All participants in America were either first generation of immigrant parents, or immigrants from Laos or Thailand themselves. Nonrandom sampling was done to ensure there were participants with in-depth knowledge and experience of the spiritual epistemology (e.g. shamans) as well as those who are particularly adapted to contemporary living styles (e.g. first-generation college students). These diverse perspectives provided valuable data towards suggesting conclusions about the collective Hmong experience.
A Note on Traditional Beliefs & Christianity

It is important to mention that this essay reflects traditional spirituality and arguably does not regard the Hmong Christian worldview since many of them have often renounced their old traditions and maintain a worldview based in Christian theology. This narrative was evident in various interviews with Christian participants. Participants who were raised in strictly Christian environments and had little to no knowledge of the animistic tradition were disregarded since they could not contribute any significant information towards the essay’s objective.

However, the distinction between traditionalists and Christians is not always rigidly dichotomous. Many Christian Hmong will continue to practice traditional beliefs (Gerdner & Xiong 2015:6). Several participants who identified as Christian elaborated on their participation and other Christian’s participation in traditional animistic beliefs. Therefore, not only are they knowledgeable about animistic spirits, but the traditional ontology of the world appeared to still be a prominent aspect of their spiritual worldview. The interplay between these two belief systems is a complex topic beyond the scope of this essay’s objective, however, the point to be made here is I found this to justify not completely disregarding some Christian narratives.

Data Collection & Analysis

Various procedures were taken to ensure comprehensive data was collected. In-depth interviews were audio recorded and lasted from forty minutes to two hours. Many of these participants were followed up with unstructured interviews as further questions evolved. Conversational unstructured interviews were made with additional community members. Participant observation allowed me to view how spiritual activities are currently practiced and talk with participants during the time activities were unfolding. Research integrity was taken to the fullest extend to ensure participants were provided with adequate informed consent. Village clan leaders granted permission to access village sites in Thailand prior to fieldwork. This study was approved by the International Review Board (IRB).

Many steps were taken to ensure data validity. In Thailand, almost all interviews were conducted in the Thai language. Although I speak advance level Thai, the project was assisted by a translator in the field who is fluently bilingual. The interviews in California were all done in English. After interviews, I engaged in member-checking through follow-up unstructured interviews and brief summaries with participants. In village sites, clarification of translation accuracy was done during the interviews and after meetings at the end of the day with the help of the translator. Interviews were later transcribed verbatim for further analysis and clarification. Thai language interviews were transcribed by fluent bilingual Thai-English speakers first in Thai and then in English. One potential setback was the possibility that information from interviews in Thai language was lost in translation since they were not in Hmong language. I tried to attend to this in three ways. First, proper Hmong pronunciation of names of spirits or spiritual concepts were clarified by native Hmong speakers beforehand. Second, interview questions were simplified enough to avoid errors when translated from English to Thai. Finally, I had fluent bilingual Thai-English speakers translate interview questions and these were discussed with the translator to clarify meanings and to avoid biases, such as leading questions.
Data collection in terms of the objectives was broken into two parts. First, I asked about various spirits and beliefs associated with nature as described in literature, while also attempting to reveal undescribed ones. Second, open-ended questions allowed participants to freely elaborate on a topic with anecdotes and personal experiences. To reveal spiritual influence on daily activities, many questions were asked about emotions, feelings, and perceptions about particular spirits and about physical outcomes created from those beliefs.

Data analysis was conducted largely following the framework of Miles and Huberman (1994) of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. For identifying particular spirits and beliefs, I extracted the mention of particular names of spirits and identified whether they were familiar or not with spirits and beliefs described in literature. Data was coded for four key themes regarding nature associations: landscapes, animals, agriculture, and ethnobotany. Nature relations in shamanism emerged as another prominent theme itself. Two key themes regarding influences on daily life activities emerged from the data: behavioral and emotional change. These two themes were further separated into subcomponents: Behavioral: restrictions, alternatives, and novelities; Emotional: fear, worry, and relief. I further identified a subcategory titled, consequences that also emerged as a relevant and reoccurring theme towards addressing spiritual influences. After coded, frequency of codes was documented, and key anecdotal evidence and narratives were used for data display and to draw conclusions.

Results

Spirit Relationships in Landscapes

I believe there is always a spirit of the land, and I believe that there is a guardian somewhere of that land, and if you are good to it, it will be good to you.

—Hmong Shaman, personal communication

Mountains play a fundamental role in traditional Hmong culture and are important at both an individual and societal level. This narrative constantly appeared in both interviews and observations. The Hmong TV Network site in Fresno, CA contained a large mural depicting a traditional scene of Hmong villages scattered throughout a mountainous landscape. Countless photographs and traditional Hmong quilts (Paj ntaub) depicted mountain scenes at the Hmong Story 409 event in Fresno, CA. Numerous participants described how mountains need to “hug” around villages for its health and prosperity (Fieldnotes, 2016).

Landscape was found to still be a significant factor in funeral traditions. Suitable Looj mem is usually determined by elders who analyze the landscape for features primarily concerning how the site is situated around surrounding mountains and hills (Fieldnotes, 2015). This significance of mountains to a burial site was exemplified elegantly from a Hmong Farmer:

It has to have a lot of mountains, just like people, they respect you and bow to you, mountains are like people, if you see a lot of curve coming down, it is like they are bowing to you, so if you put a person right there, future generations will have many people bow to that family.
In fact, it is believed to be more important in death than in life (Female Villager, personal communication, December 2015). Interestingly, the term *Looj mem* was not familiar to many participants in Thailand (or California), yet it is a fundamental practice as shown with my participation in a funeral ceremony at the Kun Chang Khian village. The site was particularly chosen for its location in nearby mountains. To get there, all attendees drove about twenty minutes outside of the village in the nearby forest up narrow dirt roads (See Figure 1). The shaman and other knowledgeable elders selected this site for another deceased elder where they performed an elaborate ceremony (Elder Male Shaman, Shaman’s Son, personal communication, January 2016). These examples found across communities suggest the everlasting importance of the traditional mountainous landscape engrained in both physical and mental space.

Forest and plants are believed to have their own spiritual entities. These spirits have the power to create significantly beneficial consequences in the Hmong worldview. Many Hmong interviewed in both California and Thailand claimed to still acknowledge the concept of guardian spirits as described by Tomforde (2006) and Huang & Sumrongthong (2004). Each geographical area has a guardian spirit. This supreme spirit can ensure the prosperity and protection of all the people who live in its territory (personal communication). The literature (Tomforde 2006; Chindarsi 1976; Huang & Sumrongthong 2004) states that in the village, guardian spirits known as *Ntoo xeeb*, will reside in large trees on carefully selected spots by shamans. Despite this, the two villages I visited did not have a guardian spirit in the form of a tree. However, a shaman of Kun Chang Khian reported that they used to have one long ago, however, due to some conflicts with development from the local Thai government, the tree had to be removed (Elder Male Shaman, personal communication December 2015). The particular name *Ntoo xeeb* was unfamiliar to most participants in California and no one had any accounts of it being practiced.

While guardian spirits can provide invaluable benefits to the community, they can quickly turn hostile in the advent of disrespect. A shaman in California described a number of serious disasters that resulted from a displeased guardian spirit, such as car accident deaths and hunting mishaps which in one case, resulted in a person being shot. A spirit may manifest illusions to victims that lead to accidents, such as tricking hunters...
into thinking another human is an animal so they will shoot them. If one acts irresponsibly in the environment, they may, “do whatever it takes, to make a traumatic event happen” (Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016). Spirits who roam forests are always considered evil and extremely dangerous. These forest dwelling entities are called Dab and many Hmong greatly fear them. One of the most feared and dangerous forest spirits is Dab ntxaung. It is said to “drink the blood and eat the internal organs” of an unsuspecting victim. No human can survive an encounter with it (Village Homestay Owner, personal communication, December 2015). Since harm or benefit is determined often by how one interacts or carries themselves in the presence of spirits, a conscious follower will perform particular or alternative behaviors in order to not offend them. A female shaman in California followed thoughtful procedures to cut a small tree in her driveway. She communicated to the spirit her reason for needing to cut the tree and performed a small offering ritual with Nyiaj and incense (Sacramento Female Shaman, personal communication, June 2016).

Large bodies of water are often considered sacred places animated with powerful spirits according to many participants in both Thailand and California. Powerful dragon spirits inhabit large bodies of water, such as lakes or rivers (Fieldnotes, 2015-16). The Doi Pui clan leader stated that Hmong in the villages will hold an annual ceremony at the head of the water for this spirit (Doi Pui Clan Leader, personal communication, December 2015). However, these spirits can also be hostile if disrespected. For example, one participant described a frightening situation of his brother almost drowning in a lake. This was believed to be the result of the offended dragon spirit, which later on, required a shaman to performing a cleansing ritual. The participant exclaimed how “spooked” his brother was about the ordeal, and the cleansing ritual’s purpose was to reconcile with the spirit and bring back harmony (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016).

It is common for many Hmong to alternate or refrain completely from certain behaviors due to spiritual presences in the surrounding environment. For example, a Hmong graduate student shared a childhood experience when she was yelling and commanding “nature” to do things, such as rain. However, her mother, viewed it as a serious danger that could potentially evoke real nature spirits. She described her mother’s worrisome perspective as, “things you say could really come to life, so don’t say it” (Graduate Student, personal communication, March 2015). Another student spoke about significant mental and behavioral preparation she had to make before a trip to Thailand. According to her mother, this was due to the fact that Thailand is the location of their home village and the site of not only her living kin, but also passed kin. Therefore, more spirits would be present and could harm her if she acted, spoke, or thought inappropriately (Female Undergraduate, personal communication, February 2016). One participant also described the need for strict awareness in behaviors whenever his family was outdoors. Loud noises at night and calling out for things as simple as “calling children to come to eat” can foster the attention of unwanted presences (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016). Making emotional distress public and calling out for the deceased can result in evil spirits responding (Hmong Woman, personal communication, June 2016). Hmong appear to alternate, restrict, or find new methods of doing activities in order to avoid provoking spirits. However, in addition to alternating behavior, proper communication with spirits is just as important. When Hmong enter the
territory of wild spirits, it is customary for them to announce their presence and intentions. Taking or harvesting certain products from the land can require one to make an offering in return (Male Villager, personal communication, January 2016). Numerous respondents reported unexplained deaths of people who did not respect the spirits or acting naïvely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

**Spirit Relationships in Animals**

Many animals have spirits with significant meaning and power that can be manipulated for human benefit, or it can result in misfortune if mishandled. The follow is a collection of the various animals and their associated spirits as described by Hmong in both Thailand and California.

The tiger has several intriguing spiritual associations and was found to still be common knowledge for both young and elder Hmong in California and Thailand. The first association is regarding a spirit called Poj ntxoog. This spirit has various explanations and legends as told through Hmong folklore. All participants attest Poj ntxoog to be a spirit in the form of a young girl with long dark hair dressed in ragged cloths whose encounter can be detrimental, or even fatal. Participants say this spirit can be seen either with a tiger or it can shapeshift into a tiger. She is a trickster who resides in natural landscapes, such as jungles or farms (Graduate Student, personal communication March 2015). A Hmong farmer described his terrifying encounter with Poj ntxoog back in his Laotian village. Him and a friend were returning home along a forested trail when they were suddenly encountered by two Poj ntxoog. Although there are procedures to follow to avoid adversity, in sheer terror, he quickly fled the scene. The following day, his mother immediately arranged a shaman ceremony to “save his soul.” The farmer claimed that his friend died because he did not consult the shaman and properly resolve the issue with the spirit (Fresno Hmong Farmer, personal communication, June 2016). Although all participants agree on the tiger association with this spirit, further details on the origins and why this relationship exists with the tiger was unknown to them.

In addition, a second participant described the relationship between the tiger and a spirit called Tswv xyas: an evil tiger-man hybrid spirit. The legend is a man with mystical powers was able to turn himself into a tiger to steal cows, but he became stuck in this hybrid form. In result, he now can only turn back into a man at night and remains as a tiger during the day. If provoked, this spirit can kill people and take their souls (Male Villager, personal communication, January 2016). These hostile spirits make Hmong cautious about their actions in forests.

Many other animals are associated with spirits or have spiritual powers as well. Dogs can serve as guardians when a person needs protection from sickness (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016). Praying mantises are believed to be intelligent and have clairvoyance. It may answer certain types of questions and the answers are based on whether the right or left arm is raised (Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication, July 2016). According to one respondent, shamans will use mice as a medium to connect to the spirit world in the early stages of training (Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016), and a Californian farmer stated that disturbing a mouse home or inflicting harm on them can result in severe consequences for that person and their family (Fresno Farmer, personal communication, March 2016). Deer are strongly connected to spirits because spirits prefer to disguise
themselves as deer in forests. According to one shaman, snakes represent immortality because of their ability to shed skin and some Hmong believe that a man encountering a snake can mean his female partner is pregnant or soon to be (Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication July 2016). On the contrary, these beliefs are not consistent across all Hmong. The Doi Pui clan leader, said a snake found in a home is a bad omen in which they need to call a shaman to cleanse the place of the negative presence brought by the snake (Doi Pui Clan Leader, personal communication, December 2015).

**Nature Relationships in Shamanism**

The consequences and behavioral influences experienced by a shaman can be extremely pronounced due to their heightened awareness of divinity. Shamans were shown to exhibit strong relationships with spirits in nature. Correspondence with spirits can be in the form of visions, dreams, or concrete interactions in the physical world. Prophecies are often expressed through symbolic representations in animals.

Prophecy through dreams and visions were illustrated by the experiences of a young male shaman who predicted several critical events. He described an unforgettable vision he experienced as a child during a family trip to a lake. While playing with a cousin around dusk at the water’s edge, he saw a frightening sight. On an island at the center of the lake, stood a giant black figure, which as a youth he described as a “gorilla” leaning against the tree. His heart “instantly dropped”, and he ran in fear back to his parents. After arriving home, he began to feel ill and that night he had a peculiar dream about himself in the jungle where a tiger lent his fur to him and told him to wear it returning home. After telling his mother about the dream, she frantically contacted a shaman to perform a ritual as it signified something negative. The participant explained that the tiger lending his fur indicated he has something that belongs to that spirit and it would eventually return to retrieve it, thus he would be risking grave consequences.

He had another more recent event regarding his stepfather who is blinded in one eye. One night, he dreamt of a crow with one eye hanging out who approached him and was frantically flying side-to-side until it collapsed to the floor in great distress. In the dream, he felt immensely distraught. Upon waking up, it immediately occurred to him that the crow symbolized his step-father due to the eye injury connection and it signified a great misfortune about to happen. Within two days of the dream, tragedy struck. Upon exiting a bus and crossing the street, his uncle was struck by a car and had to be rushed to the hospital (Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016).

A shaman may be able to directly communicate with spiritual entities in fashions similar to humans. Environmental location can play a pivotal role in a shaman’s ability to properly communicate with their *Dab neeb*. The elder female shaman in California was instructed by her *Dab neeb* to travel to an oceanside early in the morning because this was the time the “portal opened for the spirit world and human world.” Only then could she receive communication from a dragon guardian spirit. Correspondences can be extremely pronounced as she expressed during another time camping with family:

They have guardians who guard there [the campsite in the forest], so as soon as I approach the area, they know me because I do a lot of spiritual work and so they suspect that I’m here already and they send workers to greet me, so I usually tell them we are going to camp here in your [Guardian spirit] area so can you protect
Correspondence can also be overwhelming to the point of restricting activities and fearing to partake in daily life. She also claimed to be capable of hearing the voices of spirits in animals and plants. She vividly described a number of occurrences when she had to unexpectedly return home from trips due to the plethora of voices from spirits in nature tormenting her. She has had to abandon camping trips, day trips, and other similar situations in wilderness areas for fear of it getting worse at night. In the beginning of her shamanic journey, these experiences terrified her to the point of not wanting to leave her home (Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication, July 2016). The young male shaman also expressed intimate communication with spirits during camping. He states,

I will always try to make an offering and say 'Oh this is yours, we are here, we don’t mean any harm on your land or anything, we just want to sleep here for a few days, so whatever spirit is here, please don’t bother us, please protect us, and if there is any animal that comes our way, please make it go another way.'

**Spirit Relationships in Agriculture and Ethnobotany**

The medical ethnobotanical practice works in collaboration with spirits for healers to harvest resources, diagnose, and prognose patients. Fieldwork with herbal healers and shamans revealed a spirit association other than the *Dab tshuaj* (Spirit of medicine) as described by Tapp (1989: 63), which was not mentioned by any participants.

According to the herbal healers in Thailand and the elder female shaman in California, knowledge and status of this practice is acquired through an intimate collaboration with a spirit called *Yu waaj*. This spirit allows the healer to know the proper plant for an aliment and how to make the plant healing power potent. The patient must make a ritual and offering to *Yu waaj*. The offering consists of three incenses and 12 *Nyiaj* (Herbal Healer, personal communication, January 2016). Some herbs have special spirits and require offerings, otherwise they cannot be used. While there are species that any layperson can harvest on their own, others are restricted to only the healer’s management otherwise that spirit might bring further illness in retribution (Female Villager, personal communication, December 2015).

However, the spiritual aspect of ethnobotany in California remains questionable. While I did find ethnobotany to still be a strong practice in California communities, in many cases it appeared to be largely desacralized from the spiritual relationship as described above. For example, I found various Hmong at the New Year events in Sacramento and Stockton California selling a plethora of medicinal plants. However, the two participants I spoke with reported that they do not perform any spiritual activities for dealing with herbals (California Herbal Healers, personal communication, November 2015). Nearly all younger participants stated their parents and elders were heavily involved in using medicinal plants, but they could not recall any rituals in conjunction with it, nor have they heard of *Yu waaj*. Yet on the other hand once again, the spiritual aspect was not entirely absent. The elder female shaman in California recognized *Yu waaj* and had an alter for it (See Figure 2) while another participant
described the use of lemongrass in a shamanic blessing ceremony for the New Year (Male Undergraduate, personal communication, March 2016). It appears the contemporary status of this practice in California is in a volatile transition.

Although details of spirituality in agriculture were scarce in this study, several participants exemplified how their beliefs influence these practices. During a participant’s stay at the village of another ethnic group in Thailand, she found that it had been changed three times by three different ethnic groups due to unexplained occurrences of crop failure and sickness. The villagers blamed the misfortunes on evil spirits who have cursed the site. She comments, “It can really affect where you live, the food, and what you grow” (Graduate Student, personal communication, March 2015).

In the hillsides of Kun Chang Khian, a farmer cultivating crops on a terraced hillside had placed a small alter for wild spirits that she believes influences her agricultural fortune. The land she farms is their territory and, therefore, she must acknowledge their presence and give something in return to ensure a harmonious balance (Female Farmer, personal communication, December 2015). Despite these findings, none of the participants had knowledge of exact spirit names and rituals for those purposes, in contrast to the claims in some literature (see Lee 2005). It remains unclear if this is due to lack of research and knowledgeable participants in the topic, different beliefs based on geographical regions and Hmong sub-groups, or other factors.

Discussion

The primary objective of this paper was to identify the spiritual entities that constitute Hmong animistic beliefs about nature. To achieve this, I documented spirits by name, nature association (e.g. landscape feature, organism), and coded data under five nature-related themes. Analysis revealed that a diverse array of spirits still exists in the contemporary Hmong worldview of nature in both urban and traditional environments. A number of the documented spirits and beliefs (Pog ntxoog, Tswv xyas, Zaj laug, Dab ntxaung, Looj mem) are consistent with previous literature (e.g. Tapp 1989), while an additional undocumented entity (Yu waaj) was also described. Entire geographic
features to individual organisms maintain spiritual significance in the Hmong episteme. However, numerous more spirit names mentioned in literature were also unfamiliar to participants. Although this absence, many elements of nature contain their own fundamental spiritual force without particular reference. This was shown in many examples, such as agriculture, mountain, guardian, and forest spirits. Perhaps contemporary practice is transitioning from recognizing individual spirits to simply recognizing the spiritual essence alone to better suite changing lifestyles.

One potential, yet significant factor that could account for the inconsistencies described in literature are from socio-cultural changes and geopolitical conflicts over the years. In regard to agricultural spirits, Hmong environmental management has had to adapt to the various new landscapes and political authorities it found itself in contact with throughout the diaspora (Lee 2005). Hmong were historically swidden farmers and often lived more nomadic lifestyles before they were forced to settle in the respective refugee zones of host countries. This creates a radically different interaction with the environment: one based more in politics and legalities then cultural-spiritual norms. This is extremely pronounced in California and takes the center of attention of Hmong trying to farm there (and arguably affecting ethnobotanical practice similarly). These struggles are well known in both California and Thailand (Delang 2002; The Refugee Farmer Project n.d.). This could have potentially taken a toll on spiritual practices in the field, or in the least, made them less intimate and dynamic. In the new politicized environments, it is government authorities Hmong must communicate and negotiate with, not spirits. Similar reasons seem probable for the unfamiliarity of other spirits in literature. The Hmong, along with most traditional societies are in the process significant globalization and commodification. Commodification seemed to be extremely pronounced in the ethnobotanical practice and for many Hmong, has lost its spiritual association.

Activities traditionally influenced by spirits such as, choosing burial grounds and living space, and harvesting botanicals all are under the scrutiny of similar social-cultural and geopolitical challenges in the rapidly changing world around them.

Much is to be said about the spiritualized landscapes and geomantic practices found in the fieldwork. The results appear consistent with literature. In agreement with Tomforde’s (2006) Cultural Spatiality, the findings suggest mountains play a fundamental role in both physical and metal landscapes. Connection to the ancestors is profoundly significant to Hmong. Vincent K. Her (2005) has suggested an explanation regarding the Hmong’s spiritual journey to return to the ancestors after death, which involves a physical transfer back to ancestral homelands. Perhaps this is one possible explanation for the prominence of mountains observed in the findings, as ancestor spirits bridge a connection of Hmong to the mountains. This was exemplified in various examples, such as the young participant who needed to mentally and physically prepare for a trip back to Thailand. Locality is interconnected with spirituality, history, identity, and cultural knowledge (Feld & Basso 1996). Putting the literature and findings of this essay together, there exists a powerful example of a fundamental nature-spirit relationship.

The secondary objective of this paper was to address how the spiritually animated environment in Hmong worldview influence daily life activities. To fulfill this goal, data was analyzed around the theme of behavioral change. First, the narratives revealed spirits create a system of new and alternative culturally appropriate ways of performing
activities, while also completely restricting others. New mannerisms in nature are created, such as speaking appropriately in spiritual territory, and alternative spiritually specific methods of doing activities are required, such as that found in herbal medicine. Some influences can be as subtle as the words spoken, or as restrictive as convincing one to not leave home. Animistic beliefs arguably influence the actions Hmong choose in a plethora of activities throughout life.

In an effort to more precisely comprehend how the influences are engendered, several explanations are found in physical and psychological factors. Influences draw from the positive and negative physical consequences that Hmong can reap from spirits based on chosen behaviors. As shown in various anecdotes, Hmong may become gravely ill or even die from behaviors that offend spirits. On the contrary, good fortune, health, and physical protection can result from appropriate interactions. The Hmong have no doubt that all of these potential consequences are the result of how they interact with spirits. As was shown throughout the results, spirits also evoked various emotional responses from followers. Emotional responses are arguably related to the potential consequences previously mentioned. The reoccurring emotions that emerged from the data were fear, worry, and relief. It was clear from interviews that Hmong take interactions with spirits seriously. The data exemplified numerous instances of these emotions as a result of spirits. Based on the factors mentioned heretofore, many Hmong will wisely choose both mental and physical behaviors and thus, daily life actions are distinct from how they would be in spirit absence.

A final note deserves mention in regard to animistic ontology and epistemology. I found the Hmong to engage with spirits in ways that were consistent with contemporary animistic theories (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Swancutt 2019). The Hmong correspond with spirits in a mutual relationship similar to how they would with human persons. These relationships were characterized by negotiation, reconciliation, and general communication. The Hmong actively engage with spirits. These interactions are dynamic and require mindful communication. For example, in the offerings for Yu waaj and the great dragon spirit, or in the intimate conversations the shamans held with Dab and guardian spirits when in the wilderness. The Hmong are constantly entwined in a relationship with nature in which spirits serve as an intermediate enforcing it. As demonstrated in the results, the correspondences are often similar to how they would be with human persons. This worldview of animism speaks a lot towards how those nature spirits evoke significant influences.

**Limitations**

The animistic tradition of Hmong lore is diverse and complex. The Hmong are a diverse ethnic group that is divided into various subgroups. These group distinctions could perhaps provide more thorough descriptions and explain why certain Hmong may not be familiar with a particular spirit name, which previous literature and this study did not take into account. Although I took substantial measures to avoid issues from language barriers, the fact that participants in Thailand did not use Hmong language could have potentially created some discrepancy in translation. With the limitations described heretofore, generalizations are taken with precaution.
Conclusion

While this research has identified intricate nature-spirit relations in contemporary Hmong society, the data also suggests a significant number of historically described spirits are less common. However, spirit-nature relations also manifest themselves through entire landscapes, such as mountains, bodies of water, and forests where their spiritual essence is nameless, yet fundamental to towards the Hmong's epistemology of the nature world. The discussion explored the underlying emotional and physical factors that drew out various degrees of influences on the Hmong's daily actions. The narratives revealed an intimate animistic ontology characterized by relatedness with and personhood of spirits which I argue drives the behaviors of Hmong. Finally, the data showed a rich spirit influenced ethnobotanical tradition whose status in urban California appears to be juggling between both tradition and modernization. At present, several questions remain unanswered: do the spirits in literature that were unfamiliar to participants no longer constitute contemporary Hmong beliefs due to loss of traditional knowledge? How does globalization and commodification of Hmong society and culture affect spiritual practices? Future research in these areas would help cultivate a fuller picture of the complex factors that go beyond cultural-religious studies. Like many indigenous worldviews, the Hmong tradition at present is in a state of rapid transition that threatens its continuity. It is becoming increasingly recognized that animistic ontologies and epistemologies of the world are valuable alternatives towards western human-nature relations, yet research in this domain, especially for the Hmong, is currently lacking. An investigation of Hmong spirituality is not only fundamental towards interpreting Hmong culture and society, but also a vital piece in the much broader picture of understanding the animistic worldview of nature.

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1 See Bird-David 1999: S67-S69.
2 See Bird-David 1999 for a detailed overview of the evolution and debate on the concept of animism.
3 To elaborate further, Bird-David argues an animist understands and interacts mutually with the environment from the perspective of its relatedness and thus, views other living and non-living things in the environment as “persons” who make up the oneness of a being (1999).
4 For the remainder of the essay, italicized words of particular terms are in the Hmong language, which is based on the RPA (Romanized Popular Alphabet) of Smalley, Bertrais and Barney, 1953.
Dab neeb primarily refers to shamanic spirits derived from ancestors. However, literature also describes Dab neeb to be from multiple sources (see, Tapp 1989: 61). In addition, the term can also mean “stories” or “folktales.”

Most of those participants have spent the overwhelming portion of their lives as a follower of traditional beliefs. This was valid since all participants spoke fluent English or were accompanied by a Hmong who was bilingual in Hmong and English.

The idea here was that as long as Hmong were clear on the spirit or concept in their native language, they would know exactly what to elaborate on.

Hmong Story 40 is an exhibition to celebrate and showcase the history of the Hmong people in California and abroad (see hmongstory40.org).

Nyiaj is a common offering item that serves as money to spirits and is burned for the spirit to receive it (Tapp & Lee 2010).

Sources identify this spirit as Zaj laug (See, e.g., Tapp 1989: 61).

One result that can happen from such an encounter is what Hmong call ceeb. This is described as a soul being so severely shocked that it leaves the body. This can lead to various illnesses and cause the victim to develop a pale complexion, which Hmong can use as an identifier that a harmful spirit was encountered (Fresno Farmer, personal communication, June 2016).

Poj ntxoog is scantily described in research, however, a handful of articles give brief descriptions, such as that of French ethnographer, Guy Morechand (1968). He also gave consistent descriptions of Poj ntxoog in relation to the tiger.

He recalled hearing the story in his youth where elders described it as some type of big cat, such as a lion or tiger. It is likely to be a tiger since they are native to and once common to those environments.

It is worth noting that Hmong shamanic worldviews and experiences with nature can vary greatly and are often unique to the shaman. At least this was the case found in the five shaman participants of this study.

It appeared from the data that a shaman’s perspective of nature may not completely correspond to that of laypeople.

Sacramento Elder Female Shaman, personal communication, July 2016.

Young Male Shaman, personal communication, June 2016.

It is important to mention that one of these participants was a Christian, which is obviously the most contributing factor. The other participant did not want to disclose their spiritual identity.

Based on the interviews from herbalists in California, intense commodification seemed to be what was happening with the ethnobotanical practice. They were using it to make income, and the fast-paced interactions between the herbalist and client were based on money with no time for rituals even if so desired. This appeared to be the main reason other herbalists did not agree to an interview; there was no time to stop and talk.

Consider the great lengths Hmong were found to in order to appease spirits (e.g. herbal medicine ritual and burial ground geomancy).

Good examples are the shaman’s correspondences with spirits in quotation on page 17.
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Widening the Geographical Reach of the Plain of Jars, Laos

Lia Genovese

Abstract

This research report summarises ongoing fieldwork at the Plain of Jars in Laos and details megalithic artefacts in newly-discovered sites populated with jars fashioned from a variety of rocks. With two exceptions, the jars at these remote sites are in single digits and are not accompanied by plain or decorated stone discs, used as burial markers or for commemorative purposes. The sites’ isolated location bears implications for the geographical reach of the Plain of Jars by widening our understanding of this megalithic tradition in Mainland Southeast Asia.

Introduction

The Plain of Jars is spread over the provinces of Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang (Map 1). All the sites are located at latitude 19°N, while the longitude starts at 102°E for sites in Luang Prabang and progresses to 103°E for locations in Xieng Khouang.

As the leader of the first large-scale survey in 1931-1933, the French archaeologist Madeleine Colani (1866-1943) documented 26 sites (Genovese 2015a: 58-59). Sites can include a group of jars, a quarry, a stone outcrop like a rock formation protruding through the soil level, or a manufacturing site, and can hold from one single jar to several hundred units.1

Dozens of new sites have since been discovered, taking the total to just over 100, with the quantity of documented stone artefacts now exceeding 2,100 jars and
200 discs. Frequently, only villagers know the directions to small and undocumented sites and may have omitted to mention their existence in the belief that only conspicuous jar quantities warrant attention. Villagers have been acquainted with the stone jars from an early age, walking past them on the way to school or to tend the family’s rice field after class.

Jars have been documented in seven of Xieng Khouang’s eight districts (Map 2), with Mokmai the only district where surveys have yet to be conducted. Approximately ninety percent of the known sites are located in Xieng Khouang, where jars are carved in five main rock types, most commonly from sandstone and granite, but also from limestone, conglomerate and breccia, the latter being a coarse-grained rock featuring minerals cemented together in a fine-grained matrix.

Map 2: The eight districts of Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang’s Phou Khoun district. Shown also are the modern provincial capital of Phonsavan, in Paek district, and the former capital of Muang Khun in Khun district (map by Lia Genovese).
The ten sites in Luang Prabang province are located in Phou Khoun district, where sandstone alone was used for both jars and discs. The remoteness of these sites has helped to preserve their integrity, if not from the elements but at least from the effects of urbanisation and farming. Quarries have yet to be identified in Luang Prabang province and there may remain undocumented stone artefacts in particularly remote districts of the province like Pak Ou.

Other than at a few sites on well-trodden paths radiating from Xieng Khouang’s modern provincial capital of Phonsavan, surveys on the Plain of Jars require time, money and patience. While some surveys go largely according to plan, others result in abject disappointment. Colani (1935, vol. 1: 10), the doyenne of Laotian megaliths, warned that surveys on the Plain of Jars rarely turn out as planned and that researchers should prepare for “the unexpected”.

In July 2019, 11 sites consisting of 15 components in Xieng Khouang province were inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List (http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1587). These sites fulfilled the test of “Outstanding Universal Value” and met the selection criteria of “Authenticity and Integrity” as “exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared” (https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria). The inscription was the culmination of a journey that began 28 years ago, in March 1992, when Laos submitted a tentative listing to signal its intention to nominate the Plain of Jars for World Heritage (WH) status.

Four of the Plain of Jars sites feature large numbers of jars. In Paek district, Site 52-Ban Phakeo hosts 404 units in sandstone, while Site 1-Ban Nao, the most visited of the sites, holds 334 jars, mostly of sandstone. Site 3-Ban Xiengdi, in Phaxay district, has 242 jars and the same district is home to the 93 jars at Site 2-Ban Na Kho and Site 8-Huay Luang, the sandstone quarry for the jars at both Sites 2 and 3. The fourth largest is Site 42-Phou Xang, a quarry and manufacturing site hosting 113 sandstone jars, located in Kham district. These four locations – Sites 1, 3, 42 and 52 – were declared World Heritage Monuments in July 2019 and are open to tourists.

In 2016, an international team commenced a new research programme at the Plain of Jars, conducting excavations, mapping, drone photography and documentation of the megaliths. This project recorded a range of interment styles and, “for the first time, a primary burial of two individuals” (O’Reilly 2019a: 982-983) in one of the excavation units, in addition to further exploration of previously documented secondary burials. The same international team conducted excavations at Site 52-Ban Phakeo. Although the archaeological evidence found was modest, burial features like the use of limestone slabs pointed to “a similar mortuary ritual to that undertaken at Site 1” (O’Reilly 2019b).

The extant discs in both provinces are of sandstone, with the exception of two granite discs documented by Baldock (2008: 6) at Site 51-Ban Sanlouang in Khun district.

The stone discs are increasingly being viewed as commemorative artefacts or “grave markers” (UNESCO 2009: 22), placed in the vicinity of a jar to cover or mark a burial pit. The folk theory that they were made to serve as lids for the jars has been largely discredited, including in the WH dossier submitted by the Lao government in February 2018 for the 11 sites: “It is presumed that the stone jars also had lids when they were being actively used for mortuary purposes, although little evidence of this has been found [...] No disc has ever been found in place on a jar in circumstances where the placement appears original” (Nomination Text 2018: 35).
Doubts about discs as lids for the jars were first voiced by Colani (1935, vol. 1: 123): “The heavy discs found on the ground? But were they really covers? [emphasis added]”. These reservations were expressed in her two-volume monograph that synthesised her surveys of the Plain of Jars as well as the standing stones of Hua Phan province and the fields of funerary stones along Highway 7, respectively to the east and west of Xieng Khouang.

Subsequently, Bellwood (1978: 196) echoed Colani’s misgivings that discs do not seal tombs “and neither are they lids for the jars, as Colani has convincingly demonstrated”. Bellwood was referring to the experiment where Colani placed a disc atop a jar at Site 22-Ban Hin, in Kham district, to demonstrate that the ill-fitting stone could not have been a lid for the jar (Colani 1935, vol. 1: plate 33/3).

This author’s recent comparative study proposed a theory that the jars were supply-driven and therefore “created as stock” (Genovese 2019: 59), to allow for the long carving process and transportation to a final destination. This notion is corroborated by the presence of jars at quarries or manufacturing sites, at every stage of the carving process.

The iconography found on the jars and discs consists of a dozen instances of mostly spread-eagled human or animal figures, with straight or bent knees, carved into the stone. The anthropomorphic carving discovered in 1994 by the Japanese archaeologist Eiji Nitta at Site 1-Ban Nao, on Jar no. 217, is described as a full-frontal human bas relief holding up “both hands” (Nitta 1996: 16).

While the human images carved on the jars and discs show a degree of uniformity – spread-eagled body and either straight or bent knees – the animal figures display variety. For instance, the carving discovered by the author in August 2009 At Site 2-Ban Na Kho depicts a feline with round orbits and a three- branched, crown-like headdress (Genovese 2015a: 127-128).

The felines carved on the sandstone discs at Phu Da Phor, in Phou Khoun district, convey a degree of animation, particularly the representation on the large domes, the ample surface area of which has allowed for greater artistic expression. Another feline carving on a sandstone disc in the Ban Phakeo group of sites displays a clear decorative style, while still remaining within the general Plain of Jars narrative of a supine figure with arms aloft. There have been no specific studies aimed at interpreting the iconography at the Plain of Jars.

Human or animal figures at the Plain of Jars had only been documented in single representations until 1994, when an exceptional discovery at Site 1-Ban Nao was announced by Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy, who unearthed a stone slab engraved with two human beings, naked and locked in an amorous embrace. This was, and remains, the only instance of figures in pairs discovered on the Plain of Jars. Photographs of this unusual carving have never been published.2
The Newly Documented Sites

The newly documented sites are listed in Table 1 and are discussed below.

Table 1: New Plain of Jars sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site1</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Jars</th>
<th>Discs</th>
<th>Rock type</th>
<th>Iconography</th>
<th>Date inspected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Houay Tinxang</td>
<td>Nong Hét</td>
<td>Whole 1</td>
<td>Fragmented 2</td>
<td>Conglomerate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dec. 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Soviet Farm&quot; Phaxay</td>
<td>Phaxay</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan. 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Pha Tai Phaxay</td>
<td>Phaxay</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>On a jar</td>
<td>Mar. 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na Som-Site 18 Paek</td>
<td>Paek</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan. 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near Ban Thoum Khun</td>
<td>Khun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Granite</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan. 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near Site 15(^{3}) Khun</td>
<td>Khun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Granite</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan. 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Kéo Hen Khun</td>
<td>Khun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Granite</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan. 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muang Phan Khun</td>
<td>Khun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Granite</td>
<td></td>
<td>Feb. 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Namlam Phou Khoun</td>
<td>Khun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mar. 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Nam Ting(^{4}) [^{4}]</td>
<td>Phou Khoun</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>On discs</td>
<td>Jan. 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals 15 22 3

1All sites are in Xieng Khouang province except for Ban Nam Ting, located in Luang Prabang province.
2Fragmented jars given as 1 unit except for Muang Phan, where a level of precision is possible.
3The buried jar Near Site 15 quarry was not inspected, hence not counted.
4First documented by Madeleine Colani in the mid-1930s.

Xieng Khouang Province

Xieng Khouang province shares an international border with Vietnam and domestic borders with the provinces of Hua Phan, Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Bolikhambxai. Unlike the southern province of Champasak, Xieng Khouang was almost certainly "never under Khmer domination" (Stuart-Fox 1993: 107). The province has experienced a turbulent recent past, including invasion in the nineteenth century by the Yunnanese flag gangs commonly known as the “Haw”.3 The French naval surgeon Paul-Marie Neïs (1852-1907), who explored Upper Laos and the border areas between British Burma, China, Vietnam and Siam in 1882-1883, documented his escape from the approaching “Haw”, but not before bandaging “two young women who arrived at night from Muong Phan”, their right hands pierced by a bullet “discharged at them at point-blank range” as they attempted to push away the Chinese aggressors’ revolvers (Neïs 1997: 52).

An even more dramatic account concerns the Xieng Khouang villager with a silver chin. In a skirmish with the “Haw”, an unfortunate villager had lost his jaw, cheeks and lower lip when the contents of two revolvers were emptied in his face. The silversmith of the vice-king built for him "some sort of chin or rather a silver floor for his mouth, kept in place by two attachments passing round his ears", a simple but ingenious device which allowed him to smoke cigarettes but not the chewing of betel, “which made him unhappy” (Neïs 1997: 42-44).
In the Second Indochina War (1964-1973), the Plain of Jars became the battleground between Pathet Lao (communist) soldiers, backed by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), and the Royal Lao Army (RLA) allied to US-backed forces and Hmong troops. The conflict concluded with the creation of the current one-party system, inaugurated on 2 December 1975.

The author’s latest survey in Xieng Khouang province revealed undocumented sites and new jar groups close to documented locations. Even by the province’s geologically-rich standards, Xieng Khouang’s eastern reaches offer extraordinary diversity, particularly in Nong Hét and Kham districts. Shortly after most of modern Laos was annexed as the fifth province of French Indochina in October 1893, when “Siam renounced all claims to territories on the left bank and to islands in the river [Mekong]” (Benson 2018: 65), French geologists set out to explore the province’s rich soil. Léon Dussault (1866-1934), Colani’s contemporary at the Geological Survey of Indochina in Hanoi (Genovese 2018: 98), wrote: “This region is of varied appearance due to the very diverse nature of the many terrains encountered” (Dussault 1915: 539).

In Kham district, whose eastern edge borders Nong Hét, jars are carved in four different rock types: sandstone, conglomerate, limestone and breccia. Kham’s Site 23-Ban Namhon, located close to some hot springs, is the only site on the Plain hosting breccia jars. All known sites with limestone jars are in Kham but the number of jars that have survived is thought to be far fewer than were erected due to exposure to the elements and other factors (Genovese 2016: 87-88).

Nong Hét district

Nong Hét is an under-researched district home to several ethnic groups, including Hmong, Tai Dam and Kmhmu, the latter an ethnic group that linguistically belongs to the Mon-Khmer speaking family. It shares an international border with Vietnam. The district was the birthplace of Gen. Vang Pao (1929-2011), the Hmong leader that fought the rise of communism alongside US-backed troops in the Vietnam War: “On September 12, 1969, he [Vang Pao] did what the experts had said was impossible: he retook Xieng Khouang town and the airfield at Lima Lima, which had been held by the communists since the

Figure 1: Conglomerate jar at Houay Tinxang (Lia Genovese).
early 1960s” (Hamilton-Merritt 1993: 222).

The easternmost location where jars have been found is in Nong Hét district at Houay Tinxang, a combined Hmong and Kmhmu village set on a gentle hill 60 km east of Phonsavan, past Site 23-Ban Namhon and barely 40 km from the Lao-Vietnamese border.

The author visited Houay Tinxang in December 2016. The site hosts one whole conglomerate jar, with a few others nearby in various states of fragmentation. The extant jar (Figure 1) is 160 cm high, with a girth of 423 cm. Erosion has set in and some deep cracks have developed at the front and back of the jar. A groove, or recessed inner rim, has been sculpted just below the jar’s lip. No discs have been found at the site but numerous lumps of sandstone are scattered in the vicinity of the surviving jar. The site is close to a maize-processing facility which appears not to have affected the jar. Elsewhere in the province, units close to farmsteads are known to function as containers for debris, with the rims often permanently scarred when used as whetstones to “sharpen knives and farming implements” (Genovese 2019: 64).

**Phaxay district**

For French colonial families, the breezy hills near Site 2-Ban Na Kho provided a recreational respite and were known as Phu Sala Tò (‘resthouse on mountain top’). The now disused landing strip near Site 2 gave the area the historical name of “Champ d’Aviation de Lat Sen” (Colani 1935, vol. 1: 107). The jars at Site 2 are located on two adjoining hills, dissected by a pre-colonial path which was widened by the French, resulting in erosion and jar displacement.

In the early 1980s, the Soviet-financed Lat Sen Commune Cattle Farm was built in an area where rice cultivation had failed. Eight Russian families lived at the farm and were the first households to be connected to the electricity grid in the Lat Sen area. The Soviet personnel worked on the farm and trained Lao farmers in cattle husbandry. The complex, which included offices and a movie theatre, is still known as the “Soviet Farm”, despite subsequent Mongolian, Korean and Japanese investments.

To mark completion of the farm building, in early 1985 two jars were moved by fork-lift and a Soviet-made truck from Site 2-Ban Na Kho, 5 km to the northwest, and brought to the farm. The author surveyed these jars in January 2017. Both units (Figure 2) are carved with a flat rim and are undecorated, like the vast majority of the Plain’s jars. Fashioned in
sandstone from a large quarry 7 km to the south, they range in height from 140-160 cm, with a common circumference of around 400 cm. Both jars are in good condition, save for three deep dents on one of the units and the weathering caused by centuries of exposure to the elements. Wind-borne matter has taken root inside the jars.

The installation of the two jars at the “Soviet Farm” connects with a similar event in nearby Paek district. At the entrance to the village near Site 17-Boua Tai, two sandstone jars are located in a fenced compound housing a few huts and the local monastery. To the villagers, the large, bell-shaped unit, carved with an elaborate rim, is known as the ‘male’ jar, while the more modest jar located on the opposite side of the gate, simply carved with a flat rim, is the ‘female’ jar.

In around 1999, the two jars were in turn chained to an elephant and dragged over 400 metres of uneven terrain from Site 17 to Boua Tai village. The intention was to ‘gift’ the two jars to the newly-completed monastery during the inauguration ceremony. In transport, the ‘male’ jar split in half widthwise, while the ‘female’ unit fractured around the rim. The villagers roughly patched up both jars with cement.

These two sets of jars – at the entrance to Boua Tai village and at the “Soviet Farm” – are still in their new locations. In recent years, the Lao Heritage Department has recovered various stone jars from urban settings in Xieng Khouang to return them to their original location, mostly at Site 1-Ban Nao. Some of these returned jars can be identified by the soil and flowers now filling them, in a touching gesture which unfortunately lacks due consideration for the possibility of vegetation taking root in the jars.

If restoration to their original location is planned, care should be taken that the method employed does not damage the jars. A little-known instance of damage caused by modern-day relocation can be observed at Ho Phra Kéo temple museum in Vientiane Capital city. A sandstone jar weighing approximately two tons was taken from Site 1-Ban Nao in the spring of 1970 and installed at Sam Thong, a village south of the Plain of Jars which functioned as the Air America airbase during the Vietnam War. From Sam Thong, the jar was flown to Vientiane and lodged in the grounds of the USAID Requirements Office, from where it was later moved to Ho Phra Kéo. An image from 1991 shows the jar intact and in good condition, but it is now held together by cement and metal brackets due to damage sustained during relocation to a purpose-built pavilion within the temple grounds. Even in its fragmented and patched-up state, visitors to the temple are fond of dropping coins into the jar.

A solitary jar in the south of Xieng Khouang offers one of the most intriguing animal representations documented to date. In early 2017, a social media posting briefly detailed an unusual animal carving at Ban Pha Tai, a site with two jars in a village populated by Tai Dam communities, 60 km south of Phonsavan. An outcrop of 12 boulders, the largest over 5 m in length, is found 700 m from the jars. To date, no publication has ensued from this discovery and the site has not been archaeologically excavated.

The author visited Ban Pha Tai in March 2019. Both jars are in sandstone and only one is decorated. The smaller jar has lost its upper portion, with some recent fractures exposing quartz-rich sandstone. Its extant wall is 94 cm high, with a girth of 350 cm at its widest.

The larger jar is 132 cm tall, has a girth of 360 cm and is carved with a high neck and a recessed inner rim. At the time of the brief survey, this jar was surrounded by debris and assorted construction material, including a large oil drum propped against its side. It is
Genovese neverthelass in good condition, though with a section missing from the rim down to the mid-point. The decoration consists of a zoomorphic depiction of a frog (Figure 3). Unlike most carvings of figures at the Plain of Jars, which are presented in a supine position with indistinguishable features like eyes, nose or mouth, the frog on the Ban Pha Tai jar is in a prone position, with visible eyes and an enlarged stomach.

In rock-art, the anthropomorphic figures with upraised arms and often bent legs are known as “praying figures” (Scott 2018: 103).

The frog image on the sandstone jar at Ban Pha Tai is unusual for several reasons. It may be the first aquatic figure to be discovered at the Plain of Jars. The representation is animated to convey a swimming motion, quite unlike the static human and animal carvings usually found on jars and discs. The frog was carved immediately below the jar’s lip, leaving a large area of the surface undecorated. This contrasts with other documented human or animal figures, which usually occupy a central and substantial portion of the surface on a jar or disc. Moreover, the smoothest area on this jar wall is to the right of the frog image, where considerable surface preparation appears to have been undertaken. There may have been an intention to carve other figures on the large amount of blank space immediately beneath and to the right of the swollen-bellied frog.

Regionally, frog representations are associated with females but also with stone, as in the Tibetan folk tale of a beautiful girl weeping every day at dusk at the grave of her dead frog-husband, on a cliff halfway up the mountain. On the day she is petrified, from a distance, the stone resembles a girl praying: “She prays for ever at her husband’s grave” (The Frog Rider 1980: 23).

In the rock-art tradition of Western Thailand, including Khao Plara in Uthai Thani, gender-specific roles are identified by the presence of frogs and turtles and “are associated with a pregnant woman” (Shoocongdej 2002: 205). This is reiterated by Scott (2018: 118), who states that at Khao Plara a pregnant woman is depicted “with a turtle beneath and a frog beside it”, in what Srisuchat (1990: 84) has interpreted as a “fertility ritual” in an agricultural context. Among the Zhuang of southern China today, frogs are sacrificed in rainmaking ceremonies to the sound of bronze drums, “in order to warrant sufficient rainfall and fertility” (Shoocongdej 2002: 202).

**Paek district**

The author has been visiting Site 17-Ban Boua Tai at regular intervals since 2011. Its associated quarry, Site 18-Phou Hin Ngon, consists of a number of sections set several
hundred metres apart and contains finished and partially carved jars. Local villagers recount that there are more jar sites in the area, which are difficult to locate due to vegetation. Clearance or seasonal burning of the vegetation may expose new sites at a future date.

According to villagers, Pho Tsa Ngem is situated on a steep slope around 3 km north of Na Som, a section of Site 18-Phou Hin Ngon quarry. The path from Na Som to Pho Tsa Ngem is covered in thick vegetation which must be cleared over its entire length in order to reach the jars. The slope of this hill has not been cleared for decades and villagers’ recollections would be required to locate the jars. For a number of years the author has attempted to reach Pho Tsa Ngem.

However, during an unsuccessful attempt to find these jars in January 2017, the author managed to locate some previously undocumented jars at the Na Som section of the quarry. One partially-carved jar and another fragmented unit were found close to a previously documented jar, large and partially buried, carved with an exceptionally flat rim. Close by lay a new jar, a miniature unit, perfectly formed and with a neat aperture (Figure 4), one of the smallest units documented at the Plain of Jars. Further up the slope, on fairly steep terrain, a small trimmed boulder with a flat base suggests an intention to carve this block into a jar.

**Figure 4:** Miniature sandstone jar on a steep slope, Na Som-Site 18 quarry (Lia Genovese).

**Khun district**

The jars of Khun, a district south of Paek and Kham populated by ethnic minorities, remain under-researched. This is an overwhelmingly granitic area, where the uniformity in rock type is offset by variety in the jars’ size. Most of the surviving granite units measure 140-160 cm in height, but there are also dwarf units a little over 1 m tall, and a unique instance of a jar measuring 1.9 m, at the isolated location of Ban Naho (Genovese 2015: 157). Other peculiarities in Khun are found at Site 48-Ban Namnay, where the jars are buried up to the rim (Genovese 2015b: 85), an arrangement also documented at nearby Site 49-Ban Phiang.

In addition to Sites 48 and 49 and Ban Naho, Khun district is also home to Site 13-Ban Thoum, Site 16-Ban Phai and Site 51-Ban Sanlouang, all populated with granite jars. There are no granite jars in the 11 WH sites inscribed in July 2019, but Site 16-Ban Phai, a few kilometres from the former provincial capital of Muang Khun, hosts 35 granite jars, as well as a single sandstone jar, and is open to tourists.

Unlike sandstone sites, which can host hundreds of jars, the inventory at granite sites is relatively modest, rarely greater than a few dozen units. Site 49-Ban Phiang hosts around
60 jars and is the largest granite site documented to date. The jar stock at some granite sites has decreased due to rapid urbanisation, farming and the passage of time.

Sandstone discs are relatively common at larger sites such as 1, 3 and 52. However, discs in granite are extremely rare and they captivated Colani’s scholarly attention during her surveys of Khun district in 1933 and 1940. Archaeological explorations in the district revealed some subsurface burials with modest grave goods like iron knives, pots, potsherds, glass beads, engraved rings and charcoal (Colani 1935, vol. 2: 34, figure 157).

Known as Na Nong in the 1930s, present-day Ban Thoum was home to a rare granite disc weighing an estimated 200 kg and decorated with an anthropomorphic figure. Colani (1935, vol. 1: 164, figure 76, plate 56) declared the artefact “sculpted by an incompetent hand” and instructed her Hmong porters to transport the disc to the French provincial governor’s mansion in Muang Khun (Colani 1935, vol. 1: 184). The disc’s whereabouts are unknown but the replica made from her ”sketch, wax cast and photographs” (Colani 1935, vol. 1: 184) was lodged at the present-day National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi.

During this period, Colani also authorised the removal of other granite discs from Song Méng, present-day Site 48-Ban Namnay, 20 km to the south of Ban Thoum. Some of the discs were decorated with human or animal figures (CEFEO 1940: 11), the latter consisting of tigers, monkeys or ruminants. Colani reported that the side bearing the animal carving had been overturned, exposing the flat and undecorated side, an arrangement documented at other sites populated with ethnic minorities, in both Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang provinces. No photographic records of the animal-decorated granite discs have come to light but in her monograph, Colani (1935, vol. 1: plate 23) illustrated a granite disc from Song Méng, plainly carved save for a raised central section covering most of the surface.

In January 2017, this author inspected a single granite jar some distance from Ban Thoum village. Mines Advisory Group (MAG) operatives were at the time clearing the area of unexploded ordnance and the sound of war remnants being detonated could be heard all around. The jar is located at the bottom of a gentle slope, around 800 m from the village. After the removal of mud and vegetation, the jar appeared in a good state of preservation (Figure 5). A sliver of granite missing from the exposed side gave the jar an unusually large aperture.

To date, identifying granite quarries has proved a challenge. Baldock (2008: 6), a British geologist who surveyed most of the Xieng Khouang sites early in 2008, reported that “All of the granite jars are located where granite was available in the immediate vicinity”.

Site 14-Ban Natad has been proposed as a potential source of stone for the numerous sites in the area, including Site 16-Ban Phai, located a short distance away. Equally for Site 15-Houay Fa Pha, which hosts two six-metre high granite slabs from where blocks of a
suitable size could have been extracted to manufacture jars. The blocks are separated by a two-metre gap, hence the ‘Fa Pha’ (‘bolt of lightning’) appellation. To date, no jars have been found at Site 14 or Site 15. The more manageable boulders at Site 14 could have been employed to carve jars for the sites nearby but no direct evidence of quarrying has been found to date.

An undocumented jar located 300 m from Site 15-Houay Fa Pha quarry was inspected in January 2017. In keeping with the relatively modest size of granite jars, the new unit (Figure 6) measures 120 cm in length, with an aperture 30 cm wide and an estimated circumference of 280 cm. The thick layer of vegetation and mud could not mask the mason’s skill in the execution of this finely carved jar. According to a villager, a jar of similar size is buried deep in the soil, less than 1 m from this exposed unit. Thus, the immediate vicinity of Site 15-Houay Fa Pha quarry holds one exposed granite jar and, according to villagers’ reports, one buried unit.

On a subsequent visit to Khun district, also in January 2017, villagers escorted the author to an undocumented group of jars in San Kéo Hen, set on a hill 1.3 km from Ban Thoum. The thick vegetation enveloping the hill complicated the task of locating the jars but eventually the surviving granite unit (Figure 7) was identified in a small clearing surrounded by heavy growth. The unit is thick-walled and in good condition, measuring 135 cm in length and carved with a medium-size

Figure 6: Granite jar close to Site 15 quarry (Lia Genovese).

Figure 7: Granite jar at San Kéo Hen (Lia Genovese).
aperture. According to the villagers, a second jar of comparable size was pulverised during bombardments in 1970, as testified by five large craters surrounding this extant jar.

The visit to Muang Phan was the culmination of a conversation that began during fieldwork in Xieng Khouang in 2016, when a Lao archaeologist mentioned a site excluded from inventories on account of all the jars being fragmented. In February 2019, the author reached Muang Phan, set in a wooded area on a dirt road from Muang Khun, 60 km from Phonsavan.

Muang Phan hosts 20 granite jars, all fragmented except one whole unit located deep into the site. The jars are thick-walled and with shallow cavities. The mason’s skill was evident in the expertly fashioned walls, smooth despite the passage of time. It has been suggested that villagers’ superstition has contributed to the fragmentation of these jars. Fragments of jar walls, and small slabs of sandstone on occasion, had been stacked on the bases of several units (Figure 8), in the manner of a stone cairn. Modern-day stone cairns often accompany contemporary burials documented at the Plain of Jars: “Both Hmong and Phuan burials have been recorded at jar sites, and while the Phuan burials use lower foothills and spurs to place jedis, Hmong prefer the mountain ridge” (UNESCO 2009: 27).

Although Colani did not specifically document cairns built with jar or disc fragments, her accounts reported other types of damage, which she attributed to superstition and fear of the ancient stones’ residual powers. Surveying sites in Phou Khoun district in the spring of 1933, she blamed villagers for the overnight damage to sandstone discs she planned to
document the day after her arrival: “The next morning, we saw with indignation that pieces [of the discs] had been thrown to the ground and smashed. It goes without saying that the natives pretended to ignore the perpetrator” (Colani 1939: 98).

Another undocumented site in the district is located 20 km east of Muang Khun. Ban Namlam, visited in March 2019, is set in jungle and a visit requires a moderate trek as well as a sturdy vehicle. Access to the site is severely restricted, controlled by armed guards supervising gold mining activities for a foreign-owned concession that employs both Lao and overseas workers.

The two sandstone jars at Ban Namlam are thick-walled and located on hills set 400 m apart. In the immediate vicinity of the jars are sandstone boulders of modest size. One jar is 82 cm high and in very good condition. Food wrappers, plastic bottles and other debris had been dropped into the jar, as has been documented at other sites. The jar was covered by a tarpaulin held in place by sticks, an improvised shelter to trap birds during their dust baths, for the Lao delicacy of fermented swallows. Another such shelter is found 100 m from this jar.

From this position, the author walked west to the second jar, which was covered in growth but in good condition except for a fracture. This is a more imposing unit, 110 cm high, carved with a recessed inner rim and with a girth of at least 360 cm. A short distance away, the remnants of another unit, too fragmented to document. This larger jar is accompanied by an undecorated 10-cm thick disc with a diameter of 93 cm (Figure 9). In contrast with medium- to large-size sites, discs are rarely, if ever, found at small sites with jars in single digits. Discs in large quantities are found only at major locations like Site 52-Ban Phakeo, where 404 jars are accompanied by 106 discs, around 50 percent of the entire disc inventory on the Plain of Jars.

![Figure 9: Sandstone jar and disc at Ban Namlam (Lia Genovese).](image_url)
LUANG PRABANG PROVINCE

The ten sites in Luang Prabang province are populated with jars and discs fashioned from sandstone. Their remote setting entails logistical challenges, with visits often requiring a four-wheel drive vehicle, a moderate-to-challenging trek and navigation in a narrow boat. It is an under-studied area currently outside the Lao government’s research focus. Researchers require permits from the relevant authorities and armed escort is frequently a condition of the survey. None of the sites in Luang Prabang are open to the public and travelling to them involves traversing hazardous and narrow dirt roads and stony paths. Access is further curtailed by seasonal conditions, which render the dirt roads precarious even after a light rainfall.

The first and only large-scale survey and documentation of the Luang Prabang sites was conducted by Madeleine Colani over a number of months between May 1932 and May 1933. In recent years, the Lao government has conducted limited archaeological research in the area, connected to the construction of the Nam Ngum 5 hydropower project.

In 2011, a few jars and discs in low-lying areas close to the dam were relocated to higher ground, to prevent damage from flooding. Reports were compiled detailing the relocation methods, complete with images of the stone artefacts as well as names of the personnel involved and geographical coordinates, but their circulation was limited to Lao officials. In a few instances, the relocation has involved jars documented by Colani but whose state of conservation has not been updated.

Phou Khoun district

All the Luang Prabang sites documented to date are located in Phou Khoun, a district which saw much fighting during the Vietnam War. The Phu Da Pho area, which contains the jar site known as San Hin Oume in Colani’s times, corresponded to the Lima Site 103 airfield during the conflict. A disused airfield is shown in maps from the 1960s (Texas University 1965), with smaller airfields in nearby Xieng Dât.

Phou Khoun is situated 80 km west of Phonsavan, directly south of Phoukoot, a district in the northwest of Xieng Khouang. In modern times, Phou Khoun and Phoukoot fall under separate provincial jurisdictions but dozens of jars in both districts share common features like shallow cavities, thick walls and narrow apertures. Phou Khoun hosts stone artefacts not found in Xieng Khouang, like zoomorphic discs (Colani 1935, vol. 1: plates 49-53) and mushroom-shaped discs (Colani 1935, vol. 1: plates 45-47). The bases of some of the mushroom-shaped discs are 40 cm thick and skilled masonry is evident in their remarkably smooth contours.

Phou Khoun has revealed one of the most astonishing artefacts to emerge from the Plain of Jars. In 2011, six sandstone fragments were found at Nam Phat by Viengkéo Souksavatdy during a mission led by Thongsá Sayavongkhamdy, respectively Deputy Director-General and former Director-General of the Lao Heritage Department. The fragments from this location of just two jars did not at first seem unusual, but when assembled off-site, they revealed an anthropomorphic image with well-defined features such as eyes and a nose. A straight line runs from the base of the nose to what would have been the mouth, which can no longer be discerned. The figure’s left cheek rests on its left hand, in
a reflective pose aptly nicknamed ‘The Philosopher’. This extraordinary find will be the subject of a separate paper.

Although a few human carvings have been documented on jars and discs, the Nam Phat discovery is only the second anthropomorphic object, or statue, to emerge from the Plain of Jars. In May 1932, Colani (1935, vol. 1: 191-192) found the first human figure, at Thao Kham, a cemetery of funerary stones in Luang Prabang province, on the western-bound section of Highway 7. The 8.8-cm tall bronze figurine depicted a naked human being with child-like features and decorated with spirals on arms and legs.

Also in Phou Khoun is the assembly known as Kéo Tane in Colani’s times, a circuit of several kilometres punctuated by small clusters of jars and discs (Colani 1935, vol. 1: 217, map 9). The name Kéo Tane was still in use in the mid-1960s, when eight families with a total of 36 ethnic Lao people lived in the area (University of Wisconsin 1970: 374).

Ban Nam Ting is a section of the Kéo Tane circuit. The village, populated with Hmong and Kmhmu families, is set in dramatic scenery, flanked by a mountain and a sheer drop of several hundred metres. A visit in the rainy season is hazardous. Despite visiting the site in the dry season in an all-terrain vehicle driven by a skilled off-road driver, a light shower the previous day made the narrow and stony road arduous to negotiate. Slash and burn was already under way but it did not directly threaten the megaliths.

Ban Nam Ting hosts four jars, two zoomorphic discs (Figure 10) and one unworked sandstone block. Unusually, all four jars feature a recessed inner rim, when ordinarily only one such rimmed type is found among the dozens of flat-rimmed units at most sites documented to date.

In keeping with jars elsewhere in the district, their height is relatively modest, at around 160 cm, with one unit barely reaching 90 cm. The girth varies from 460 cm for the large units, to 200 cm for the more modest jars. The jars’ interior is shaped to depths of 43-55 cm, typical of the shallow cavities in the area. Two of the jars display signs of deliberate damage. One unit has been splashed with red paint, while the rim of another jar has been used as a whetstone.

Figure 10: Sandstone jars and animal-decorated domes at Ban Nam Ting (Lia Genovese).
Both animal-decorated domes have suffered considerable erosion since Colani’s surveys in the mid-1930s. The base is 43 cm thick for the smaller dome and 50 cm for the larger one. The circumference is broadly comparable, respectively 410 cm and 415 cm.

Colani documented other animal-decorated discs at cemeteries of funerary stones west of Phou Khoun, but these sites, which do not host any megalithic jars, are not currently being studied.

Conclusions

With the exception of Ban Nam Ting, the new jar groups detailed in this paper are not recorded in current site inventories managed by the Lao Heritage Department. Their discovery validates the ongoing process of comprehensively documenting the Plain of Jars, which is revealing new sites at regular intervals.

Consistent with the process of participatory mapping, local inhabitants are indispensable contributors in efforts to secure information on undocumented sites. This is confirmed by the numerous jars discovered with villagers’ help.

Houay Tinxang is the easternmost location hosting jars. Although the site is small, its location on the eastern edge of Xieng Khouang province bears implications for the geographical reach of the Plain of Jars, which now extends for 120 km, from Luang Prabang province’s Phou Khoun to Xieng Khouang’s Nong Hét, close to the Vietnamese border.

Small sites can reveal astonishing details, like the unusual frog carving at Ban Pha Tai, a minor site at considerable distance from the 242 jars at Site 3-Ban Xiengdi. The frog carving at Ban Pha Tai is materially different from other animal representations and is unique for being the first aquatic representation documented at the Plain of Jars.

The small units at Na Som, Site 18 quarry, reveal adaptation of carving techniques to working with small blocks, resulting in a recognisable, fully-formed jar after the considerable waste generated by the carving process. At this stage in our knowledge, we cannot explore whether there was a special purpose for these miniature jars or whether they were created for a particular class of people.

Historically, the jars have been admired for their antiquity. At Site 17-Ban Boua Tai, the removal of two jars to the village compound recalls the two jars moved from Site 2-Ban Na Kho to the “Soviet Farm”. The Site 17 and “Soviet Farm” cases exemplify impoverished communities’ desire to celebrate important village events by offering artefacts of value, a gesture which can result in damage to the jars, as documented at Site 17.

Current assumptions for Site 15 need reviewing following the documentation of new jars a short distance from the quarry. Although the physical space around Site 15 is restricted, the area adjacent to the quarry, where the new jars are located, may have functioned as a workshop.

The presence of fragmented jars at several sites points to a higher jar count previously. Any assumptions on the size of these isolated sites need to take this factor into account.

For Muang Phan, it cannot be stated with any degree of certainty whether the jars were broken deliberately or damaged by weathering. However, 19 out of 20 granite jars suffering the same fate at the hands of the elements would be unlikely, particularly since the jars are dispersed in four groups around the site.
Ban Namlam is the first instance of a disc found at a site with fewer than ten jars. Its distance from the larger sites in Paek district, populated with hundreds of jars and dozens of discs, invites us to revisit notions of hierarchy, which maintain that discs are found only at large sites.

The sites in Luang Prabang’s Phou Khoun are excluded from official tourist visits, with their remote setting affording a degree of protection denied to some of the more popular sites in Xieng Khouang. However, the integrity of some Phou Khoun sites has been disrupted by the relocation of jars and discs from their original archaeological position to new ground, to avert potential damage from economic development in the area. In some instances, the stone artefacts were relocated before it could be established whether they constituted locations documented by Colani in the mid-1930s or whether they were previously unknown sites.

Finally, it is hoped that future studies will explore the possible relationship between small sites and the large assemblies in Paek and Phaxay, to understand random groups of jars found in remote locations, often at some distance from a major site. The large sites are almost exclusively populated with jars fashioned from sandstone (a total of 1,093 jars at Sites 1, 3, 42 and 52) but three different rock types (sandstone, conglomerate and granite) are found at the small sites detailed in this research report (Table 1), with a total count of 37 jars, including at least 22 fragmented units. Rather than presenting an area of contrast, it suggests a commonality in ancient communities’ desire to create monuments in stone from locally-available raw materials, from granite boulders strewn in river beds to blocks from a rich sandstone quarry. Moreover, employing different rock types must have entailed adaptation of carving skills as there are major differences in working with relatively soft sandstone or limestone as against hard granite or conglomerate.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the villagers of Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang provinces, for their kind help. She also owes a debt of gratitude to Mr Mac Alan Thompson (1941-2018), Mr Mark Ratter and Mr Bouapha Douangsouliya. For the sites in Luang Prabang province, thanks are due to the brothers Pao and Sii. Thanks are offered to Mr Kamseng for assistance in locating new sites in Khun district. The author is grateful for reviewers’ comments on a draft version of this report but is solely responsible for any remaining inaccuracies.
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CEFEO (Cahiers de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient). 1940, third quarter no. 24.


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1 For sites already documented, this paper uses the denomination employed by the Lao Heritage Department, consisting of a numerical label followed by the site’s geographical location (e.g. Site 1-Ban Nao).

2 During his doctoral fieldwork in 1994, a malfunction prevented Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy from photographing this important discovery. Personal communication of 23 April 2014 from Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy.

3 In 1874, the Plain of Jars fell to the “Haw”, which consisted of bands of defeated rebels fleeing southern China in the wake of a suppressed rebellion which first surfaced in Yunnan in 1857 and put down by Qing imperial forces in 1873.

4 Lima Sites were clandestine U.S. military installations for “covert paramilitary and combat operations” (Gerdner et al. 2019: 3) as well as humanitarian efforts for Lao and Hmong allies.

5 Personal communication of 27 March 2011 from Mr. Sida, a village elder at Boua Tai village.

6 Personal communication of 21 June 2016 from Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy.
Improving Education Access and Quality in the Lao PDR
Based on the Seven Principles of the ASEAN Declaration for Out-of-School Children

Miki Inui¹

Introduction

Despite the enormous investment to achieve Education for All (EFA) since 1990 and the contribution of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adapted in 2000 and 2015, respectively, there remain 58 million Out of School Children (OOSC) worldwide. According to UNICEF and UIS (UNESCO Institute of Statistics), OOSC is categorized into two groups, “presently out of school,” primary and secondary aged children who have been enrolled neither in primary nor lower secondary schools for more than one year, and “at risk of being out of school” (UNICEF 2015).

Among the 58 million OOSC, 3.6 million are confirmed to be in ASEAN countries. The causes for OOSC vary across different countries and regions, however, general findings indicate that girls, children from rural areas, the poor; together with religious, ethnic and handicapped minorities tend to suffer from inequities in the education system (Bloch 1991, Burger 1988, Smith 1994, Adewale & Adebowale 2008, UIS 2015). In addition, having impairments was the top reason for children with disabilities to be out of school (Plan International 2013). According to Kameyama (2018), Conflict Affected and Fragile States (CAFS) and disability have been recently recognized as characteristics of OOSC. Obviously, they are considered to be educationally disadvantaged.

To respond to the increase of OOSCY in ASEAN countries, the “ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening for OOSCY” (Out of School Children and Youth) was adapted in 2016¹. Cooperation within ASEAN countries to eliminate OOSC has been promoted, especially since the establishment of the Asian Economic Society (AEC). However, according to UNESCO (2018), a relatively larger population of OOSC is found in Indonesia (2,016,360), the Philippines (586,284), and Cambodia (184,284). Despite its small

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number of OOSC, 50,332, Lao PDR exhibits the third highest percentage of OOSC (6.66\%) within the ASEAN countries, followed by Cambodia and Indonesia, as shown in Table 1.

Schooling is one of the best hopes for improving the life prospects of a child from a poor family and for increasing economic and social mobility and reducing poverty (King & van de Walle 2007), however, it has been difficult to reduce OOSCY, not only in ASEAN countries but worldwide, due to various kinds of barriers facing these children.

Table 1: Number and Percentage of OOSC in ASEAN countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of OOSC</th>
<th>Percentage of OOSC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>184,824</td>
<td>9.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>2,061,360</td>
<td>7.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>50,332</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>586,284</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>107,315</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>127,071</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>41,794</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(UNESCO 2018)

The research question in this paper is divided into two. First, we examine the current state of OOSCY and its causes in Lao PDR. Second, we investigate to what extent the seven principles of the ASEAN Declaration (inclusivity, equality, accessibility, continuity, quality, flexibility, and sustainability) established by UNESCO have been fulfilled so as to eliminate the limited access to education. As stated, conditions and causes are predicted to be different from province to province within the country. This paper focuses on regional disparity based on the statistical data and field research.

**Conceptual approach**

As for the conceptual approach, the seven principles proposed by UNESCO (2018) are as follows: 1) Inclusivity: the entitlement to have access to education based on nondiscrimination and equal opportunity for all; 2) Equity: strong commitment, specific support, and resources to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities, and inequalities in access to education, participation, and learning outcomes; 3) Accessibility: access to education for all children and youth irrespective of gender, nationality, ethnicity, disability, geographic location, religion, belief, culture, social origin, and other factors; 4) Continuity: continuous education, particularly to
enable children and youth to access school, and to remain and be retained in school without dropping out; 5) Quality: effective teachers, curriculum, methodology, pedagogy, educational materials, evaluations, facilitations, and child and youth participation in cooperation with families and communities; 6) Flexibility: flexible and different pathways for learning, both formal and non-formal, academic and vocational skills, especially for those who are disadvantaged or marginalized; 7) Sustainability: education is on a continuum and part of a lifelong dynamic, a cornerstone for human development, with respect for the planet and the quest for prosperity, peace and partnership.

In this paper, these principles are organized into four categories under the agreement of a UNESCO official in Bangkok, namely, 1) Inclusivity, 2) Accessibility and 3) Equity are grouped as access to education, and 4) Continuity and 7) Sustainability are grouped as continuity. Quality in education and flexibility are considered as independent categories.

However, attention needs to be paid if these four categories are enough to investigate the state and cause of OOSCY because, from the perspective of stakeholders, their actual educational experience should be taken into consideration. Bloch (1991) indicates that school participation is the interaction of supply and demand in the learning process. Supply means the availability and quality of school facilities, material and teachers. Demand is created by parents in terms of opportunity, the cost of schooling, and the influence of cultural and religious factors. The learning process means children's experience at school. In this paper, these three factors are also examined to achieve the goal of this research.

Throughout the paper, investigating each category and its factors, by paying attention to regional characteristics, is important.

The Current situation and Government Policy regarding OOSCY

In the Lao PDR, government policy, since 1990, has focused on eliminating OOSCY, especially after participating in the World Conference for Education for All and confirmed to focus on the development of primary education. Since 1990, government policy in Lao PDR has focused on eliminating OOSCY, especially after the stage of primary education. In 1990, the term “OOSCY” did not exist, however, the government exhibited a deep concern for these children and treated them as being educationally disadvantaged. This concern has shown itself in both the education laws and the action plans for education since the 1990s.

In 1996, the government advocated the expansion of educational opportunities among ethnic minorities, and made efforts to promote their cultural heritages in
policy documents. Since then, the government has gradually implemented policies that have the stated goal of making additional educational resources available to ethnic minorities. A decree regarding compulsory education was enforced at that time because the net enrollment rate at primary school was only 68.5%. In 1998, the Ministry of Education (MOE) conducted an overview of government policy as regards education and, as a long-term objective, promoted vocational training for women and girls, minority groups, and disadvantaged adults (Peters, 1998). Moreover, the Education Strategic Vision issued in 2000 aimed to increase the enrollment rate in primary schools by up to 90%, 95%, and 98% in 2010, 2015, and 2020, respectively.

According to the “Education for All National Plan of Action 2003-2015” (MOE & UNESCO, 2005), the priorities in the education sector were access, quality, and management for minorities, girls, and poor families, and specific goals were addressed along with the MDGs. As help from international aid was recognized as an essential strategy to develop the education sector, the Education Development Strategy Framework (EDSF) 2009-2015 was proposed in 2007 along with the revised education law, which focused on the improvement of access to education in remote areas, particularly for women, girls, and educationally disadvantaged people.

In addition, the current educational policy document entitled, “National Strategy and Plan of Action one Inclusive Education 2011-2015,” aims to eliminate disparities in educational access for disadvantaged groups (especially women and girls), ethnic groups, and people with socio-economic difficulties (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2011). According to the government, through these improvements, ethnic groups and women will eventually have access to equal educational opportunities in Laos. As the current Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2016–2020 still focuses on equal access to quality education, as can be seen by statements such as “the number of learners from Early Childhood Education to lower secondary grade 9 increases with a special focus on disadvantaged learners and also by ensuring gender equity” (MOES 2015), it is possible to say that EFA has not yet been achieved in Lao PDR even though the net enrollment rate in 2018 reached 91.47%.

Previous research on OOSCY in Lao PDR

Regarding this issue, in Lao PDR, three conditions, namely children from poor rural communities, females, and minorities are considered to have high exclusion rates (King & van de Walle 2007, World Bank 2016, UNESCO 2017, Noonan, 2018). In general, as can well be imagined, children from poor families tend to be educationally disadvantaged due to economic difficulties. It especially happens in
rural areas where income generation activities are limited.

Girls and females also tend to be victims of OOSCY partly because of traditional customs. In Lao PDR, education was available for Buddhist boys it means it was not unavailable for girls (Condominas 1998, Faming 2007). It indicates that the rate of OOSC for females was higher than for males (UNESCO, 2017). In addition to this fact, ethnic minorities who live in mountainous areas tend to be classified as OOSCY due to the limited access to school, the lack of school facilities and educational resources, and language differences. As minority children speak their mother tongues, they have a hard time studying in the Lao language at school, so they tend to stay away from school (Thant & Vokes 1986, Inui 2009, ADB 2000, Berge, Chounlamany, Khoupophilaphanh & Silfver 2016, The United Nations in Lao PDR, 2015). Onphanhdala and Suruga (2008) report that large differences among Lao and ethnic groups can be observed in terms of repetition and late enrollment. However, those factors are similar to viewpoints highlighted in the1980–1990s.

On the other hand, current research concerning OOSCY shows different concerns, such as dropping out of school occurs because it is too expensive to attend school, and ethnic minorities tend to have no interest in education (World Bank, 2016). These days, school enrollment fees are rising in urban areas, such as the capital, Vientiane, and some students drop out because of this reason. The low interest in education among minorities has been highlighted for quite a long time, but it is becoming more of an issue these days because the majority of Lao people have higher expectations of schooling than before. Moreover, child marriage and child labor are currently issues in remote areas (Xayavong & Pholhirul 2018, UNICEF 2020). For example, Xayavong & Pholhirul (2018) found out, as a result of quantitative analysis, that child labor, especially among girls, has a strong impact on school dropout rates. Married children also tend to receive a lower level of education compared to unmarried children. As child marriage and child labor occurs in remote mountainous areas, it could be said that ethnic minorities are easily targeted as OOSCY.

These serious issues highlighted by current researchers are totally believable, but there should exist regional differences in these factors. The view of previous research tends to observe the countrywide perspective. However, as Inui (2019) reported in the field research, there are huge regional disparities among provinces in terms of survival rates, complete school rates, drop out and repetition rates, therefore, a focus on regional disparities is needed.

UNICEF (2020) pointed out that access and completion of various levels of education highlights strong socioeconomic factors; poverty is named as a key factor contributing to inequalities. The next figure shows the rate of OOSC by province. It can be seen that there are significant disparities by provinces; for example, the capital,
Vientiane shows the lowest rate (13.4%), but Poxaly (30.6%), Luang Namtha (25.6%) in the north, and Savannakhet (28.4%) and Saravan (23.6) in south, have much higher rates. The rate of OOSCY somehow overlaps with the poverty rate, for example, Vientiane, which shows the lowest OOSC, has the lowest poverty rate, and southern regions such as Savannakhet, Saravan, and Sekong have the highest poverty rates as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: The Rate of OOSC by province](image)

*Figure 1: The Rate of OOSC by province*

(Created by author based on Coulombe, Epprecht, Pimhidzai, Vilaysouk, 2016)

**Research methodology**

A mixed research methodology was adopted for the conduct of this research. Quantitative data was collected from the national census, education statistics, and through interviews. Education index data, such as the school attendance rate, survival rate, and dropout rate reported by each province were analyzed to assess the educational access and continuity as well as the quality.

To better understand the impact at local level, qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders who are involved in OOSCY and its educational assistance activities or programs. First of all, a formal interview was implemented by a UNESCO official in Bangkok who was involved in the “ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening for OOSCY” and created the seven principles with other international organizations. It was possible to obtain detailed information regarding the international cooperation program because UNESCO coordinates the overall OOSCY project within ASEAN countries.
Second of all, in order to investigate regional disparities, in this paper, interview data which was collected by the author from 2014–2019 was utilized. The research field was divided into three regions of Lao PDR, namely, the north, central, and south regions where the author made intermittent visits. Within these three regions, four major cities, ① Luang Namtha, ② Luang Phrabang, ③ Vientiane, and ④ Savannakhet were selected as the targeted fields.

![Figure 2. Map of Lao PDR](image)

The affiliations of the interviewees varied across different research sites, but they are generally school authorities, teachers, and staff members of the Provincial Department of Education, the Department of Labor and Social Welfare, and international NGOs (INGO) as shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Research Site</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Major questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>② Luang Phrabang (2015-2019)</td>
<td>PESS, DESB, teachers (special education school, village school)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>③ Vientiane (2018-19)</td>
<td>MOES (Inclusive Education), RIES, UNICEF, WFP, INGOs, AusAID</td>
<td>2. Internal/External assistance for OOSCY.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>④ Savannakhet (2014,2018)</td>
<td>DESB, Villagers, PLSW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition, observations in local primary schools in each field were conducted along with the interviews to examine the quality of the education. In the school observations, various factors were examined such as the condition of teachers, timetable, use of the textbook, classroom facilities, and the language use of both teachers and students.

Fry, Bi, and Apahung (2018), who examined the state and the cause of educational disparity in Thailand, stated that utilizing both a quantitative and a qualitative approach would be needed to analyze the current state of education and suggest solutions.

Results

Who is the most disadvantaged?

In response to the first research question, the most disadvantaged groups are girls, ethnic minorities, and children from rural and poor families, as previous research has pointed out. However, as a result of qualitative research, a hidden group—children with disabilities (hereafter, CWD)—was considered to be the most disadvantaged and to have the least access to school.

An interview with MOES (Department of Inclusive Education) showed that the total number of CWD is unknown due to a lack of data, however, most CWD in remote areas have extremely limited access to schools, because only two special educational schools are available for disabled children in the entire country (two schools for blind and deaf children in Vientiane and Luang Phrabang). Since the School for the Deaf and Blind in Savannakhet was closed due to budgetary shortages, children with these specific disabilities need to attend boarding school in either of the above-mentioned cities. However, access is not guaranteed to every CWD because not every family prefers to send their children to boarding school, particularly if they are too young. Besides, the distances from rural areas to the two schools are too far. According to one interviewee, a teacher in the special school in Luang Phrabang, there are about seventy students from northern provinces, but they are fortunate to be there, as many parents disagree about sending them to the school due to their limited financial resources and the cost of transportation from the rural provinces to the school. This situation prevents countless CWD from attending school. A member of staff who
Inui retired from MOES and works at an international organization mentioned that, despite the lack of exact data, 15% to 20% of OOSCY in Lao PDR are considered to be disabled children. It is obvious that more special educational schools need to be established in each region.

Kameyama (2018) pointed out that disabled children make up one of the recently recognized groups of OOSCY, and they should be particularly cared for by the education sector in Lao PDR, because this invisible group has the right to receive an education, but is the last group to have access to school.

Figure 3: Students at the Deaf School

Figure 4: Dormitory of the Deaf School (Luang Phrabang)
Examining Four Categories and three factors

Access

As has been discussed in previous research and shown in Figure 1, “The rate of OOSC by province,” access to education has not been achieved in Lao PDR. The most notable problem is a significant disparity among the provinces. Other data, besides the rate of OOSC, also indicate inequality in education and uneven enrollment. For example, the “rate of never been school,” which was reported by the national census (2015) and “gross enrollment rate in lower secondary school,” shown in Table 3, both prove the disparities.

Table 3: Education data regarding access to education by target provinces (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>Rate of never been to school (above 6 years of age)</th>
<th>Gross enrollment rate (Lower secondary)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luang Namtha</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>73.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Phrabang</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>92.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannakhet</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>74.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lao Statistics Bureau, Lao EDUInfo 2015)

The table indicates that the rate of “never been to school” is the lowest in the capital, Vientiane (2.4%). Luang Phrabang (14.2%) and Savannakhet (18.4 %) have higher rates than the national average (13.1%). The rate in Luang Namtha (27.3%) is the highest and it means this province has the least access to education in lower secondary school. The infrastructure of school buildings and classrooms shows significant differences as shown the photos.
Figure 9 shows the data by provinces more clearly. The figure divides school attendance (more than 6 years old) into three categories, which are “never been to school,” “currently at school,” and “attended before.” It is clear to see the difference between Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Luang Namtha in terms of the status of “never attended” and “attended before.”

![Figure 7: Akha village in the hillside](image1)

![Figure 8: School of Akha minority (Luang Namtha)](image2)

![Figure 9. School attendance by target provinces (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015)](image3)

- Vientiane
- Savannakhet
- Luang Namtha
- Luan Phrabang
- Lao PDR

- Never attended
- Currently attending
- Attended before
- Not stated
Moreover, as shown in Table 3, the gross enrollment rate in lower secondary school shows the lowest rate (58.5%) in Savannakhet, which means access to lower secondary education is extremely limited compared to Vientiane (92.4%). Luang Namtha has a rate of 73.1% but is still lower than the national average (74.4%). From these data, it can be concluded that only the capital, Vientiane has achieved access to education even at secondary level.

Qualitative research also reported the difficulty of access to education. An interview with the Provincial Education and Sports Services (PESS) in Luang Namtha showed that a major reason for lack of access to education is the long distance to schools in mountainous areas, especially where minorities reside. The number of schools is limited in remote areas where the Department of Education and Sports Bureau (DESB) has faced severe budgetary shortages and a lack of educational resources. Besides, in those areas, parents and students do not have much motivation to engage with and understand education, because a family in poverty tends to struggle to meet the costs. An interview with the Provincial Department of Labor and Social Welfare (PLSW) in Savannakhet shared a similar viewpoint in terms of family poverty due to the limited agricultural industry, and a long distance to travel to schools in mountainous areas. Moreover, children with special needs, especially deaf and blind students, have no option to attend school except through boarding school in Luang Phrabang which would require a drive of 5–6 hours. Reflecting on these three factors, Bloch (1991) highlighted that none of the factors supply sufficiently, and the demand and learning process are not achieved.

**Continuity**

Likewise with access to school, “continuity” has not been achieved in both quantitative and qualitative aspects. As Table 4 shows, the survival rate in primary school (those who reached the final grade) is the highest in Vientiane as can be imagined. Luang Phrabang (81.1%) and Luang Namtha (87.0%) exceed the national average (78.3%), but Savannakhet is inferior to the average. Survival rate is linked to the shortage of schools (complete school) because children can neither finish nor continue their education if there are no schools near their homes. These data somehow overlap with the dropout rate, for example, Vientiane shows the lowest dropout rate (3.9%), and the highest is in Savannakhet (8.3%).
Table 4: Education data regarding continuity of education (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survival rate (Primary school)</th>
<th>Dropout Rate (Lower Secondary school)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luang Namtha</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Phrabang</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannakhet</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lao EDUInfo, 2015)

The factors causing dropout differ among the provinces. According to the DESB in Luang Phrabang, which shows the second highest dropout rate, students in remote areas tend to drop out if transportation is not available because it is hard to walk a long distance. On another hand, in Vientiane, a staff from an NGO said that students drop out even in the city center due to the high enrollment fees (about 40 USD in public secondary schools and 400 USD in upper secondary school). This shows the causes of dropout differ among the regions.

Reflecting on the previous research, poverty, taking care of siblings, and child labor were the major reasons for dropout, but there is a different tendency in Savannakhet. As shown in the map (Figure 1), Savanakhet is located across the Mekong river from Thailand, where the minimum wage is three times higher than Lao PDR. Therefore, migration labor, working in factories or rice fields, and returning home on a daily basis, are common in this area. As this lifestyle encourages young people to earn cash rather than studying at school, they quit their education and engage in earning cash in Thailand. Reflecting these situation, currently, avoiding human-trafficking is one of the major issue in cross-border areas.
Also, the data regarding dropout obtained from PESS in Luang Namtha shows the negative aspect of rural areas. Figure 3 shows the number of dropout students in primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary level. Number of dropout students have decreased in the primary education level, but those of secondary level have increased significantly.

As is clear, the number of dropout students exceeded 1,000 in 2017 and 2018. As regards the reason, a PESS officer indicated that students cannot continue their education because of the lack of schools and dormitories. The officer said that even though students enroll in the school in the first year, they gradually drop out when they have difficulties commuting to school. Also, poverty and parents’ low understanding of education can be factors causing dropout. These results conclude that the reasons behind OOSCY differ greatly in different regions. It means that supply and demand has not been achieved in terms of access to education.

![Figure 12: Number of dropout students in Luang Namtha Province](Data obtained from PESS, Luang Namtha)

**Quality**

The quality of education is potentially the most serious issue and is an extremely difficult barrier to overcome. Quality is evident through statistics such as student-teacher ratio, average class size, teachers’ salaries, instruction time, and learning outcomes. In this research, the learning outcomes (test scores in Lao language and mathematics) are used to establish the differences.

Figure 4 shows the proficiency levels associated with benchmarks based on the national assessment test (ASLO) in the Lao language conducted in 2013.
It is obvious that the rate labeled “Independent,” enabling independent learning, is lowest in Luang Namtha (4.59%), and highest in Vientiane (49.5%). The disparity between these two provinces is significant, namely, the province with a higher minority rate has the highest level of disadvantage.7

Regarding “Pre-functional,” meaning a student has not reached the minimum level for a functional purpose in Lao Society, this is highest in Luang Namtha (35.46%) and lowest in Vientiane (7.71%). This means that the quality of education differs significantly among the regions.

Observations and interviews in public primary schools in Luang Namtha and Luang Phrabang indicated the presence of underprivileged conditions, from poor school infrastructures, to a lack of quality in other areas such as the distribution of textbooks, the lack of educational materials, less instruction time, and the poor qualifications of teachers.

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**Figure 13**: Percentages of students at three benchmarks by target provinces

(Created by the author from MOES&RIES 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Prefunctional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luang Namtha</td>
<td>4.59%</td>
<td>59.95%</td>
<td>35.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Phrabang</td>
<td>24.14%</td>
<td>62.35%</td>
<td>13.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>42.79%</td>
<td>7.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannakhet</td>
<td>29.59%</td>
<td>58.24%</td>
<td>12.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>24.03%</td>
<td>59.33%</td>
<td>16.64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Figure 14**: Lenten minority school (Luang Namtha)

**Figure 15**: Khamu minority school (Luang Phrabang)
In a Lenten minority (subgroup of Akha) village school of Luang Namtha, about 20 km from the center, students use old textbooks from 2011, and only three teachers are available to teach about seventy students. The classes are managed by having different grades in the same group (grades 1 to 2 and 3 to 4 study together). Most students never communicated in the Lao language with the author because they felt embarrassed to talk in a language other than their mother tongue. Another village in Luang Phrabang, about 50 km from the center, had a similarly disadvantaged situation in terms of instruction time and teachers’ qualifications. In the village, old textbooks were used, and instruction time was limited. For example, 30 hours per week (6 hours a day) are allocated in the school, the same as for the Lenten minority school (Table 5). In Akha village in Luang Namtha, there were no classes on Friday afternoons, because the teacher wanted to return to her hometown at the weekend.

On the other hand, there were 35 hours (7 hours a day) allocated in a school located in town (Table 6). In this school, most students belong to a majority group, the Lao. A difference can be seen in the teaching subjects. In the town school, more important subjects such as Math, Lao language, and the World Around Us (Science & Social studies) are taught. Math is even taught in French, shown as Math(F) in the table, because the school is a public school selected to teach the French language.

**Table 5:** Timetable of a Rural Lenten Village in Luang Namtha (grades 3–4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>G</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Raising Flag</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>PE</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Flag</td>
<td>WAU</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Lao Writing</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>P.E.</td>
<td>WAU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>WAU</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Lao Writing</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>P.E.</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Home Room</td>
<td>Clean Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6: Timetable of a Town School in Luang Phrabang (4th grade)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>WAU</td>
<td>P.E.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tu</td>
<td>Math (F)</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Moral Ed.</td>
<td>Craft</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Math (F)</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Th</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>WAU</td>
<td>Clean Classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Math (F)</td>
<td>Lao Language</td>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flag</td>
<td>Lowering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Math(F) Mathematics taught in French language

Figure 16: Physical education class in a town school

Figure 17: French words in the classroom (Luang Phrabang)

In general, DESB determines the timetable for each school, however, according to the teachers who were interviewed for this research, the schools are able to change the learning content according to local characteristics and the availability of teachers.

The difference in teaching quality among the provinces was notable. There was found to be quite a number of volunteer teachers in the three provinces except in Vientiane. They do not usually take home a salary and start to work until they become full time teachers. This is because the Lao government sets the number of public officers at 1,800 as a consequence of a lack of budget. Therefore, approximately 10,000 volunteer teachers work unpaid until the local government (PESS) admits them as full time teachers. The author visited three schools in the rural villages of Luang Phrabang and found one or two volunteer teachers among five to six teachers in the schools. The volunteer teachers lived in shabby, simple houses and were provided with rice and vegetables by the villagers. These living and working
Improving Education Access and Quality in the Lao PDR

Conditions do not encourage people to enter teaching and this also has a negative impact on the academic achievement of students. This shows that besides the factors of supply and demand, the learning process, which directly impacts on quality, has not been achieved as desired.

Flexibility

Reflecting the research objective, to investigate to what extent the seven principles of the ASEAN Declaration (categorized into access, continuity, quality, and flexibility) have been fulfilled, none of the categories have yet been achieved. However, the last category, flexibility, which guarantees different pathways of learning styles for marginalized or disadvantaged groups, seems to have been successfully fulfilled in Lao PDR.

As previously discussed in this paper, budget shortages were the biggest barrier to eliminating OOSCY in Lao PDR, however, regional cooperation within ASEAN countries, international projects by International NGOs, help from aid agencies, as well as small-sized projects, have enabled children to continue their education. For instance, at the regional level of ASEAN, a “Regional Equivalency Program,” which aims to eliminate OOSCY, is ready to be carried out under the coordination of UNESCO. According to UNESCO Bangkok, donors from governments such as Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia support OOSCY in advocacy, capacity building, data analysis, and monitoring. In addition to this, various kinds of education projects to eliminate OOSCY have been carried out. Currently BEQUAL (Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR) coordinated by AusAid and the European Union is a major project that is trying to improve participation and access to primary education by constructing schools, revising textbooks, building the capacity of local government officers, and offering different educational activities at a local level. International NGOs, such as DVV International have played key roles to eliminate OOSC by offering literacy course, mathematics classes vocational education as well as building communication skills(DVV International 2018).

Moreover, UNESCO has implemented a “Primary Equivalency Program” in Lao PDR, which assists children who did not finish their primary education. This program concentrates a three-year educational curriculum (grades 3 to 5) into a two-year program and offers after-school study. Currently, 6,000 students are targeted in this program and teachers obtain extra payment, nearly 100USD per month, by being involved in this project. According to UNESCO, this project is financed by the non-formal education sector; therefore, obtaining a budget was relatively easy compared to the general education sector whose budget has been continuously limited. By continuing these projects, different pathways and learning styles are guaranteed
The local government has also made efforts to assist OOSCY by collaborating with NGOs so that they can open different pathways to continue children’s education. For example, PESS in Luang Namtha accepted OOSCY in the Technical Training Center and teaches young people how to grow vegetables and raise chickens, and other skills for those students who have a mechanical aptitude, by utilizing the vocational education budget. In the school for the deaf and blind in Luang Phrabang, teachers were sent to Thailand to learn sign language with the help of World Vision. And in Savannakhet, international NGOs such as AFESHIP and World Vision provide migrant children with an anti-human trafficking program and vocational training to support OOSCY. They might take risks or face poverty in the future. Taking these positive aspects into consideration, supply and demand, and the learning process have achieved success at micro and macro level.

Conclusion

There were two objectives in this research. The first was to examine the current state of OOSCY and its causes in Lao PDR. The results indicated that despite the national policy, substantial efforts on behalf of the government, and international aid, eliminating OOSCY has faced difficulties because the current situation is very complex. As was discussed in this paper, catering for invisible students such as CWD in remote areas, or migrant children in Lao-Thai border areas, will be a requirement. They are regarded as the final group of OOSCY, therefore, as King & van de Walle (2017) pointed out, considering the specific constraints and needs facing each group will be a priority to help these disadvantaged children. In addition, understanding regional disparities, from both quantitative and qualitative points of view, will be needed as the research results have proved. Reflecting on the current disparities and limited resources, providing equal opportunities in the entire country is hard to imagine, however, reducing regional disparities will give students the opportunity to realize their potential and talent (Fry et al., 2018).

The second objective was to investigate to what extent the seven principles (which were categorized into access, continuity, quality, flexibility) were fulfilled. As a result of examining these categories, only flexibility was successfully achieved with the help of an enormous number of international projects. However, other principles such as access, equality, and quality were not achieved, under extremely difficult conditions, especially in remote areas. From the aspect of quality, various kinds of disadvantaged situations were observed, and the situation yielded a negative impact on academic achievement.

The reason why flexibility was achieved was because the assisting organizations within the country.
utilized the budget from other sectors, such as non-formal and vocational sectors, instead of the general education sector which has suffered severe budget shortages. Therefore, as shown in the interview results, seeking a budget in available sectors in accordance with regional and local needs is an effective strategy to eliminate OOSCY. Moreover, raising awareness of education at a local level and training local staff to build on their technical skills will also be required because local understanding of education is low and response to local staff is too slow, especially in remote areas. This situation has resulted in poor access and a low quality of education for a number of years. As educating OOSCY leads to economic gain and produces a wide range of non-market benefits (Coloumbe, Epprecht et al., 2016, Burnett & Thomas 2013), advocating the necessity of education at micro-level, and also a stronger network formation, and regional cooperation at macro level, is necessary to eliminate OOSCY, not only in Lao PDR, but in other developing countries.
The declaration was drafted with inputs from ASEAN member states and subsequently endorsed by all member countries at the ASEAN Summit in September 2016 in Vientiane, Lao PDR. In 2017, UNICEF and UNESCO supported ASEAN to organize a regional workshop on strengthening education for OOSCY in Bangkok. ASEAN’s commitment to strengthen education for OOSCY was reiterated when attending representatives re-affirmed their intent to realize the Declaration in 2019 and beyond (UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2018).

2 MOE was renamed as the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) in 2011.

3 Cited from Big Brothers Mouse (http://www.bigbrothermouse.com/images/laos_map.gif).

4 The years in brackets are when the research was mainly conducted. Co-researchers conducted research in Savannakhet to follow up the previous research. The research term is different in each site, but usually lasts 4 to 5 days.

5 PESS are established in each province and are responsible for secondary education and technical & vocational education in terms of education development and planning, budget control and supply for teachers. DEBS which established in each district have overall responsibilities for pre-primary education, primary education and non-formal education. These decentralization systems started in 2000, however, the proceeding process has not been successful due to the weak capacity of local government staffs.

6 According to MOES, there are no special schools for physically and mentally disabled children. If public schools will not accept them, they have no choice but to stay at home, especially in rural areas.

7 In Luang Namtha, according to the Population Census of 2015 (Lao Statistics Bureau), Aka and Khmou have the highest percentage of ethnic groups (each 25%). Lue (10%) and Hmong (7%) are also considered as major groups. The data was obtained by official request, not from a website.

8 The total number of hours spent studying math and Lao language are 11 hours and 7 hours, respectively. On the other hand, in the Lenten school, the total number of hours for each is 7 hours (4th grade). The reason that the Lenten village has a Lao writing class is that they are one of the ethnic minorities who do not speak the Lao language.

9 Other than in Lao PDR, UNESCO also offers “Leaning Csoin Project for Migrant Children” in Myanmar/Thailand border because migrant children tend to be OOSCY due to the stateless situation. The project cashes out to the parents based on the amount of children’s reading by utilizing the smart phone.
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Hydropower Development and its Impact on Local Communities in Laos: A Case Study of the Nam Ou 2 Project

Amith Phetsada¹ and Kosuke Mizuno²

Abstract

This research assesses both the positive and negative outcomes of hydroelectric plant construction for local communities in Laos. Specifically, it compares the condition of local livelihoods before and after the relocation and consolidation of two villages in Ngoi District, Luang Prabang province due to the Nam Ou 2 Hydropower Development Project. Fieldwork was carried out twice; once from August to September 2018 to interview resettled villagers and once in May 2019 to interview local government officials in charge of the resettlement. Data from interviews with 95 household heads (13 female) in the village and data from the Social and Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) demonstrate that the relocation has currently led to more disadvantages than benefits. Although there is a range of outcomes across specific villagers and family units, most have experienced hardships such as significantly greater travel time to their farmlands. It also found that the average annual income has decreased 25% compared to that in their former villages. Most importantly, the article confirms typical resettlement issues, including verbal promises made by the project to address expected social and economic difficulties which have not been implemented, causing a significant lack of trust in the local government and dissatisfaction in the local community.

Keywords: Economic development, hydropower, impact, Laos, local livelihood change, Nam Ou River

Introduction

A huge and rapid change is happening in Laos: large scale development projects. Hydropower development, a high speed railway under China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a highway project from Laos to a Vietnamese port, and many more projects have been constructed or are planned for the coming years. While macro-economic growth in Laos has been strong, will local Lao people be able to handle such dramatic socioeconomic and environmental transformations? Hydropower development has contributed to the economic development of Laos. However, there needs to be more detailed investigation of the positive and negative impacts for local communities.

‘Globally, dams have been built to produce power and electricity since the industrial revolution. The first use of dams for hydropower was around 1890. In 2002, hydropower provides approximately 19 percent of the world’s total electricity supply and is used in over 150 countries’ (Altinbilek, 2002: 16). In Laos, the first dams were Nam

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Dong in Luang Prabang province and Xe La Bam in Champasak province. These were only small scale dams with installed capacity of 1 and 5 megawatts (MW), respectively and started operation in 1970. The first large scale dam of the country is Nam Ngum 1 Dam which started operation in 1971 with the installed capacity of 155 MW and generation capacity of 1,160 gigawatts (GWh). There were 64 power generation plants in 2018, with a total installed capacity of 7,374 MW and generation capacity of 38,261 GWh. Hydropower contributes to 74% of total power use in Laos, while the remaining sources include thermal (26%), solar (0.38%), and biomass (0.34%) (EDL, 2019). Approximately 90% of the hydropower produced in Laos is exported to neighboring countries as part of Laos’ strategy of becoming the “Battery of ASEAN”. Laos has supplied significant amounts of electricity to countries across mainland Southeast Asia and plans to continue to do so. By 2020, Laos will have provided 9,000 MW to Thailand, 5,000 MW to Vietnam, 300 MW to Malaysia, 200 MW to Cambodia, 100 MW to Myanmar. However, the Prime Minister of Laos, Thongloun Sisoulith, said at the World Economic Forum on ASEAN 2018 that Laos can no longer become the battery of Asia because the country’s capacity to develop electricity and meet the demand of ASEAN countries is limited. He also noted that after the collapse of Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dam in July 2018, Laos will have to continue considering hydropower production along with other options of renewable and clean energy such as solar and wind. However, the country should ensure that the hydropower production process is based on a well-studied and well-planned approach complying with international standards, scientific information and experts’ views. (Abunales, 2018).

There has been a significant amount of research on the impact that hydropower development has had on the livelihoods of local people in the Mekong Region, including Laos. Matthews (2012:403), in his study of water grabbing in the Mekong basin, writes that “Although the government of Laos has promoted hydropower’s potential income as a step towards bringing Lao PDR out of poverty, there are concerns whether the money generated from hydropower electricity sales will actually reach the local economy and address social priorities”. Furthermore, he argued that in accordance with hydropower development in Laos, the winners are powerful water grabbing actors: the government of Laos (provincial and central) and Lao elites. The other groups of winners are powerful actors from Thailand: the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), independent power producers (IPPs), investors, and developers. On the other hand, the environment, biodiversity, and society (as reflected in the livelihoods and culture of natural resource dependent groups and vulnerable people) are losers of hydropower development in the Mekong River basin.

In Laos, there is one hydropower project – the Nam Theun 2 Dam (NT2) – that is viewed as the most successful project and has been promoted as the model for hydropower development by the government of Laos because it meets international standards. However, as Shoemaker and Robichaud (2018: 8) noted ‘NT2 triggered all of the Bank’s safeguard policies – guidelines and requirements designed to ensured that its projects are implemented with high standards and do not cause net social and environmental damage. At the time, it was widely debated whether fulfillment of the Bank’s safeguards was realistic given the political economy that existed in Laos. The

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3 Speech of Mr. Khammany Inthirath, Minister of Energy and Mines at the 6th General Meeting Session 8th of the National Assembly of Laos, Vientiane Capital; November 26, 2018: unpublished.
findings of this book suggest that it was not'. Lao researchers, with whom the first author of this paper had discussions, expressed that NT2 might be considered a good project from an environmental management perspective because it significantly funded environmental protection, such as national protected areas. However, in terms of resettled people's livelihood development, it still has a lot of shortcomings.

There has been a significant amount of research on hydropower development-induced resettlement in Southern Laos (Baird et al. 2015; Green and Baird 2016; Shoemaker and Robichaud 2018; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2007). Such research has focused on internal resettlement via the government’s resettlement justifications and instruments in the country, distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary resettlement.

Delang and Toro (2011) found that communities relocated due to construction of Houy Ho and Xe Katam dams, (completed in 1997 and 2009, respectively) of Southern Laos, encountered three main issues. First, there was uncertainty and a lack of information on when the relocation will take place and the future compensation amount. Second, there was a lack of suitable agricultural land in the relocated village and resettled villagers also faced land conflicts with neighboring host villagers. Third, resettled villagers have attempted to return to work at their old farmlands and let their children stay at the relocated village by themselves.

Katus and Suhardiman (2016) examine the transition of four villages into one resettled village in Nam Gnouang River of Theun Hinboun Power Project in 2011, central Laos. The study found that the connection between village administrative committees and the local government makes resettlement easier and that those villagers who have such links to political power feel settled in their new village. The study also suggests that different villages have different advantages based on geography (i.e. the distance from new village to their former villages). This means the ability and expenditure on travelling from resettled village to their prior villages differs accordingly based on the location of the resettled community.

To date, however, there has not been any specific research conducted on the livelihood change of local communities relocated in the area of Nam Ou basin. Thus, this research aims to assess the livelihood of relocated villages of the Nam Ou 2 Dam construction, which is one of the dams in the first phase of constructing seven dams on the Nam Ou River. In this area, we believe that the geography is different from that of central and southern parts of Laos and thus would have different impacts from hydropower development. Compared to the South, people’s farmlands in the North are usually in hilly areas and are not easily inundated.

This paper is the assessment of the livelihood conditions of villagers in the resettled Mai PhoneKham Village. It is a village that was combined from two villages; HatPhang and HatKhip. The new village was given the name Mai PhoneKham by the project, which means “the new village of golden hill”. However, villagers prefer to call the village by its old name, “HatKhip”. Thus, to be consistent with the villagers’ usage but also to be clear, the resettled village will be referred to as New HatKhip and the village prior to relocation as Old HatKhip. New HatKhip Village is located near Pak Nga village (a village located by the Route 13 North, see the map below) and is approximately five kilometers downstream of the Nam Ou 2 Dam.
This paper argues that the resettlement of the New HatKhip Village failed to meet the Lao government’s own objective for the livelihoods of people resettled due to hydropower to be better than before resettlement. This research shows that the average household income of the community has decreased by approximately 25% from that prior to the resettlement. The factors are: 1) no arable lands in the relocated village, 2) no available food sources, 3) the need to return to their fields in the former villages, which increases costs for them. In addition, this article confirms typical resettlement-related issues, such as verbal promises made by the project to address expected social and economic difficulties having not been implemented, causing a significant lack of trust in the local government and dissatisfaction in the local community.

Profile of Nam Ou 2 hydropower development project

The dam construction started in December 2012 with 120 MW of installed capacity and 546 GWh/year of generation capacity. The construction was completed and started to generate electricity at the end of 2016. The dam is located 53 km north of Luang Prabang city. The project was developed in the form of Build-Own-Operate-Transfer with a 29-year concession. A Chinese company, Sinohydro (currently POWERCHINA), has 90% of the share and a Lao state-owned enterprise, Electricte du Laos-Generation (EDL-Gen); a subsidiary of EDL, has the remaining 10%.

There are seven electricity dams on the Nam Ou River (see in the map in figure 1). All of them were developed by Sinohydro. These seven dams were built in two phases; Phase 1 consists of the Nam Ou Dams 2, 5, and 6, which was completed in 2016. Phase 2 consists of the Nam Ou Dams 1, 3, 4, and 7, completed in 2019. The Nam Ou 2 Dam is 48 meters high and has a crest length of 300 meters. The Nam Ou 2 hydropower project affected 24 villages. According to Earth Systems Lao, Old HatKhip Village was affected by construction. HatPhang was affected by high levels of inundation and construction. Additionally, there were two villages affected by medium levels of inundation, two villages affected by low levels of inundation, and the remaining 17 villages only experienced impacts upon land and other assets. (Earth Systems Lao, 2011:11, unpublished). Old HatKhip and HatPhang Villages had larger numbers of households resettled. Additionally, they were resettled into one village in June 2014, New HatKhip Village, as the government policy was to merge small villages to create a focal site. That is why New HatKhip Village was chosen as a study site as both former villages (HatPhang and Old HatKhip) had a significant number of total households before and after the merger.

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4 This is stipulated by the government in Decree No. 192/PM dated July 7, 2005 and Decree No.84; dated April 05, 2016 Article 15 that “The level of livelihood conditions of the affected households must be upgraded or at least to be the same as original level”.
Materials and Methods

The first two months of fieldwork research were conducted by the first author from August to September 2018 to interview, interact with and observe the livelihood changes of the village. The data of average income from interviews with 95 household heads (13 are female) and occasional interactions with New HatKhip villagers was used to compare with the data from the social and environmental impact assessment (SEIA) that was gathered by the project prior to the dam construction.

The second period of field research was also conducted by the first author in May 2019 to interview government officials at the Department of Energy and Mines of Luang Prabang Province, the governmental agency in charge of the resettlement work. Additionally, secondary data was obtained from literature. The research utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods to descriptively analyze the livelihood conditions of the resettled villagers.

Results

Demographics of the village

The historical records of the two former villages differ greatly. In Old HatKhip, documents from the abbot of the village temple indicate a founding date 467 years ago.
At that time, villagers moved from the Lamphun area of Lanna Kingdom (Thailand) with Laos’ former King Sethathirath. Eventually they were joined by forest-and mountain-dwelling ethnic groups like the Khmu, due to internal resettlement policies of the government of Laos.

The elderly villagers of HatPhang only trace their history to the 1950s, when there were 15 ethnic Lao families in the village. The village doubled in the early 1970s as more households moved in due to government resettlement policies which existed through the late 1970s. HatPhang had a final increase to its current size in 2005 to 2006 when ethnic Khmu households from villages of KhoneKerng and Mok Lek (previously existed villages located approximately 15 and 20 kilometers respectively from New HatKhip Village) relocated there.

Resettlement policies therefore impacted both former villages. The government justified resettlement for five reasons: opium eradication, security concerns, access and service delivery (including access to roads and electricity), cultural integration and nation-building, and swidden agriculture reduction. They used three key policy instruments: focal sites, village consolidation, and land and forest allocation (see Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2005; 2007). Development was supposed to be brought to mountainous areas; however, practically the move of mountain-dwelling or remote residents to lowland areas was less expensive and more efficient for the government. Thus, resettlement has been popular in the country.

Before relocation, HatPhang village had 28 Khmu families, 43 Lao families, and 6 mixed families with total number of 71 households. A mixed family means a family that the husband or wife is Khmu or Lao ethnic. Old HatKhip Village had 23 Khmu families and 42 Lao families. There was no mixed family in the village. The number of households in Old HatKhip village before relocation was 65. In the current relocated village (New HatKhip) as of September 2018, there are 59 Khmu families and 103 Lao families with total number of 162 households; 748 people; 370 females. The number of mixed families in the relocated village is unknown.

### Housing

In the former villages HatPhang and Old HatKhip, the project categorized the houses into three types: A, B, and C. Of these three, type C is considered to be the best and the ideal house type in the area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of House</th>
<th>Old HatKhip</th>
<th>HatPhang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type A houses, were the houses with a temporary structure: walls were made with bamboo and the roofs were made with hay.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type B houses were the houses with a semi-temporary structure: walls were made with wood and roofed with corrugated zinc.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type C houses were the house with a permanent structure: the walls were bricks and cement, and the roofs were made with tiles.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nam Ou Hydropower Development Project and EDL, 2012
The project built new houses in a style between B and C (as they have wooden walls and tile roof, see Figure 2 below) from September 2013 to April 2014 and estimated the cost at 85 million LAK. The houses were built in the New HatKhip Village (20°20’57.63” N 102°25’23.57” E) with the total area of 54,000 m². The new house was two-story wooden walls and tile roof. The first floor was open space. All relocated villagers received the same type of house regardless of their prior house in the former village. The new houses had improvements over the Type A homes in the former villages but there were significant problems.

**Figure 2:** A house that was built and offered from the project before being renovated

One house has three rooms regardless of family size. The land area for the house is 20m x 20m, which was smaller than the typical land area in the former villages. Before relocation, the project promised that every house would have a fence, cement floor, and the interior ceiling but these verbal commitments were not fulfilled.

At the time of relocation, the project gave each household two million LAK for transportation and two million LAK for house renovation. Renovations generally included converting the first floor open space into a living area and installing kitchens which were not originally included. Wood had to be replaced because the original wood was not of high quality, some of it was young and it warped, creating gaps. Other wood became easily infested by termites. The average cost of renovations per household was 35.41 million LAK, including labor, but there was a wide range of costs from 0 to 100 million LAK. The range represented zero costs for those who completed their own renovation using wood from nearby forests, often with help from family and friends.

*Photo:* taken by the first author in August, 2018
during the typical quiet period from work of December to January. Labor costs, if included, would have raised the overall costs much more as a day’s labor is 50,000 LAK locally. When interviewed, the villagers said they did not track labor costs and could not estimate.

The villagers also received grants of money to replace their cash crops and agricultural trees. This money was used to fund house renovations as the 4 million LAK designated cash was not enough. The first author asked why the villagers did not ask the project to fix or renovate the houses on their behalf. The villagers stated they asked the project to provide both the first and second floor for living. However, the project did not agree because it would cost too much money.

One of the consequences of issues with new homes is that some of the villagers have built small huts (see figure 3) in the upstream area near the reservoir and the site of their former villages and farm lands. The project and the local authorities consider this to be illegal. Around 20 households have essentially returned. These huts in the Lao language are called “Sa nam (ສາ ນໍມໍ)”. By building small huts near their farms, villagers do not have to commute every day to the relocated village, which can reduce their costs. Plus, they can closely take care of their cattle and poultry. However, this raises the question of the purpose of the new houses in the relocated village when some villagers choose not to live there.

A common problem occurring with resettlement is the location itself. According to the original resettlement plan, the new location was selected in February 2012. The process was that project staff, EDL employees, Ngoi District committee members and leaders of the two villages surveyed four sites. They ultimately agreed the final location. It was selected because it was near the national Route 13 North and Pak Nga village, where there are secondary schools. It was an easy location for commuting due to a new bridge which was also constructed to connect the new village site and Route 13 North. However, there were also differing opinions within the stakeholders, as the district committee has strong beliefs in the value of urbanizing two villages. But many villagers simply thought any new location would be better because of the promises made to improve their livelihoods.

During the interviews, an interviewee shared his opinion that if they could choose, they would choose to move to an area near the former village; just on the upper location of the mountain. He asserted that the area is steep but the project

**Figure 3** - Small huts that villagers built in upstream near their agricultural lands

**Photo:** taken by the first author in May, 2019.
can make it flat. Often times, affected villagers are not satisfied with the new location simply because it is hard for them to find food. This issue is not only in Laos. A study in Ghana also found the same result. As stated by an interviewee in Ghana, “I would have preferred being relocated into a squatter house close to the river to enable me to have easy access to the river than living in plush houses located far away from the river” (Obour, Owusu, Agyeman, Ahenkan and Madrid, 2015:294). During the interaction and interviews, some villagers expressed they were crying before the relocation because they did not want to leave their homes and they felt uncertain about their future. The majority of resettlement in Laos is based on “push factors” rather than “pull factors” meaning the villagers were forced to evacuate rather than being encouraged to resettle voluntarily. Baird and Shoemaker (2007:881) would term them as ‘villager-initiated’ and ‘externally-initiated’ or ‘coerced’ resettlement.

**Agricultural land and farming condition**

In the relocated village, villagers have not received local agricultural lands they claim were promised to them four years ago. As a result, they travel daily to their former villages to farm and raise livestock. Those who do not have vehicles walk to their farmland which takes two hours if their farm was in Old HatKhip; they begin their walk at 6:00 and complete their walk back home at 18:00. If the farm was in HatPhang the walking time is three hours. The cost of commuting is significant. The cost of a liter of gasoline is 10,000 LAK which can be used for two days (two round trips) by motorcycle. During the harvest time, people hire a truck driver to carry their rice and other cash crops to the relocated village for 8,000 LAK per one sack of rice. Alternatively, some people rent rain-fed farmlands for rice plantations in Pak Nga village. A 2 hectare plot rents for 1.5 or 2 million LAK and that can produce 2 tons of rice.

The villagers said that the Ngoi district committee asked each household to pay 45,000 LAK to the district, after relocation, and they would receive a plot of agricultural land per household in the relocated village. The villagers stated each household gave 45,000 LAK but no agricultural land was provided to them. The report of Prime Minister’s Office’s Inspection and Assessment Department stated the district of Muang Ngoi would create a village fund specifically due to the lack of appropriate land in the relocated village. Money would be put into the fund because the government could not find appropriate land for the villagers. However, villagers said there is no village fund and they do not know what happened to their payments.

There are many practical implications from the lack of dedicated agricultural space which has led to the villagers commuting back to their original sites. Animals have insufficient space to roam freely so they are more likely to catch diseases, particularly from livestock introduced from other villages. Some animals have been stolen. Although theft can also be a problem in the original sites, the household heads who commute there often sleep overnight to protect livestock.

Although there have been serious hardships on the relocated villagers related to the lack of agricultural lands, it needs to be mentioned that there would be notable environmental consequences of granting those lands. Interviews indicated that each household could have been compensated up to 4.5 hectares of agricultural land, most of which would have been swidden cultivation (*hai*) for growing rice and other cash crops plantation (*Suan*) e.g. banana, orange, etc. The average area of each land is 1.5 hectare for
Food consumption

The sourcing of food has been negatively impacted in multiple ways. The dam has created an unstable water level and impacted fishing, particularly as the relocated village is downstream of the dam. An earlier forecast estimated that 66 percent of the fish in Nam Ou River would decrease due to the seven Nam Ou hydropower cascades (Meynell, 2016). Villagers now buy more pork or beef from merchants who sell meat daily in the new village. There has also been an impact on non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Before relocation, a variety of edible NTFPs were available from the local forest: bamboo shoots, bamboo grubs, sugar palm, wild animals and birds, naturally growing vegetables, etc. Even non-edible NTFPs could be sold for extra income: cardamom, broom grass, incense glue bark, paper mulberry, etc. All NTFPs are virtually non-existent in the new village. Similarly, firewood now needs to be carried from areas near the former villages by a two-wheeled modified tractor (*lod thai* or *lod torktork*) that would be hired for 50,000 to 60,000 LAK per trip. Villagers are unable to weigh the wood by kilograms or tons so they load as much firewood as possible unto the tractor and pay the driver for each load. Lastly, the new village lacks riverside gardens as the river’s edge is owned by the Pak Nga villagers who lived there before the relocated village came into existence. Any other available food source is accessed by three parties: the new villagers, Pak Nga residents and villagers from a third nearby village, Na Ham (see the map above). The outcome is much greater costs for the relocated villagers as they now have to pay for items they used to plant or collect by themselves.

Economic activities

The villagers said that one of the economic benefits was the opportunity to give up swidden cultivation and obtain better jobs provided by the project. In 2014, the district and provincial authorities even came to survey the villages on potential new occupations. The project said they would hire people from the impacted villages. Earth Systems Lao estimated 1,450 workers would be hired by the project throughout the construction period. However, no significant change had occurred and the villagers continued to practice swidden cultivation. Many construction workers were hired from other places. Only 17 out of 95 household heads interviewed said they or their family members have/had been employed by the project.

In the former villages, approximately 92 percent of the villagers were farmers. The type of farming is rain-fed farming of dry rice; fields were mostly on the mountains or foot hills so they were not inundated. The second most common occupation of villagers was local government official (4.21 percent of the 95 household heads interviewed). They work for the government as primary school teachers and military officers. The third ranking occupation was being a small business owner including retail shops, weaving, etc.

In the relocated village, the change in the number of farmers is not so significant; villagers continue to farm even after they have moved to the new village but they typically commute back to the former village location. However, in the new village, other jobs have been available. For example, people have become employees of private companies. In
particular, younger workers can commute to factories nearby. They can also deliver water. (In Laos, tap water is not drinkable so they usually buy 20 liter bottles of water for 4,000 LAK and this is delivered.) Some people have also become employed as carpenters.

Generally, jobs are available for the younger generation. However, for older people, there are not many choices other than continuing to practice swidden cultivation. Unfortunately, it has now become too difficult for them to walk to their former villages to do farming and they are now unemployed. 4.21 percent of the villagers interviewed said they are not doing any work currently (see figure 4). They only rely on their children with whom they live. Generally, older people take care of the houses and their grandchildren, while their children go to work. Since the occupations have not changed dramatically, the sources of income have remained similar between former and relocated villages; although as noted, their expenditures have increased.

**Figure 4:** Comparison between former and current jobs (% of 95 hh heads)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Former Village</th>
<th>New Village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>91.58</td>
<td>78.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Business</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Officers</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Worker</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisherman</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Company …</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** authors

**Accesses to public services in the relocated village**

Quality of hospital/health services: The project provided a new hospital which was staffed with two nurses at the time of the field survey. There was no hospital in the former village. The nurses treat basic ailments but send patients with more severe cases to larger hospitals in the city of Luang Prabang, which is much closer to the relocated village than the former villages.

Quality of school: The relocated village has a primary school. In addition, it is near Pak Nga secondary schools. The project has provided study and sports equipment/tools, and a drinking water cooler to the village primary school. There is also a kindergarten in the relocated village. It is more convenient now for children to attend school.

Electricity usage: In both former villages HatPhang and Old HatKhip, electricity was available since 2011. In the former villages, there was one transmission line but in the new village there are two lines so electricity is more stable and there are less black-
out times. People said electricity costs are higher even though they are using the same number of electronic devices such as refrigerators, televisions, etc. There may be a case that they are using more electricity as the internet connection is now available. Additionally, from the interview questionnaires with the villagers, we found that 15 households bought other electric devices (e.g., washing machine and refrigerator) after moving to the new village.

Water supply: In the former villages, people used natural spring water for drinking, cooking, etc., and they collected it from the communal taps near their homes. In the relocated village, the project constructed a water supply infrastructure for the village. There is a water pipe that draws water from a stream in the area of HouayPhang village and delivers to each household's tap directly. Villagers pay monthly water supply fees for 5,000 LAK per household. However, after two years, the infrastructure no longer worked. There are periods from for 4 to 5 months when villagers must carry water from streams nearby. During the remaining months of the rainy season, they collect water from the rain. Although a tap in each house was meant to be an improvement, the broken water system makes it meaningless. The village asked the project to fix the water infrastructure but it was not addressed and was handed over to the village to fix at the two-year handover in 2016.

Condition of telecommunication, road connection, and market access: Before relocation, mobile phones could be used in the former villages. However, there are more choices of telecommunication networks in the relocated village and the signal is better than in the past. In the relocated village, the roads are well connected to other areas. Villagers can travel easily to big cities such as Luang Prabang and the Nam Thouam area (a development region affiliated with Nam Bak district) for shopping or, in a few cases, for trade. Market access of the villagers has become better, but ironically they do not have anything to trade with others. Improved access to markets alone does not push resettled villagers to better livelihood standards. As Sayatham and Suhardiman put it ‘We show that having access to markets and services is not always linked to greater economic opportunities, or increases in rural households’ ability to rise above the poverty threshold’ (2015:18).

In New HatKhip Village, villagers said that their improved access is less meaningful to them since they are not traders or merchants; only buyers. However, the authors observed that villagers are trading forest products they collect from the prior locations to traders who come to the relocated village site; therefore, the villagers may be benefiting from improved access into their location. There are now new bridges and roads connecting New HatKhip Village to other city which is an improvement. However, some improvements are still needed. The small streets/pathways inside the New HatKhip have not been asphalted as promised before relocation. Also, the roads to the former villages are not being maintained which is impacting those who commute back to them for farming.

Household income
According to the data from the project’s SEIA, the average annual household cash income for 24 villages in the Nam Ou 2 dam area before relocation range from approximately 6.8 million LAK (HouayHang) to 33.8 million LAK (Old HatKhip) with an average of 18.7 million LAK. Per capita annual income ranges from approximately 1
million LAK to 7.5 million LAK. HatPhang’s per capita annual income was 1.9 million LAK (62 households interviewed) while Old HatKhip’s was 7.5 million LAK (35 households interviewed) (Earth Systems Lao, 2011:4-28).

Comparing the household income of the former villages and the relocated village, the SEIA conducted by the Earth Systems Lao shows that the average household income was 33.8 million LAK for Old HatKhip Village and 8.9 million LAK for HatPhang Village (Earth Systems Lao, 2011:4-28). When the per household income for each village is multiplied by the total number of households in each village (58 in Old HatKhip and 62 in HatPhang), the final combined total, weighted by village, is 2,521,517,506 LAK. This figure is divided by 120 which is the number of households of the two villages combined, equaling 21,012,646 LAK as the weighted average before the relocation. When taking the consumer price index (CPI) into account, 21,012,646 become 25,176,082 in fiscal year 2017-2018 which is the time of this field work. Figure 4 shows the change of household average income per year of the two former villages compared with the new relocated village.

5 The calculation below shows where the percentage of decrease in average household income has been obtained taking Consumer Price Index or inflation into consideration.

\[
\frac{33,872,457 \times 58 + 8,982,500 \times 128.8}{120} = 21,012,646
\]

\[
\frac{21,012,646 \times 128.8}{107.5} = 25,176,082
\]

= 25,176,082 (2011 income worth in 2017-2018)
25,176,082 is the income in 2011

- 58 is the total household number of Old HatKhip during the time of feasibility study
- 120 is the total household number of Old HatKhip and HatPhang during the time of feasibility study
- 128.8 is the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in 2017-2018 (2010 is the base year, World Bank)
- 107.5 is the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in 2010-2011 (2010 is the base year, World Bank)

Purchasing power

\[
18,645,347 - 25,176,082 = -6,530,735 \text{(change of income in 2017-2018)}
\]

Change in percent

\[
-6,530,735 / 25,176,082 = 0.25 \text{(-25%)} \text{average income in the relocated village is around 25% less than that of the former villages}
\]
Based on the input of the 95 heads of household (13 women), the average annual household income in New HatKhip has decreased by 25% compared to the weighted average of the two villages prior to the relocation as captured by 2011 SEIA data (aged to 2017-2018 using CPI.) This figure is consistent with overall comments from interviewees that 86% of household heads said their income has decreased with only 10% stating it was unchanged and 4% indicating it increased. The 25% figure also is valid considering the many increased costs this research uncovered which had not been addressed by the project (even though general occupation-related income only decreased slightly in some cases):

- unplanned renovation and rebuilding costs for the new home due to construction issues
- new commuting costs to continue farming at prior locations (plus hut costs) or new rental costs due to lack of available local land
- greater costs of getting products to market
- replacing unavailable locally-sourced food with food purchased from others
- a lack of local non-timber forest products - lower income from selling non-edible items and inability to find edible items
- additional costs for water, electricity and wood

**Figure 4:** Weighted average household income of the former villages and 95 interviewed household heads in the relocated village (LAK)

![Chart showing income comparison between Old HatKhip, HatPhang, and New HatKhip (Relocated Village).]

**Source:** created by authors with data from Earth Systems Lao's Social and Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) 2011, and * result from interviews.
Participation in decision-making

Every hydropower development project in Laos is obliged to do a feasibility study and social and environmental impact assessment. Nam Ou 2 hydropower development project was no exception. During these stages, meetings and public consultation with villagers were implemented. Every household head was required to participate and announcements came from the village office.

During interviews with the household heads, the first author asked them the reasons why they participated in the meetings with the project and the local government. This question meant to assess whether the villagers participated in the public consultation willingly or involuntarily. 83% of respondents said they joined the meetings because they were told to do so. This implies that participation is an obligation rather than a choice and most of the time, not meaningful. In research on public participation in other areas of Laos, Mirumachi and Torriti (2012:130) write that ‘Local communities were involved in the public participation procedure merely out of pressure by governments and development institutions’. For this project, around 61% (58 people) of the household heads said they expressed their thoughts and opinions during the meetings. Furthermore, approximately 32% of the interviewees believed their opinions were meaningful while around 47% of them said they do not know.

The culture in Laos supports meetings being obligatory and the political power connection between village leaders and government officials is always important. The dam development project was considered essential with wide public participation and consultation but limited feedback. The villagers of New Hat Khip stated any household heads would be fined 50,000 LAK for not attending. Moreover, in the Nam Ou 2 Dam case, some interviewees indicated that they limited their feedback because they felt insulted by the Muang Ngo District mayor who called them lazy during a meeting. He said the villagers only wait for grants from the Chinese (i.e. the project). They believed none of their requests would be implemented so did not care.

Compensation negotiation

The price for compensation is already decided by the provincial authorities6. However, the province’s methodology for the unit price of lost cash crops and agricultural trees was ambiguous. Regarding compensation, Mirumachi and Torriti (2012:129) noted that ‘the monetary assessment of the resettlement was estimated based on an ad hoc available price for resettlement and not on the non-market costs of resettling that include the willingness to accept of locals, which could be informed through public involvement’. Since the price for cash crops and agricultural trees such as orange, banana, coconut trees, as well as the agricultural lands, etc., had been decided by the province, villagers could not ask for more. From our observation and discussions with affected villagers of Nam Ou 2 and Nam Ou 1 dams, we can conclude that compensation for resettlement due to development projects in Laos varies accordingly to the local authorities and affected village committees regardless of the development project scale. This means the local authorities’ efforts and resettled villagers’ solidarity to accept the compensation or not

6 Stipulated in Decisions of Luang Prabang Province Governor on Acceptance of Unit Price of Compensation for Nam Ou 2 Hydropower Project Affected People number 316/Governor-LPB, dated June 16, 2012.
or to negotiate against the project. However, from the villagers’ point of views, most of the times local authorities do not appear to stand with the villagers. In addition, villagers themselves do not appear to negotiate with the project in coordinated manner.

For land compensation, villagers said they were promised before relocation that they would be compensated with new land in New HatKhip Village. Yet, it seems they could not negotiate since the local government insisted that the land belongs to the state. The message was mixed because they also promised before relocation that agricultural land would be compensated in the New HatKhip Village and was also stipulated in documented Decisions of the Luang Prabang Province Governor (which subsequently did not occur). Even though affected villagers could not negotiate to receive compensation for land and other assets, they were satisfied with the cash crops and agricultural trees compensation although there continued to be inconsistency between the value of agricultural trees and agricultural lands. For example, in case of a teak forest, villagers would receive only compensation for teak wood. The land of the teak forest was not compensated. Not fully compensating for the land is indeed illegal, but villagers have no power to fight for their rights and the civil rights movement at the grassroots level is weak.

The villagers stated there was going to be a three-year schedule of living support grants, provided twice per year. One grant was received after relocation for 1.28 million LAK per person. The villagers waited but the next grant but it did not come. 115 households filed formal request documents and finally received a second grant in August 2017, more than three years after the resettlement.

The issues regarding living support grants were combined with other compensation issues and the general need for rehabilitation of local livelihoods are indicated in a formal report to the central government.

One of the village committee members shared his opinion that the resettlement of the villages in Nam Ou 2 dam area was the first such event in the north of Laos therefore villagers did not have experience in negotiating. He claimed they did not have knowledge and experience about relocation so they trusted the government and the Party. They simply thought their livelihood would be better as the project and government authorities said.

Additionally, one senior villager (an 83-year old male) was more direct and said “Kong Karn Ma Tua Pa Xa Xon Long Kee Tom Leo Nee. (Sieuvatamanapabolabokhipkeeteembiewadieem)

Literally, “The project came to lie to people to convince them to get into a muddy pond and then left”. He felt the intentions were untrustworthy from the beginning, the promises were not sincere, and no help was given.

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7 Only 115 households in filed the formal request document the remaining 21 households did not cooperate in the process. The factors for not cooperating were ambiguous. It was whether because the 21 households were afraid of the upper local authorities or because they had no hope to get the grant. The filed formal request document was handed directly to the Prime Minister’s Office in Vientiane in August 2016. The Office suggested the Ministry of Energy and Mines investigate and solve the issue. Additionally, in the report, it is written that the HatKhip Village chief was fired by the Ngoi district mayor since the village chief, together with villagers, made the request for the promised living support grants.

8 The compensation issues were noted in the Prime Minister’s Office’s Department of Inspection and Assessment numbered 51/PMO.IA, dated November 7, 2016. The Department contacted the Ngoi district to investigate about the issues, but the issues remain unresolved.
Figure 5 explains the overall conditions of the livelihood conditions of the relocated village. The 95 respondents were asked to compare the condition of each issue (pillar) to those in their former villages. It is based on the perceptions expressed by the 95 household heads using a simple calculation. It calculates the percentage of the 95 respondents saying the situation has been better or worse. 0 to 100 is the percentage; the closer to 100 the better the condition of the topic is. For example, 95 household heads were asked to compare the condition of water supply in the relocated village and that of their former villages; 92 out of 95 respondents said the condition of the water supply in the relocated village is poor. Therefore, the line in the web for water supply is close to 0. Figure 5 indicates that livestock raising, agricultural land, household income, food consumption, electricity, and water supply have been worse since the relocation. Improvements have been found in hospital/ health care services, school, roads, telecommunication, and market access.
Opinions from local authorities in charge of resettlement

In May 2019, the first author interviewed a staff member from the Department of Energy and Mines of Luang Prabang Province about the resettlement of New HatKhip Village. The staff member stated that the villagers misunderstood and there were no promises. Both the three-year living support grants and agricultural lands in the relocated village were not promised. Additionally, the local government staff expressed that in fact there was no living support grants for affected villagers signed in the project contract either. However, the local government representatives were sympathetic and asked the hydropower company to provide the affected villagers a one-year living support grant and build a road from the relocated village to former villages so that villagers can commute to their farm lands conveniently. He also affirmed that the government of Laos can sue the hydropower project company in case it does not implement the agreements signed in the contract.

The staff member also mentioned that the timing of the dam project was driven by the China-Laos 70th Friendship Anniversary. Laos’ signing of the contract was considered a gift to China in honor of that event. The upper level discussions and speed of decisions meant that some detailed agreements, which were signed after the government approval, were unclear, including the provision of job creation and livelihood development programs.

The opinions obtained from the local government staff that was directly in charge of the compensation and resettlement of the village and those from affected villagers were contradictory. On one hand the local government appears to have been putting much effort in developing the resettled community. For instance, they urged the hydropower company to hire students from the Faculty of Agriculture of Souphanouvong University to study about fish aquaculture in up- or downstream of the dam for the villagers. In addition, they claimed that the villagers were provided electricity fees for six months (150,000 LAK per household per month). Also, the local government urged the company to give 10 million LAK cash to buy one buffalo for the resettled village warming ceremony. However, on the other hand, villagers seem to criticize the local government of not implementing the given verbal promises. The villagers tend to claim that their livelihood has been worse due to the resettlement.

Discussion and conclusion

This research assesses both the outcomes of hydroelectric plant construction for local communities in Laos. Specifically, it compares the condition of local livelihoods before and after the relocation and consolidation of two villages in Ngoi District, Luang Prabang province due to the Nam Ou 2 Hydropower Development Project. When the existing data of SEIA gathered prior to resettlement is compared to the authors’ data from fieldwork at the New HatKhip Village, both positive and negative outcomes become evident. The positive aspects are market access, telecommunication, road, school, and hospital/health care service provided to the community. Opportunities for improvement are livestock grazing, agricultural land, household income, food consumption, and water supply. This research presents the real issues occurring with one particular resettled community: New HatKhip Village. However, the authors have no intention to be against or criticize the project and the government authorities. The authors only present the facts
that need to be accepted and developed in order to address opportunities for improvement and rebuild trust with the people.

Average income of villagers has been decreased approximately 25% compared to the average income before resettlement. Many of the factors which decrease income are related to agriculture and the lack of suitable local alternatives to natural food resources. Whether the costs are direct or indirect, there is clearly less natural food resource in the new village. The decrease or absence of natural resources has created more difficulties and food insecurity which leads to “new poverty” as in other areas of Laos (Shoemaker and Robichaud, 2018).

The resettled people’s job rehabilitation program has not been implemented; meaning no new and better jobs have been provided to the resettled villagers. The local authority stated that the program would be implemented in September or October 2019, but not occurring yet at present as of May 2020. Although this research indicated there were not significant drops in occupation-related income, the lack of a job rehabilitation program resulted in no new, better-paying jobs which could offset increased costs, stimulate the local economy, and also fulfill original promises from authorities.

Significant research on impact of hydropower development and hydropower-induced resettlement has been conducted elsewhere in Laos. Those findings are consistent with this research, finding three serious problems. First, resettled villagers do not receive suitable agricultural land. Second, promises made by those in control have not been met. And third, resettled people face food insecurity in their relocated village. Recommendations from the authors are given below.

Adequate agricultural land for resettled villagers must be determined at the earliest part of the process. This requires thorough, well-planned and well-studied assessment that many stakeholders, including foreign experts and NGOs, review with active public participation and consultation. This will ensure all parties agree and will ensure adequate agricultural land for the resettled villagers. This should be done before project approvals and realization that it may take a long time. As Souksavath put it “The time of EIA studies is very limited for most hydropower projects in Laos, except for the case of the Nam Theun 2 Project, while in the case of Japan impact assessments take at least ten years’ (Souksavath, 2010:82).

Villagers need to be formally advised of their rights and obligations so they can review promises made by development projects. Villagers should be able to ask the development project staffs to document and sign agreements by all parties so that villagers can make claims if commitments are not fulfilled.

The concept of a ‘focal site’ should be reconsidered as combining many villages into one small city may easily lead to food insecurity when the population is larger than the available resources. The resettled villagers and the host villagers will share the same food and income sources. Our research also demonstrated the negative impact on income/food security from NTFPs. Although NTFPs that had not been sold in the past now have market value and market access is improved, the resources have become very scarce and benefit very few villagers who have been basically dependent on natural food resources.

For the future, new resettlement locations should be more precisely investigated, consulted, with greater participation from the impacted villagers and independent researchers. The authors suggest more thorough reviews and governance and these
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efforts should not be rushed to that more development is given to dam-induced resettled communities in Laos. This includes study processes such as feasibility studies, EIA, SIA, public consultation, etc.

The project and the local authorities should not simply resettle them and abandon them. Villagers should be taken care of and assisted so that they can adapt to their new environment within their transition period. In fact, as stipulated in the Lao government Decrees No.192 and No.84, for every hydropower and other development projects, when resettlement was implemented, the resettled people were provided with livelihood rehabilitation and job rehabilitation programs for at least 3 to 5 years during the transition period. In most of the cases, including our case study, there is no assessment for these livelihood and job rehabilitation programs after this transition period. The hydropower development projects and the local authorities should be more benevolent and sympathetic to the resettled communities’ livelihood development. In our case study, an unfortunate outcome is that there is no trust between the people and the local authorities in charge of relocation. Some villagers frankly expressed that people have lost trust in the state and government since they are now poorer due to the resettlement. How can the trust be rebuilt? The authors recommend that closer and more frequent monitoring from central government is needed. This would encourage the projects and local government to implement the agreements and resettlement work and exercise the regulations. In addition, the central government should not only rely on the so-called “flower reports” from the local government offices which include only positive elements of the project without considering critical issues for the sake of further community development.

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Luang Prabang, a World Heritage Town: UNESCO, Tourism and Rising Chinese Influence

Phill Wilcox

Abstract

This article revisits the conclusions of Dawn Starin’s “Letter from Luang Prabang” published in 2008, in which she questions whether UNESCO’s recognition of the city’s historic center as a heritage site would be positive or negative for the city. She raises serious concerns about the future of Luang Prabang and suggests that UNESCO World Heritage Status would lead to a major upsurge of tourism and potentially, destroy what makes Luang Prabang special. This paper starts from the basis that reducing such a complex issue to a single binary question is misconceived. Moreover, that while UNESCO in Luang Prabang and management of the city’s heritage remain pertinent issues, of far more importance and urgency, is the growing visibility of China in Luang Prabang and concerns about Chinese influence. The paper argues that negotiating this is now the fundamental pressing issue facing Luang Prabang, and that questions of China in Luang Prabang, and Laos generally, are complex, nuanced and contradictory.

Keywords: UNESCO, Luang Prabang, Laos, Heritage Tourism, China

In 2008, Dawn Starin published an important piece that poses a question: is UNESCO designation of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site positive or negative? In an essay subtitled “Letter from Luang Prabang”, she posed this seemingly binary question thirteen years after UNESCO recognized Luang Prabang’s historic center as a place of intangible world heritage that is valuable for all humanity. Her conclusion is that while time will tell for sure, overall that UNESCO designation will continue to encourage an unsustainable flood of tourists and have dire consequences for the city. She terms this process one of the very real possibility of UNESCO offering Luang Prabang a “kiss of death” (2008, 652).

Three years later, Reeves and Long observed Starin’s piece as one that “cogently and evocatively alerted readers to the threats posed to Luang Prabang by the rapid rise of tourism” (2011, 3-4). While less alarmist in its approach they also contend that the process of UNESCO recognition in Luang Prabang has produced a process of change the effects of which are difficult to control and require new systems of heritage management.

The principle problem with both of these pieces, but particularly that of Starin, is that neither takes the question of local agency seriously and in Starin’s case, not at all. Both view locals in Luang Prabang as passive recipients of whatever happens to them as they are pulled by dominant forces, for whom Laos is a pawn in a much larger agenda and any associated disadvantage akin to collateral damage. The first comprehensive attempt to insert agency back into this discussion appears from Berliner (2012) who argues strongly for the importance of hearing local voices of different actors in and around discourses of heritage and what this really means for those who live and work in and around the historic center of Luang Prabang. Berliner

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is a unique voice in considering just how powerful/powerless local people are and how they live out these wider agendas of heritage, globalization and social change in their everyday lives. His contention is that discourses of preservation and heritage in Luang Prabang are far more multiple, contested and contradictory than they first appear.

Berliner’s arguments are profound and have informed much of my own work on heritage in Luang Prabang. Yet six years on from Berliner’s article, and over a decade since Starin’s piece, it is worth revisiting these issues. I argue that this is particularly crucial as Luang Prabang is now subject to a new force of change and that this has a considerable amount to do with rising Chinese presence in the city. This will only increase in the coming few years as Laos becomes far more inter-connected with China. The high-speed Lao-China part of the Kunming-Singapore railway is scheduled to open in 2021, which will drastically reduce travel time between Laos and China and make both countries far more accessible to each other. Already, numbers of Chinese businesses, Chinese tourists and Chinese influence is readily visible in Luang Prabang. For the first time, since 2016, numbers of tourists from Western countries show decline, while numbers of tourists from East Asian countries, and specifically China, show a marked increase. In 2018, almost 20% of all visitors to Laos were Chinese (Lao Ministry of Information 2018). That Luang Prabang has a reputation has a heritage town, and has UNESCO recognition of the same, may well be relevant here too.

I do not mean to argue here that questions of heritage in Luang Prabang have become less important, merely that the situation on the ground is fast changing with rising China, something to which Berliner understandably paid little attention. My overall purpose in this article is to argue that twenty-five years on from the UNESCO designation of Luang Prabang, the question of whether that is something positive or negative is a false one. No culture or city is static, and it is of course impossible to know how Luang Prabang would have developed differently. Moreover, the UNESCO certification has now been in place for over two decades. A more interesting question is to think through how local people exercise agency in such a landscape and what the limits of that agency are. Secondly, I believe that the question of UNESCO as positive or negative is an outdated one. In my research, local people were far more vocal on how Luang Prabang is changing in the face of rising Chinese influence, and what this will mean for the city. This is summed up particularly eloquently in the words of my interlocutors who told me categorically that “it does not matter what UNESCO says [about Luang Prabang] because in 30 years, this will all be Chinese anyway”.

This paper is based partly on research I undertook for my doctorate for 15 months until mid 2016, in which time I lived and worked in the heritage zone of central Luang Prabang. It is also informed by a follow up visit to both China and Laos at the very end of 2017 and then a period of six months in Luang Prabang in 2019, specifically to consider the city changing as the Lao-China railway becomes a tangible reality. Throughout, I have employed ethnography as a primary means of research, but also had repeated interviews with the same interlocutors, which has allowed me to form a long-term view of their opinions over time. Some of them are local to Luang Prabang, others are migrants who have moved to Luang Prabang for education and employment opportunities.

I am not arguing that tourism has not changed Luang Prabang. Nor am I arguing that UNESCO has had no role in that. To ask about the effects and consequences of UNESCO recognition of Luang Prabang is, in my view, a perfectly legitimate enquiry. However, to reduce that to a single binary question of whether it
is good or bad, is unhelpful. A cursory look shows that the devil really does reside in the abundant detail, which is apparent just beneath the surface. This is a complex issue and requires recognition of that in the answer. For me, good or bad UNESCO is also an outdated question. I will argue here that there is now a much hotter topic in Luang Prabang in the form of China and Chinese influence. This is a complex question that is nuanced, not binary.

**Luang Prabang: a timeless paradise?**

Luang Prabang, capital of a province carrying the same name, enjoys a sumptuous location. Situated on the confluence of two rivers: the Nam Khan and the more famous mighty Mekong, the city is surrounded by mountains and represents a major urban center in Northern Laos. It currently takes around ten hours to reach the city by bus from Vientiane. Once the China-Lao railway is operational, this travel time will reduce by almost 90%.

Luang Prabang is a city with a long history. A royal capital since the fourteenth century, then monarch, King Fa Ngum adopted Theravada Buddhism and set a path for Luang Prabang to become an important religious center. Unsurprisingly, given its location, Luang Prabang has been the subject of considerable attention from invading influences throughout its history culminating in colonial rule from France from 1893 until independence in 1953. Laos became established as a one-party socialist state in 1975, and the revolution that brought this about was the culmination of a long period of civil war between the eventually victorious Lao communist forces and the Royal Lao Government, who were supported by the United States. American involvement in Laos during the decades preceding 1975 was considerable, and Eastern Laos was heavily bombed as a result of American attempts to contain the spread of communism in neighboring Vietnam. The city of Luang Prabang fortunately escaped this period largely unscathed by the heavy bombing.

Given its religious significance, Luang Prabang was the royal capital of the Lao Kingdom until the dissolution of the monarchy in 1975 and the founding of Laos as a one-party socialist state, a political status quo that remains in place until today. Following the regime change, the country closed to outsiders and Luang Prabang entered a difficult phase in its history, when its associations with the former regime made it almost a damned place (Berliner 2011, 2012). These grittier aspects of the past are absent from contemporary, official narratives of history in Luang Prabang. Strict economic austerity was eased as Laos adopted new economic policies in the mid-1980s that reintroduced private enterprise and opened its doors to tourism and limited forms of outside investment in the 1990s (Stuart Fox 1998; Yamada 2013). However, such initiatives have not resulted in any easing of the political climate. Laos remains a one-party state and retains a commitment to one party socialism, at least nominally.

Yamada (2018) argues cogently that by leading a process of economic reform, the Lao state ensured a place for itself within that process of change, thus avoiding making itself redundant. The process of state-managed heritage and past-making is apparent all over Laos but is particularly interesting in Luang Prabang where the usual strategies of side-lining, lambasting or ignoring pre-revolutionary heritage are at odds with the current Lao political system as the legitimate rulers of the country simply do not work there. It is notable how in much of the rest of Laos, there is silence about the Lao monarchy, except for brief statements about the monarchy being
defeated by the people’s choice of socialism. This does not happen in Luang Prabang given that much of this architecture is celebrated as part of the city’s heritage. For Long and Sweet (2006) this also allows for a significant convergence of interests between UNESCO and the local and national authorities: both focus on celebrating the city’s architectural heritage and do not engage with difficult questions about the grittier aspects of history.

Today, much as in the rest of Laos, Luang Prabang city remains a place of considerable ethnic diversity. The population is around 56,000 with significant minorities of Khmu and Hmong people living alongside the lowland Lao population. According to the most recent population census, these minorities make up around 11% and 9.2% of the population respectively, with the Khmu being the majority ethnic group in Luang Prabang Province (Lao Population and Housing Census 2015). Luang Prabang also remains a significant religious center, and still contains over forty Buddhist temples, with a high concentration of these located inside the historic center. This is largely the area that UNESCO recognizes as a heritage site with the following justification for so doing:

[It] celebrates the city’s ‘successful fusion of the traditional architectural and urban structures and those of the Europe colonial rulers of the 19th and 20th centuries.... [with a] unique townscape... remarkably well preserved, illustrating a key stage in the blending of two distinct cultural traditions.’ (UNESCO 1995, 46, cited in Dearborn and Stallmeyer 2009, 252)

This reflects only the positive and a-political aspects of colonialism in Luang Prabang. This means that UNESCO values the stunning architecture for which the city is renowned and anything ugly, contentious, or belonging to any other historical period is overlooked and not officially designated as heritage. As Long and Sweet (2006) argue, this has the unique effect of creating a significant convergence of interests between UNESCO and the Lao government and allows for an emphasis in presentations that generally do not engage with the difficult aspects of recent history, particularly around the revolution and founding of the contemporary Lao state. It also means that the apparently unwelcome difficult questions about modernity and the sort of future different members of the Lao population want, as well as questions of unwelcome foreign influence in Laos terminate at the perimeters of the heritage zone. These difficult questions are neither emphasized nor welcome in such a space.

The official invitation from the Luang Prabang tourist office adopts a similar approach, which is far more concerned with beauty than politics, inviting visitors to:

Lose yourself in the timelessness of Luang Prabang. Stroll narrow lanes that wind between beautifully restored Buddhist temples, traditional timber homes, and French colonial structures. Experience for yourself the legendary Lao hospitality. Engage in the daily rhythms of a place and a people shaped by a thousand years of ritual (Tourism Luang Prabang n-d)

This apparently lovely invitation has the unique effect of portraying Luang Prabang as a place that is seemingly both untouched by time and able to transcend it. The words “timeless Luang Prabang” appear in the city’s official marketing. I suggest that timelessness is a deliberate strategy to emphasize the beauty and charm, while largely avoiding the difficult questions that may arise from detailed interrogation. Moreover,
timelessness evokes an almost ethereal or other-worldly quality that precludes difficult questions about the worldly realm. Moreover, the idea that the people are shaped by history, rather than shape it themselves, allows people to be present in history without allotting blame or responsibility. This is relevant for Laos generally where versions of history are particularly contested and overtly silenced in the political context. It also sets up Luang Prabang to change again as China’s influence rises without open discussion of the same. The only problem is that this is an approach that degrades local people in passive victims of history rather than agents at least able to influence, even if in very limited ways, their own destinies.

As there are strict rules on what can and cannot be done with the buildings within the heritage zone itself, much of the everyday stuff of daily life including larger markets, shops and basic amenities are located outside the heritage zone. In 2007, concerns were raised largely by the International Council of Monuments and Sites about the nature of development and whether Luang Prabang should be placed on the UNESCO World Heritage in Danger list in view of breaches to the building regulations (Staiff and Bushell 2013). Some of this may come from beliefs that building regulations were being met when owing to confusion on the ground amongst building owners about the nature of the regulations (Leong, Takada, and Yamaguchi 2016). Nevertheless, the relationship between UNESCO, heritage, Luang Prabang and tourism endures strongly. While conducting my research, a guesthouse manager asked me to avoid writing anything critical of Luang Prabang given the importance of tourism, although was unable to elaborate on what he meant by this statement. He could only tell me that tourism is important to Luang Prabang, and that is vital that tourists continue to come.

And come they do, in large numbers. While tourism since the reopening of Laos was traditionally something done by backpackers, these now rub shoulders in the city’s famous night market with luxury boutique tourists as well as those on short trips from Thailand or those in tour groups often from new tourist markets. Tourism in Luang Prabang shows considerable heterogeneity and 2019 is designated a special year for Lao: China tourism. I suggest that this represents a further phase of discourses of changing tourism. As Staiff and Bushell (2013) suggested: tourism is not something that happens as an external force but often represents a longer process of change. The presence of increasing numbers of Chinese lead to some Western visitors citing this as a further reason that they regret not visiting earlier they also lament that the town is soon to change into a Lao version of Chiang Mai and therefore overly commercial. Others consider that the town’s UNESCO heritage zone, outside of which very few venture for any meaningful period, is more museum than living town anyway, a sort of preserved oasis which does not represent an actual living space. On either reckoning, these statements are often a prelude to an expression of frustration that Luang Prabang does not fit the picture in their imagination. This may be because of increasing commercialization of the city, worries about how Chinese visitors do not respect this apparently special space, or both.

Starin: an alarm bell

This is the sort of sentiment with which Starin begins her piece and her arrival Luang Prabang, namely that it did not fit the timeless paradise that she imagined that this “sleepy settlement” should offer (2008, 641). Her article begins with a characterization that has a long pedigree in descriptions of Laos in travel literature:
that of a remote and forgotten place in which travelers venture with Orientalist ideas of a fabled, magical Shangri-La, and one that is now threatened by the distinctly unwelcome and single march of globalization.

There is little sense from Starin’s article that she resided in Luang Prabang for any extended period of time and her claims are bold for what may have been a single, brief visit. Her arguments relate only to the very center of Luang Prabang and the historic center around the peninsula. Yet a mostly unremarkable city – in tourist terms - exists beyond this and it is in this more peripheral area that there are schools, hospitals, markets, shops that do not have tourists as their main customer base. Notably, in Starin’s letter, there is a strong sense of the city as having shrunk as she considers little beyond the historic center. She talks of arriving in Luang Prabang and going straight to the nearest market, which is of course, the night market. This sells mostly handicrafts. It is therefore unsurprising that Starin could not find the fresh produce that she expected to see at a market. What is surprising is that she did not know this in advance, given she indicates that she had consulted a guidebook, which described the Night Market with adjectives such as “atmospheric, romantic and traditional” (Ibid. 641). The night market has never been anything but a venue for the sale of handicrafts to customers who are generally not local. Some of these use traditional techniques on new products, some of them claim to be more traditional and authentic. It is then a place of some claims to tradition and history, but not with the sort of claims that Starin hoped to find.2

The Orientalist lens is not difficult to recognize here. Her central thesis is that Luang Prabang is indeed a special place, but that UNESCO certification will encourage tourists to visit it and that will, inevitably, destroy its illusive, special qualities. She argues this with reference to the trading of illegal wildlife and their constituent parts, inappropriate tourist behavior at the daily morning alms giving to monks, generic tourists from backpackers who demonstrate little respect for local culture and acceptable forms of behavior and a government in the sway of UNESCO that will do anything to chase tourist hard currency. In her description of the night market, Starin writes that tourists buy products “at prices totally incomprehensible to the local population” (Ibid. 641). Later she contends that “yes [Luang Prabang] is an oasis compared to next door [countries]. But for how long? Here, tourism is big business, really big businesses. Tourism is the engine that drives the Luang Prabang economy. UNESCO has made that possible” (Ibid. 644).

There is a startling lack of recognition of any degree of local agency anywhere in Starin’s piece. There is absolutely no questioning of whether local people might choose to leave the historic heritage zone, and that their decisions to relocate to the suburbs and rent out their old homes may represent a choice rather than coercion. Nor is there any recognition of how people may make a choice to engage with tourism, be they guesthouse owners, tour operators or novice monks, save for a comment from a business owner about how business is going better due to rising numbers of visitors, and even his gain is placed in the context of negative consequences for the city overall. What she presents is a binary divide of tourists vs. locals, but a decidedly one-sided

2 Starin argues that some of the handicrafts sold on the Luang Prabang Night Market are not actually local. My research in Luang Prabang indicates that she is correct on this point. The Luang Prabang Handicraft Association has now introduced a scheme whereby vendors can indicate that their products are handmade in the province. Further information can be found here: https://luangprabanghandicraftassociation.weebly.com/about.html
one as local voices are almost entirely silent in her piece. Starin positions herself away from the category of the bad tourist, who consumes Luang Prabang with no concern about the consequences. Starin reports how she feels very worried that “no concern has been voiced over the changes in social and cultural fabric of the town” (Ibid. 649). Detailed consideration of how anyone else feels about it, and the value of their own agency, is absent.

This is a major omission, because a cursory untangling the threads of tourism, heritage and different actors in Luang Prabang reveals a complex picture. Nostalgia, a longing for an idealized past is, as Berliner (2012) argues cogently, a major driving force for different actors in Luang Prabang but it is a grave error to consider that it exists in a singular form. Instead, Luang Prabang represents a battleground where different understandings and agendas of preservation of the past are played out between tourists with differing needs and expectations, heritage professionals, local and national governments and so on. Like Berliner, I have encountered often self-appointed heritage professionals in Luang Prabang, who have very specific ideas about what should be preserved and how. I have also documented large numbers of locals who are very happy to take advantage of interest in the heritage zone through renting out their old houses there and relocating to modern homes in the suburbs. This has several advantages including much cheaper land and options to use much cheaper building materials as well as places with stronger communities, better amenities and the ability not to live in a museum space. This shows sharply that depopulation of central Luang Prabang is not a completely passive process. For them, heritage and interest in the architecture of heritage is profit, in economic terms but also in quality of life.

Business and profit from heritage in Luang Prabang happens in a myriad of ways. Starin is particularly critical of tourist behavior around Tak-Baat or the daily offerings of alms to monks. She wonders if this ancient ritual has become a sort of sideshow illustrated for tourists” (2008, 643). While complaints from both academic literature, tourists and locals who have witnessed this in Luang Prabang, a growing amount of scholarship in this area recognizes that this is not merely about bad tourist behaviour (Berliner 2012; Suntikul and Jachna 2013). Starin herself notes the present of street vendors attempting to sell offerings that tourists can give to monks but fails to consider that these vendors are Lao too. Large tour groups now make up more and more of the people donating offerings in central Luang Prabang, often in the company of Lao tour guides. In late 2017, I was told by a former novice monk that the local government had prohibited novice monks from wearing blankets over robes during the winter season despite the cold temperatures at dawn on the grounds that these were not aesthetically pleasing to tourists. While I had no way of verifying that information at the time, even the suggestion raises an important question: what is the role of the local population, including the local authorities, in the changing nature of almsgiving? Like Berliner, I have noted that while tourists may describe encounters with monks in idealistic language of beauty and sincerity, monks are able to exploit visitor interest in their lives for very immediate material and often financial gain. Holt notes novice monks providing information to tourists that are clearly rehearsed for the purpose of obtaining something back from visitors in return (Holt 2009). I was asked for money by a novice monk I had chatted with several times previously in return for him answering some of my research questions. Scholars investigating Buddhism in Laos directly note an ongoing change as more boys ordaining as novices come from ethnic minorities with little history of Buddhism and less ethnic Lao
interest in actually becoming monks (Holt 2009; Ladwig 2013). I suggest this has much to do with wider societal changes in Laos as it seeks to develop, and who wins and who loses out of this process of development. For the lowland Lao, ordination as a novice monk is a means to social mobility which is no longer as necessary as it once was. For boys living in the countryside, it represents a very economic and real-world choice. Luang Prabang and how people encounter and perform its heritage are changing, and this UNESCO is not the only factor in this.

Unfortunately, Starin does not consider any of this. Instead her conclusion is clear: UNESCO certification is bad, and Luang Prabang being in its thrall will, inevitably, ruin itself as more of it is turned over to tourist engagement and the historic center depopulates. In the arrival of UNESCO and the undesirable effects of tourism therein lie the seeds of destruction for Luang Prabang. She concludes her article with a rhetorical question:

Was the World heritage label the “kiss of death”? Will this designation lead to the sort of tsunami of tourists-friendly, tourist-necessary development that threatens the very cultural character and treasures it was meant to preserve? Has it given birth to a premature mad dash for modernization, development, and tourism representing almost as serious a threat to Laos and its people and its culture as incursions and colonial ambitions and mad bombing campaigns did in the past?” (2008, 652)

This is the only occasion in which she says anything critical about the French colonial period. This is somewhat ironic when French colonial architecture is one of the major reasons for the UNESCO celebration of Luang Prabang. The analogy with the war is an interesting one with its images of utter devastation that it evokes, helpfully illustrated at the end of the article with a picture of the logo to clear the unexploded ordinance (UXO) from Laos. I suggest this is a cheap point, as Luang Prabang city was not itself directly involved in the bombings of the secret war (Banfman 1972, Warner 1997). The conflation between tourism, UNESCO and bombs is dramatized and rather distasteful. There is now a museum in Luang Prabang devoted to this, yet this is more about accessing the large numbers of visitors to the city, who may also donate much needed funds to help clear the UXO. It could also be indicative of exploiting tourist interest in Laos to assist in resolving a serious humanitarian problem. Even if so, this would also represent something far more material than the special and illusive spiritual Luang Prabang that Starin hoped to find.

**Luang Prabang: multiple actors in multiple space**

It is surprising that while Starin's article raises some very big questions, direct engagement with her piece among scholarship on Luang Prabang has been so limited. I suggest that this is largely because most scholars are wary of taking such a categorical position on a complex question reduced to such a closed mode of enquiry. Yet the themes raised by Starin and their complexity have a long history in other contexts (Avieli 2015; Hitchcock and King 2003; Herzfeld 1991; Joy 2010). Returning to Berliner’s piece on nostalgia in Luang Prabang, what he notes as ideas of nostalgia, a longing for an idealized past coupled with a feeling of sadness that the present is somehow worse or threatening to become so, are exactly the feelings that Starin articulates in her piece but his only direct engagement with Starin is a brief nod to her
work as “an alarmist perspective” (2012, 784). I agree but note that Berliner demonstrates why in his own article. Starin’s worries about UNESCO and the rising tide of tourism are presented as things that everyone who cares about the future of Luang Prabang should, apparently, care about. My argument joins with Berliner’s in considering that Luang Prabang as diverse and even agendas of celebrating an idealized version of the past, of nostalgia, are multiple.

Berliner helpfully distinguishes between what he terms endo-nostalgia and exo-nostalgia (Ibid. 781). In the former, this relates to nostalgia for a past for which one has personal experience, which would include members of the Lao diaspora who hold memories of Luang Prabang from an earlier time and perhaps even from before the revolution in 1975. It can also apply to elderly members of the local population who have a long memory through which to view societal change in the city. In the latter category, exo-nostalgia, people long for a past in which they have no personal experience. As Berliner notes, exo-nostalgia is common amongst visitors to Luang Prabang and similarly, among all those who seek to preserve it to a state of imagined past other than anything they have personally experienced. In my argument, Starin’s error resides firmly in the second category: she assumes that her concerns about UNESCO and rising tourism development in Laos would be felt by anyone else in her position, yet has no personal reference point in the past on which to base her concern at what she sees as the city’s inevitable decline.

Staiff and Bushell do not share this gloomy outlook. For them, the question of whether UNESCO empowers locals or not is unclear. They argue that the starting point for considering that question should be that Luang Prabang, like anywhere else, is neither static nor frozen in time, and that it would be a grave error to even consider that it should be, a criticism I level at Starin in this article. For Staiff and Bushell “Luang Prabang is, and will continue to be, a place that is constantly remade in a non-directional and non-linear process of endlessly becoming” (2013, 109). I agree that UNESCO certification has brought change to Luang Prabang partly through its branding, which encourages tourists to visit but I would not argue that it is the only transformative force. UNESCO’s rules have consequences for local people, yet I have been told repeatedly that these are important for ensuring that tourists will continue to come, which is essential for people’s livelihoods. As Dearborn and Stalmeyer (2009) note, this means that Luang Prabang has been transformed and is still in a process of transformation. But given that nothing is static, that is no surprise. Nor should it be.

I have interviewed many people in Luang Prabang, usually local elites or expatriates, who hold reservations about tourism or certain aspects of tourism in Luang Prabang and who may claim that their position is the correct one to the exclusion of all others. Yet the extent to which they would also see UNESCO as culpable in damaging Luang Prabang is not made out, with many people across the city regarding UNESCO in multiple ways. One Lao guesthouse manager told me that UNESCO’s previously mentioned building restrictions may be seen as onerous and regulations applied inconsistently. However, he also regarded them as an organization with which it was possible to negotiate, a strategy that he utilized when trying to gain approval for a new guesthouse within the heritage zone. Another informant, a Western expatriate had some surprisingly positive words about UNESCO in contrast to the local population, who she regarded as being too ignorant to take care of Luang Prabang’s heritage. In a walking interview with me through the heritage zone, she pointed at a crumbling wall and commented that UNESCO would eventually
order something done about it and how that was positive, as otherwise nothing would ever be completed. She finished this description by telling me that: “in this town, UNESCO is the best thing that has ever happened”.

Long and Sweet (2006) note that Luang Prabang’s cultural value, to UNESCO at least, lies in its past and not in it being a living town today. Its appeal lies in its exoticism, and UNESCO is instrumental in recognizing this. Staiff and Bushell (2013) argue that the empowering qualities of UNESCO are unclear, but that locals are quick to talk about how UNESCO helps make the town beautiful, and this sort of beauty is the reason given by many visitors for the visit in the first place. This echoes with my own research in Luang Prabang. Many locals are pleased to see rising tourist interest in their town, with one interlocutor telling me about how people visit because “they want to see nature and old stuff” and how “it is important that people see how we have preserved stuff from the past up until the present day”. Many people are positive about tourists visiting Luang Prabang, even if many also apologize for their low levels of knowledge about UNESCO and what it actually does. They may talk about heritage, (morhladok), which Berliner points out is a new word in Lao to use in this context. I would also suggest that low levels of knowledge about UNESCO may stem from the invisibility of some of UNESCO’s work, even if its regulations have tangible effects. These same people can however talk often quite extensively about China and the growing visibility of China in the landscape of Luang Prabang.

“If I learn Chinese, I’ll never be out of a job”

At the time of writing this article, I was struck by a new discussion taking place on a Facebook group for Luang Prabang about rising Chinese presence in the city and how Chinese business owners planned to turn an empty building in the heritage zone into a Chinese restaurant. Reactions to this followed the same predictable form I had encountered in this group previously, with some other members of this group (both Western expatriate and elite local Lao) criticizing the Chinese business owner with increasing volume and suggesting that rising numbers of Chinese business interests in Luang Prabang are unwelcome because they have no respect for Lao culture. This particular discussion was played out online, but it is not uncommon for people all across Lao society to talk about rising China. This exchange is important because it underlines the depth of feeling about Chinese in Laos across the population, not merely from those who were most likely to be subject to the most negative consequences of Chinese influence, for example those relocated from land needed for Chinese backed infrastructure projects.

Laos is a poor country, and discourse from the Lao government is that the country needs to develop urgently. Current government plans are for Laos to exit Least Developed Country status by 2025 and become a middle-income country in the years that follow. These are ambitious targets, and subject to increasing criticism that they will lead to growing societal inequality. But in attempting fast-track development of the country, it is not difficult to see how mega infrastructure projects are of interest to the Lao authorities. One does not need to venture far outside Luang Prabang to see hydropower projects. Many tourists now arrive in Luang Prabang through its new airport, which opened in 2013. This gives the impression of a modern city, but its construction also incurred significant resettlement, new forms of poverty and considerable national debt for the country (Sims 2015). Doing this in the name of development is happening again as part of the construction of the Lao-China Railway,
on which people will also soon be able to arrive in Luang Prabang. For the first time, this will link China with Thailand through a high speed rail line that will run approximately half the territory of Laos. The projected end date for this project is 2021 and is easily the most ambitious infrastructure project in Laos yet. Such a project will inevitably cause upheaval for those subject to relocation. Widespread concerns were identified to me by both expatriates and locals about inadequate compensation and the cost of the project to what remains a very poor country. People also expressed concerns about who would benefit from such a project. What is clear is that this project will bring Chinese influence directly to the city of Luang Prabang in a much more immediate way than has been the case previously merely by making Laos much more accessible to China. The station is to be located outside the city center and away from the heritage zone. But even so, how this very immediate and tangible need for development intersects with ideas of timelessness, and how the two can be managed is of course another question that will require further research in the coming years.

Of course, throughout its history, Luang Prabang has been shaped by a wide range of different people and events. Presently, increasing Chinese influence is again changing the urban landscape of Luang Prabang and is making its presence felt increasingly. This is largely unsurprising as Chinese investments in Laos already far outweigh the country’s GDP and is particularly apparent in infrastructure projects (Ignatius 2016). In cities, large numbers of Chinese owned and operated businesses are increasingly obvious. These include restaurants, hotels and supermarkets. Signage in Mandarin in Luang Prabang is increasingly common. Berliner (2012) noted complaints from Thai tourists that signage should be in Thai to accommodate large numbers of Thai visitors. It is notable that a large amount of signage now does feature a third language in addition to Lao and English, and that third language is Mandarin. My argument here is a straightforward one: whatever the concerns of the local population about UNESCO, these are likely to be dwarfed by their opinions of rising China and Chinese influence in Luang Prabang. In other words, Starin’s question is now clearly outdated: in the main, people have other things to think and worry about.

The small but growing body of literature on Chinese influence in Laos has focused predominantly on economic activities, which involve traffic via the Lao-China border. Although there are ten Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Laos, the two along the Lao China border have earned a profound reputation as mega playgrounds where it is possible for Chinese nationals to break Lao laws (Laungaramsri 2014; Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011). However, Chinese influence elsewhere in the country is expanding and deserves critical attention. There are now five Chinese owned and operated supermarkets in Luang Prabang itself including one within the heritage zone itself, which locals regarded as a significant change within the city’s urban landscape. There is also a Chinese market in Luang Prabang, in which mainly Chinese-made goods are sold to both Chinese migrants and to local shoppers. My interlocutors reflected to me that the prices here were cheap, even though quality was often somewhat lacking. This desire for modernity, material goods and the so-called good life is noted increasingly in literature on China’s influence in developing countries and to Laos itself, even if it comes at a cost to the local economy (Alden 2005; Brautigam 2011; Lyttleton and Li 2017). My participants bemoaned the rising plethora of Chinese products in Luang Prabang, yet they still patronized Chinese shops and markets to get good prices on what they wished to buy. Others worked willingly with Chinese businesses, and many have been quick to tell me that they feel the Chinese have the possibility to flout Lao laws. Other interlocutors have been quick to tell me that while
China may help Laos develop and in so doing help people escape poverty. That they were aware of this, yet still viewed China with levels of pragmatism and ambivalence shows through their own lives and bodies that this is a complicated, and contradictory issue.

Chinese influence comes in many different forms. In 2019, a branch of Chinese store Miniso had opened in the very center of the heritage zone in central Luang Prabang. Numbers of Chinese tourists are increasing and many of my closest participants had worked in tourism-related businesses including restaurants and guesthouses that cater to increasing numbers of Chinese. One attended a job interview at a Chinese managed hotel just outside the heritage zone and left disillusioned when it became clear that Mandarin language skills were a clear pre-requisite to obtaining a job. Another went to university in China and returned to Laos confident that his Chinese language skills would secure him at least a reasonably well-paid job given that Mandarin speakers are so much in demand. Many were studying Chinese via free classes in Luang Prabang and dreamed of studying or working in China. Younger people especially can talk far more about China than about UNESCO, and often have a very tangible connection with China through Chinese manufactured material goods. This is only likely to increase once the railway connection is operational as the possibility to move large amounts of stuff and numbers of people much more quickly becomes a tangible reality.

Starin may well be horrified at the thought of Luang Prabang changing and its tourist demographic moving from backpackers to Chinese tourists, who often travel in groups, yet this is increasingly evident in Luang Prabang and I have heard complaints about them from tourists from Western countries. A French tourist with whom I shared a table in a coffee shop was quick to tell me how the Chinese have no respect for the local culture. This is a comment to which I made a private smile, given that the same allegation has been made about tourists from Western countries for at least the past two decades. Starin would perhaps find it comforting that very few Western tourists I encountered in Luang Prabang in the years since railway construction began have any knowledge of the coming railway. This of course interjects different needs into an existing tourist market as tourist priorities are not universal either. Tourists from other countries though might well be pleased. Wandering through the heritage zone on the way to work one day, I overheard a Chinese tourist remark to her Lao tour guide: “it’s really nice here, but it’s so underdeveloped. Where are all the high-rise buildings?” This observation demonstrates that ideas about what constitutes development are by no means universal. One person’s ideas of utopia, development and beauty would therefore appear to constitute nightmare flaw or shortcoming to another (Laungaramsri 2014; Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011; Nyíri 2006). Interestingly, Starin comments at length on the illegal wildlife trade in Luang Prabang, particularly of the component parts of animals. This remains an issue in Luang Prabang, yet customers are overwhelmingly Chinese and arguably it is largely this market that is driving this trade (Vigne and Martin 2017).

In Luang Prabang itself, some participants argued that UNESCO could and would take an important role ensure that such a project did not change the special nature of the town, which is so appealing to visitors from Western countries and important for the local economy. Others I interviewed were considerably more concerned that Chinese influence would change Luang Prabang irreparably by bringing Chinese influence both in substance and in form much closer to the town
than previously and there being seemingly no meaningful regulation on this whatever the official statements might say to the contrary. Of course, this is still a new and emerging phenomenon but concerns about China’s ability to transform Luang Prabang far outweigh any grumbling about UNESCO I have ever documented in Luang Prabang.

Conclusion

Thirty years before Starin wrote the essay that is the focus of this paper, a young scholar writing shortly after the revolution that established Laos as a one-party state and looking back at the period of time preceding those tumultuous events, observed that: “Luang Prabang is a city whose surface beauty is only the outward evidence of an inner charm which has captivated numerous visitors. That charm, though present throughout Laos, is most obvious in the glorious setting of Luang Prabang itself” (Barber 1979, i.)

Charm in a glorious setting: this is the sort of image that Starin had in her imagination when she went to Luang Prabang. Instead, she found a place subject to different agendas and drivers of change, only one of which is UNESCO. She was understandably concerned at what she saw as the negative transformative qualities of mass tourism increasing since the UNESCO designation, which appeared to threaten this image of tranquility. Yet over forty years since Barber made this statement, and over a decade since the publication of Starin’s essay, people still travel to Luang Prabang in search of such images. This suggests that if mass tourism really is endangering Luang Prabang, the predictions of doom have not yet been realized fully. Belief in that dream remains prominent in the imaginations of many visitors to the city. Some visitors are disappointed that this is not realized, some of which may be indeed due to over commercialization of Luang Prabang. In this, Starin’s somewhat whimsically subtitled Letter from Luang Prabang may have some resonance. But that only reveals the surface of a situation that has much to do with different agendas and multiple actors. UNESCO may be partly responsible for encouraging people to visit, but what of individual and collective agency amongst actors in Luang Prabang?

That this question is complex is unsurprising. The picture is inevitably multifaceted. Starin’s neat division between tourists vs locals inevitably does not hold up. Some locals may well complain about bad tourist behavior but much of the local population continues to argue that UNESCO certification is a good thing for Luang Prabang as it encourages people to come in the first place. Some of these locals may decide to rent out their old homes in the center and move elsewhere. While this may depopulate the center, it also indicates that they are not passive subjects swept along by a tsunami of tourism engendered by a kiss of death from UNESCO that sets this chain of events in motion. Likewise, the demography of tourists in Luang Prabang is undoubtedly changing, as numbers of tourists from so-termed Western countries show decline, and those from East Asia increase. Even among these labels, needs and expectations vary.

Presumably, the contemporary local authorities of Luang Prabang, in their desire to portray Luang Prabang as an ancient city of timeless splendor, would be thrilled with a statement such as Barber’s that extols the city’s charm and beauty but does not venture too far into its politics. Moreover, they would also be pleased at a statement that focuses squarely on the splendor of Luang Prabang, rather than the increasingly contentious issue of the presence of China. I have argued here that even
if the question of the merits of UNESCO certification of Luang Prabang were even still a particularly pertinent one, it is now secondary to a much bigger issue about how the city is changing now.

My argument here has been that the issue of rising China in Luang Prabang was presented to me as of being fundamentally important and was the one thing on which seemingly everyone has an opinion. I have demonstrated here that this cannot be reduced to a simple yes/no question. This manifests in grumbling about the numbers of Chinese drivers, Chinese businesses and growing numbers of Chinese people. China is entering the landscape of Laos, and Luang Prabang, in fundamental ways. In sum, my research suggests that UNESCO is not perceived as a major driver of social change amongst the population of Luang Prabang and given the very low levels of knowledge about UNESCO and what it does, I consider the extent to which it ever was by locals to be highly questionable. Instead, China and Chinese influence in Laos is a major force of change. For me, this is the important question to watch and which will bring about societal change. While some Chinese will of course visit Luang Prabang out of an interest in heritage, the idea that UNESCO alone will bring about the ultimate downfall of Luang Prabang is an outdated one. In 2019, this is not the only relevant question for contemporary Luang Prabang.

I have criticized Starin for an orientalist agenda, and failing to recognize local agency in her article, especially around how people negotiate the everyday experience of heritage in Luang Prabang. To be clear, I am not criticizing Starin or any of the other scholars in this article for not considering the issue of China in Laos. This is a recent phenomenon. I am however arguing that expecting to find a straightforward answer to whether something is good or bad is restrictive and unhelpful. The issue of China in Luang Prabang and Laos generally, is a complicated one that is multi-faceted and often contradictory as the city is subject to competing forces including UNESCO, Chinese interests, diverse groups of tourists, local and national authorities as well as the changing local population. This is a question that can and should be continued elsewhere. As a long term expatriate in Luang Prabang told me in August 2019, this is not a question of whether rising China will be a “kiss of death” for Luang Prabang but a question to approach with the mindset of “it is super difficult, but I am trying to be open-minded about it”. I am not ruling out the possibility for actual or implied conflict between the agendas of new Chinese in Luang Prabang and UNESCO's agendas to preserve the town's historic center. Considering how UNESCO's work changes as Luang Prabang changes, this would be a very fruitful area for further research over the coming years.
Bibliography


The Worship of Lao Royalty (Buddha) Idols as a Marker of Lao Migrations and Identity in Thailand

David Lempert

Abstract

While most studies of Buddhist art and structures in Southeast Asia seem to focus on the nature of Buddhist worship (rituals and beliefs) as well as on meaning and technique of the art, itself, Buddha idols can also be seen as cultural markers with a political purpose. In copying the Khmer King Jayavarman VII who fashioned Buddha idols in his own likeness in the late 12th century, at least one Lao King, Setthathirat/Xayasettha/Sayasetthathiraj (called Chaychetta in Thailand), in the 16th century, also fashioned Buddhas in his likeness and of members of his family. Many of these Lao royalty Buddhas are identified and worshipped in Thailand, as are other Lao Buddhas, providing a track of different eras of Lao influence and voluntary and forced migrations while also serving as markers for reflections on Lao and Thai identity, the role of Buddhism, and history and change in the region.

Keywords: Thailand, Laos, Lan Xang, Setthathirat, Chaychetta, Buddhism, identity

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Introduction

In the city of Nong Bua Lamphu (“Lotus Lake”), one hundred kilometers south of Vientiane and the Lao border, in the Issan region of northern Thailand, where the Thai government has erected statues and shrines to promote worship of an early 19th century Lao lord, Phrawo Phrata, who died fighting against the reassertion of Lao authority here, the main figure of worship is not this ill-fated lord. It is, in fact, the Lao 16th century King Setthathirat, who ruled over most of Issan during the era of the Lan Xang (“One Million Elephant”) Empire from its newly repositioned capital of Vientiane. Although the story presented in the Tourist Administration of Thailand (“TAT”) guide to

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The Worship of Lao Royalty (Buddha) Idols

The city and province, and in most scholarship by Thai and foreign historians, archaeologists, religious studies scholars, and art historians, is that the people of Nong Bua Lamphu and elsewhere in Thailand are worshipping “Buddhas” and “Buddhism” and its precepts, the statues that they are bowing to here, including that of Phrawo Phrata, are not “Buddha”. Like many “Buddha” idols in Thailand and Laos, the central “Buddha” statue at Wat Si Khun Mueang/ Wat Khon Chum Nam Ok Bo has a name that all of the locals know. It is “Luangpho Phra Chaiyachettha”, the “Royal Buddha Setthathirat” (using the name “Chaiyachettha” that is used in Thailand as the form of the name for King Setthathirat, one of many spellings that also includes Phrao Chao Jayachetariraj and Chaichetthathirach).

In the city of Nong Khai, some 20 km east of Vientiane, along the Mekong and also in Thai Issan, the city’s main worship “Buddha” also has a name and is, in fact, not Buddha and not a male. The Buddha is “Phra Sai” at the Wat named for it (Wat Pho Sai/ Pho Chai). It is well recognized as an image of a young daughter of the same Lao King, Setthathirat. Another “Buddha” in Nong Khai in Wat Si Muang Nong/ Si (Khun) Muang, close to the Mekong River, is also known as Setthathirat. Both in Bangkok, the Thai capital, and in Nakhon Nayok Province, about 100 km east of Bangkok, the idols worshipped include the “Phra Som”/”Phra Serm”, an idol of King Setthathirat’s older daughter.

In Nakhon Phanom and nearby Tha U-Then, some 300 km east of Vientiane in eastern Issan, on the Mekong, two “Buddhas” worshipped here are copies of the symbol of royal authority in Laos, including that of the former Lan Xang capital of Luang Prabang, the city of the “Royal Beautiful Buddha”. One, worshipped Buddha, the Phra Seng, may be an idol representing another one of Setthathirat’s children, while a second one is a copy of the “Phra Bang”.

The “emic” (internal) perspective given by the Lao and Thai governments and peoples today as to their religions and worship is that they are worshipping the Buddha and the teachings of Buddhism (including non-materialism and low consumption, peace and non-violence, study, and equality in human relations).

The “etic” (external) perspective observed by outsiders and acknowledged by the Thai and the Lao is that a large number of the “Buddhas” being worshipped are actually images of Setthathirat and his family and of royalty and blend with the worship of statues of authority figures that both the Lao and Thai governments continue to build today (often expensive and monumental objects of bronze and other metals). Many of the statues are mixes of precious metals and are in temples with other monumental objects including towers built by the Kings. The real worship here may be political authority and hierarchy, wealth, empire and ethnic lineage (such as ethnic ties of the Lao to their kings in the absence of other cultural markers of identity).

Recent articles on Buddhism in Thailand and Laos have highlighted the way that the religion merged aspects of Brahman elite worship with Buddhism such that Kings that the religion itself embedded worship of the kings and hierarchy in ways that have institutionalized royal control, well beyond simply using the religion as a form of “legitimacy” but (Skilling, 2007; Grabowsky, 2007). Anthropologists have also commented on the worship cults of kings in the region that extend to statues, with such worship viewed as separate from Buddhism because the statues are outside of wats (Evans, 1998).

In contrast to the usual studies in archaeology of Buddhas, by artistic style and in
reference to specific philosophical teachings and symbols, and also in contrast to the common anthropological approach to the study of identity through rituals and psychologies of meaning, this piece combines a traditional cultural geography approach with that of political anthropology and material culture. It looks at culture from the perspective of markers of objective physical presence and of power relations, as seen from an outsider’s “etic” perspective rather than an insider’s “emic” view.

This piece begins to re-examine some of the “Buddhas” of the Lan Xang era during the period of Setthathirat as a possible attempt to create a worship cult similar to that of the Khmer King Jayavarman VII, whose monuments and personalized (“Buddha”) statues can also be found in Issan and in Laos up the Mekong River. The article also seeks to examine the spread and continued worship of other key Lao imperial Buddhas in Thailand with Lao expansion in the 14th to 18th centuries during the era of Lan Xang, followed by forced migrations under the Thai in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It also examines the claims of “theft” of Lao Buddhas from Vientiane in 1828 as a form of war booty by the Siamese or capture of worship symbols to be placed within the Thai hierarchy of authority and control in an attempt to examine how current elites also use these specific statues and Buddhism in the context of worship cults and authority structures.

Background:

While the Mon peoples living in the areas of contemporary Thailand and Laos seem to have largely followed Buddhism during the 8th to 11th century, both the Khmer kingdoms that began to conquer parts of this territory, coming from the southeast, and the various Tai groups (Tai Lao, Tai Yuan, Tai Lu and others) that began to enter this region from the north and northeast, did not. All of them faced similar issues of conquest in confronting these populations and in adapting to these territories. The question was how they would establish control over the peoples and lands (issues of extermination, assimilation, or accommodation) and how they would define their own identities as empires on these territories. Though the Tai peoples were of common origin (and the Siamese and Lao may be of common origin as Tai-Lao, coming down the upper Mekong) (Chamberlain, 1998), they also had to make these decisions in confronting each other. While there are few contemporaneous records of the history and while much of the history has been destroyed, they did leave trails of art in the form of “Buddha” statues that may also tell the story if they can be deciphered.

Although the Mon “Buddhist” peoples whom the Tai groups encountered are historically viewed as practicing forms of Buddhism that are similar to those of the religion that is recognized today and that was historically developed in India, there is in fact no written record that clearly identifies the religious practices and the forms of belief and worship that existed, how it merged with local beliefs and evolved. What is clear from historic remains is that Indianization that entered the Gulf of Thailand around the 4th and 5th centuries B.C.E. (largely from the Gupta Empire and perhaps a sign of Gupta imperialism (Author, n.p.1)) brought both Brahman/Hindu religious gods and symbols alongside Buddhism. Although Buddhism largely replaced Brahman worship in the region after the fall of the Gupta Empire from the 6th century, in the Haripunjaya Mon imperial kingdom in the north of Thailand, the Mon Dvaravati regions in Issan (eastern,
Mekong area) and Laos, and in areas falling under Nan Zhao in northern Thailand and Laos and possibly further south in Thailand towards the Gulf (Author, n.p.2), possibly indicating that the masses (following Buddhism) had thrown off outside kings (whose ceremonial power was reinforced through Brahmanist ceremonies for elites), there was some reintroduction of Brahman elite worship from conquests by the Chen La Khmer in the 6th and 7th centuries (throughout Thai Issan) and then from the 9th to 12th centuries with the spread of Angkor throughout Issan, Laos and much of central and parts of northern Thailand.

In the view of some archaeologists, the type of Buddhism that did exist and continued to emerge in Thailand was actually one that merged much of the symbolism and idea of Brahman elite worship within the practice of “Buddhism” but without the specific gods or worship symbols of Brahmanism (e.g., linga and yoni worship) (Skilling, 2007).

Under Khmer rule in southern Issan, even though Angkor still followed Brahmanism, King Jayavarman VI (1090 – 1108), established Buddhist worship at Phimai, though the first “Buddhist” King of Angkor (or perhaps just one of its regions) is generally considered to be Dharanindravarman II (1150 – 1160), a half century later, whose son, Jayavarman VII (1181 – 1218) ultimately converted the royal religion of Angkor to Buddhism. In giving up Brahmanism, however, Jayavarman VII seemed to add a change into the concept of Buddhism that is visible in his major monuments in Angkor and throughout many citadels in the area of Cambodia, as well as in worship throughout the empire into Thailand and Laos. He placed his image on towers in Angkor Thom and Banteay Chmarr (in northwest Cambodia on the Thai border and the pilgrimage route from Angkor to Phimai) as well as on Buddhas.

Jayavarman VII is said to have made 23 statues of himself that he spread throughout the Angkorean Realm and that are termed the “Jayabuddhamahanatha” (“Jaya-Buddha-Great Savior”/“Great Protector of the Victorious Buddha”) in establishing the ideal of the the ideal of the righteous Buddhist monarch (dhammaja) (Grabowsky, 2007). Though apparently only four of the 23 are reported, one of them is in the center of Vientiane, at the That Luang, carved in green sandstone, where it remains today (Jacques, 2005). In moving the Lan Xang capital to Vientiane and then rebuilding the 12th century Angkorian Khmer temple on what may have been a much earlier (perhaps Gupta era, 4th – 5th century) with a tower style emblematic of his reign, Setthatirat also directly confronted the Jayavarman VII statue and this tradition of Buddhist kings. (Ngaosrivathanas, 2009, p. 21). Another is in Sukhothai, which was a Khmer regional capital before the arrival of the Tai-Lao (Sukhothai) conquering it, so the model of a king as Buddha was also known to Sukhothai, which means it also would have been known to Lan Na and Ayutthaya, as well. (The other two Jayavarman VII Buddhas are in Phimai and Angkor).

The idea of the Kings as Buddhas was quickly integrated into the traditions of these new Tai empires by various kings starting in the 13th century, but most of the early statues of Kings that are identified from that time did not appear to merge the images of royalty into Buddhas (Apinan, 1992). Instead, they were life sized statues with crowns, suggesting that they were to be “future” Buddhas. This seems to be similar to the earlier (9th century) Nan Zhao tradition of relief carvings of kings as separate from Buddhas in the grottos around Dali in Yunnan (Author, n.p.2).
Historians report on specific kings who embraced the idea that they were future Buddhas, starting with the Sukhothai King Lithai (1346 – 68/74), grandson of Ramkhamhaeng (Skilling, 2007) and Lan Xang King Chakkaphat (King Sainya Cakkhaphat Phaeo Phaeo, 1442 - 79) and every king thereafter, with many of them also calling themselves cakkavattin or universal conqueror (Grabowsky, 2007, at 126).

To link themselves with Buddhism and to place their stamp on it, there are two things that are clear that Kings did, but a question mark on the third; the creation of Buddhas in their own image following the example of Jayavarman VII. Each sought control of specific historic Buddhas of particular rarity and value which served as the “palladia” or protective, cult images that symbolized their power in much the same way that the “crown jewels” signified the power of royalty in European kingdoms. Two of the distinctive Buddhas that have served this role and that predate the arrival of the Tai are the Phra Keo (the “emerald Buddha”, a small topaz crystal Buddha idol) and the Phra Bang (a gold, silver and bronze cast Buddha idol less than 1 m high that may be of Khmer origin). The other thing that they did was rebuild and reconsecrate the Indianized brick (or laterite and sandstone) towers that were mostly of the Khmer, possibly earlier (Gupta Empire) with specific shapes and motifs while also building newer ones as well as new pagodas, to house Buddhas and other worship objects. The various styles of lotus shapes, corn cobs, or inkwell/carafe (more typical of Lan Xang) for these towers offered an example of their power as a form of this “tower power”. Although it can be debated whether they maintained the phallic symbolism of Brahmanism in creating these “Buddhist” towers on mostly Brahman structures, many architects suggest that the form and underlying motives are implicitly those of sexual representations associated with royal power as much or more than a way to reflect “Buddhist” teaching (Sudjic, 2011). None of them, however, are “face towers” like those of Jayavarman VII with his image on the towers.

Most of the attention in the study of Buddhas in the region and their relationship to political power has focused on the specific palladium Buddhas, the Phra Bang and Phra Keo and those of other Buddhist kingdoms like Lan Na but less on other named Buddhas, many of them of brick and stucco and largely immobile without destroying them, or just too large and heavy, but large numbers of them recognizable and mobile, or on the towers and their patterns of construction. Probably given the even greater difficulties of study, there is less attention on the specific patterns of destruction, disfiguration and transformation of Buddhas and what it means though the attempts to reconfigure Khmer statues, including the Jayavarman VII Buddha at the That Luang in Vientiane, are common and are often found as a result of natural damage or restoration (Author, 2015).

Art historians and religious studies experts have also focused on style of Buddha statues as a way of offering cultural markers of trade and influence, and to some extent for study of ethnic identity and interactions. But with the initial identifications and categorization of architecture and art as “religious” (e.g., “Buddhist”), there has been little focus on these objects in terms of specific political meaning or loyalties. Tour guides in Vientiane today, for example, are conscious of what they consider the “invasion” and assimilation of Thai Buddha styles in new Buddhas in Laos and what this means for Lao identity (in discussions with the author at Wat Sissaket in Vientiane in 2016) but there seems to be a reluctance by tour guides and monks to open discussions with foreigners over the meaning of worship of Buddhas that are named for royal family members.
While there are often records on the dates and processes of casting of Buddhas and specific locations and transport, there don’t seem to be any explanations of the more than a few “models” or namesakes (like the three Buddhas named after Setthathirat’s daughters). Nor has there been much of an attempt (if any) to try to retrace Lao patrimony and Diaspora, though there has been some recording as part of studies by the Thai of heritage that remains in Thailand (Damrong Ratchanuphap, 1973 [1925]). Neither the Lao nor Thai governments nor private individuals even with potential economic gain (in the tourism industry) seem at all interested in tracking the heritage. The author of this article tried for five years to bring the Lao and Thai governments together with several international agencies and donors (including the U.N. system and overseas Lao groups) as well as private publishers and the tourist industry, along with other governments. Indeed, while it may still be possible to try to track the heritage of Lao artisans from the Vientiane capital as well as specific artifacts in a way that could reconstruct some of what existed, this author believes that there are specific political reasons why both governments actually prefer to maintain animosities and also to destroy heritage and identity (Author, n.p.3). Most researchers seem to take this as a cue and simply follow suit.

Although it may be impossible to estimate how many identifiable Buddhas there were in Lan Xang (some preliminary methods of estimates are offered below, in connection with estimates of wats as well as estimates of specific Buddha towers (“pra thats”/“chedis”), there are in fact many that it is possible to track as a starting point. The typical inflammatory rhetoric in publications in Laos and Thailand seeks to promote conflict and place blame rather than try to measure the heritage. The history of one of Setthathirat’s main wats along the Mekong river in Vientiane, written by one of the elderly monks, charges that, “Most of [the] cultural varieties and precious heritages (sic) of the nation including Buddha images (sic) were taken away by invaders and foreign aggressors” (Samaleuk, 2015, at 35). Usually the blame is placed on the Thai and the order of King Rama III in 1828 that the Lao claim was to “return Vientiane to the wild animals and to leave nothing behind but weeds and water” (Ngaosyvathn, 1989, p 55), echoed by foreign works claiming that, “the Siamese made a complete holocaust of Vientiane” (Hall, 1968 at 451).

In fact, most of the stucco Buddhas were not destroyed, nor were the large immobile cast Buddhas, and many Buddhas were in fact transported by migrating Lao groups where they remain at wats in Thailand. A large cache of Buddhas remained concentrated in Wat Sisaket in Vientiane.

In the same way that Tai groups continued to worship the Buddhas of the Khmer and Mon (and in northern Thailand, the Nan Zhao), competing Buddhist groups do not seem to have destroyed this heritage but just moved it along with peoples. The Ho, pushed south by the Chinese from Yunnan in 1873, did ravage Laos, burning villages and looking for gold artifacts under Buddha towers, but there is no actual evidence that they “excavated and took away all precious, religious and cultural intinquities (sic) of the Lao people” as the Lao monk at Wat Ong Tue claims (Samaleuk, 2015, at 35), since there is no report of any Lao artifacts turning up in China or elsewhere as a result of the Ho. They left the one ton gold, silver and bronze Ong Tue Buddha in Vientiane intact, and the other named Buddhas that were taken (and protected) by the Siamese and migrating Lao were already gone some 50 and 100 years before.
Probably most of the actual damage has been international sales and neglect of Buddhas and other patrimony in recent history that are usually not mentioned in the same sentence as these past movements of objects, though their impact could be greater. The Lao government in 1955 destroyed the large stucco Buddha at Wat That Luang that dated back to Lan Xang. What has happened more recently might be described as a systematic assault by the international community on heritage and identity, if not a gang assault. Though they are only foundations, the World Bank completely uprooted the remaining brick foundations of the central Lan Xang royal wat of the kings, the Wat Klang, in order to put up its new offices (to be completed in 2016) directly on the area of royal authority along the Mekong in Vientiane. Meanwhile the Luxembourg Development’s tourism project, LANITA has opened the door to the sale and destruction of an ancient Lan Xang site at the Mekong and Passak River mouth, where the French era home of Prince Souvannouvong has already been demolished (in 2015). In repaving the main road through the city partly along the Mekong, the Japanese paved over what remained of the inner city wall around the old royal palaces and wats while Chinese investors have now dried up both the royal Nong Chan lake in the city center and the That Luang marsh/lake for high rise constructions.

While sites are destroyed and Buddhas disappear in both Thailand and Laos, there seems to be an interesting linked phenomenon in both countries that may actually shed light on the meaning of Buddhas and of worship practices. Both countries continue to erect large cast bronze statues that are objects of worship in many ways parallel to those of the Buddhas in wats. Though they are not presented as Buddhas, they are all very similar in clothing and type to each other as historic political and military leaders.

**Methodology of the Search**

There are in fact thousands of wats and shrines with Buddha statues from fallen wats, as well as hundreds of Buddha idols in museum collections, and many more uncounted in private collections in Thailand (and now in museum and private collections overseas). While that makes it impossible to systematically identify every idol and to track its origin, it is possible to find those Lao Buddhas in Thailand that are specifically recognized as having historic importance as well as to search for and record others by using specific markers (Lao migrant communities, ancient Lan Xang communities with Lan Xang towers). Generating such a list is not a systematic inventory or full measure, but it is enough for preliminary hypothesis raising and testing.

**General Research Approach to Generate Information on Lao Buddhas**

The goal of this research, as part of a much larger study to record and examine the geographic distribution of heritage throughout Southeast Asia and to consider the various perspectives and uses of that heritage (conducted since 1998, with a focus in Thailand and Laos between 2009 and 2016), was to identify both the structures and the important worship objects of the Lao in Thailand by specific types, periods and origin, to map it on the geography and to offer anthropological and cultural interpretations of the history as written by various parties, as viewed by people living around it, and as interpreted by an outside observer (the author) without specific attachments to the local religion, culture, or politics (i.e., offering an “etic” perspective). In identifying heritage by
period, a goal has also been to associate heritage with particular historical figures (royalty, intellectuals, other historic figures) as a way to considering the choices they made and the impacts it had, as well as what remained and what did not remain. The research was not conducted with a specific hypothesis about Lan Xang or Buddhism. It was to look at social change, ethnicity, and environmental adaptation in the region by surveying the monuments and presentation of history.

In general, the author has been cataloguing hundreds of historical and cultural sites as a guide to helping peoples to recover, interpret and apply their lost and forgotten history so as to take pride in their past, to build understanding and tolerance with different peoples, to preserve their heritage for tourism and beauty of their communities, and to understand the historical relationships of peoples to their natural and social environments in ways that can promote healthy and sustainable communities (Author, 2012; 2013). The author has made systematic visits to every province in eastern Thailand (Issan), to much of northern Thailand and central Thailand, visiting local museums, towns and sites on local roads.

In investigating and researching sites and in travelling to sites over the course of several years (2009 to 2016), the author relied on Tourist Administration of Thailand (TAT) guidebooks, museum presentations in provinces, works of previous archaeologists surveying sites in the region (Vallibhotama, 1980, 1981; Solheim and Gorman, 1966; Damrong Ratchanuphap, 1973 [1925]) as well as architectural and artistic comparison information (Krairikish, 2012) as well as regional history (Coedes, 1968; O’Reilly, 2007; Higham, 2002; Viravong, 1964; Stuart Fox, 1998; Ngaosrivathanas, 2008, 2009; Ngaosyvatahns, 1989; Goudineau and Lorrillard, 2008; Finot, 1917; Evans, 1999).

For part of this period, while living in Vientiane, the author maintained ties with the Lao Institute for Social Sciences, History Department and with other government organizations working on history and culture and tourism, starting with the year of the 450th anniversary of Vientiane as the Lan Xang capital of Setthathirat (2010).

For the purposes of this article, material has been culled from a large database of sites that were visited and sites that were reported but not yet visited and fit into categories of Buddhas that are mobile and immobile and that are either directly identified as Lao from the period of Lan Xang and the Lao kingdom of Vientiane, before 1828 or for which there is a good indication that they may be Lao (in a wat next to a Lao pra that or in a wat of a Lao migratory community).

Since a number of Buddhas in the study were linked directly with Setthathirat and his family, there was also an attempt to try to classify and compare these idols with any that were similarly identified and remain in Laos itself, to see if they fit any particular pattern. This is described in the Results section, below.

**Difficulties in Research and Classification**

While it may seem relatively straightforward to visit wats, view and record information about Buddhas, the task is much more difficult. Generally, the older the idol, the more important it is, the more it is available for worship (i.e., exhibited) and publicized, and the more that it is written about it. This seems to be the case no matter the cultural or geographic origin of the idol in Thailand, with no apparent discrimination or suppression of information about Buddhas even originating in Lan Xang or representing Lan Xang royalty. At the same time, there does not seem to be any way to
measure this or to know whether or how the current treatment differs from that in the past. By contrast, idols (and temples and structures) that are identified with other religions like Brahmanism, that do not fit with current religious ideology are ignored, or they are remade or transformed into Buddhist worship sites and idols, with the earlier and actual history ignored. For many older objects in Thailand, generally before the 8th century, actual archaeological history is often rewritten to fit with mythologies of Buddhism and information has no confirmable historic basis, but that is not the case with objects created in the Lan Xang era, though it is with those “found” and used as symbols of power in that era (like the Phra Keo and Phra Bang) (Author, n.p.3).

In many cases, Buddhhas are named, often with linkages to political authority as “Royal” Buddhhas (“Pho Luang”) and these names can be helpful in offering information about them, but often the names are generic such as “Gold Buddha” or “Big Buddha” that offer no historic information while other names are suggestive of some kinds of relationships like the “Child Buddha” but leaving only speculation.

Problems in recording and identification include the following:

- It is very hard to even see most Buddha idols. In most wats, monks do not leave the temples open and the historic Buddhhas are inside main temples that are locked for protection.
- There is very little information at most wats. Little is posted and there is often little agreement about it. Monks are not concerned with the history.
- Identification is difficult because inscription stones are often moved. Bronze Buddhhas have also often been moved. There are rarely writings or dates on the Buddhhas or accompanying inscription stones. There are Lao semas at a number of Mekong sites like Phon Phisai but they are ancient Lao and not translated. The process is a bit like identifying old family photographs in a relative’s albums. The keepers of the albums knew the people in the photos at the time they were taken, but they do not put captions on their photos. Fifty years later, almost all of the information is gone.
- Many of the Buddhhas have been “renovated” in ways that change the facial features or the entire form of the statue. Even if there were distinguishing markers that could be used to identify the models for the Buddha idols that go beyond specific artistic style of given periods (e.g., personal birthmarks, scars), they don’t appear on Buddha idols.

Baseline Numbers and Patterns of Buddha Idols

In the capitals of Tai empires like Sukhothai and Lan Na, there are very clear associations between kings and members of the royal family, specific temples that they constructed and pra thats/chedis that served as their funeral towers, as well as specific idols that they constructed at these sites. Although the assumption that these Buddhhas that are directly associated with kings and royal families are not images or representations of these historic figures, at least in particular eras, this practice of construction in the capitals and then throughout the empire (either by the same kings or by local leaders under those kings, often members of the royal family itself or married into it) offers some way of calculating the number of Buddha idols one might expect to exist for Lan Xang and their original locations.

The pattern that appears in Luang Prabang starting in 1342 and partly in
Vientiane before it was capital and then when it became a capital is that kings and local governors established specific temples as their worship sites and maybe funerary sites. Sometimes there are also sites for queens (the Phon Sai in Vientiane is associated with Setthathirat’s wife), for kings in waiting (Setthathirat’s temple in Chiang Mai could fit this pattern there, though he was also considered the ruler there) and for the Maha Uparat (“Vice King”) usually sent to a second city. In Laos, there are specific stupas and sometimes associated stucco Buddhas and bronze Buddhas, some immobile (due to size) and most mobile associated with kings. In some cases, wats are connected with other family members, which makes counting even more difficult, such as two small wats for brothers of Setthathirat in Vientiane (Wat Pa Po and Wat Pa Sai). That could be the pattern with Buddhas, similar to the Pharaohs of Egypt building statues at their pyramids. In the case of Tai empires, there also appear from the time of Sukhothai and Lan Na to be key statues at major points of the empire: borders, strategic areas, and major cities.

There is no inventory of Buddhas in Lan Xang and no way to guess what existed at given times other than by accounts of succession of kings, construction of particular wats, and expansion of the empire. There are contemporary accounts of the numbers of wats in Vientiane but not of the Buddhas. The total number of wats in Vientiane before 1827 was: somewhere between 50 and 120. The Ngaosrivathanas (2009) cite sources that counted 120 temples (A.H. Franck, 1926), 42 (Delineau, 1893), or 62 (Raquez, 1902). The total number of kings was: 50 over 500 years, which roughly correlates with the number of royal family wats that appear in Vientiane. Note, however, that this is just Vientiane and does not include the large expanse of Lan Xang throughout Thai Issan.

There do not appear to be any counts of the number of Lan Xang stupas that were built by 1820 in Vientiane, areas of Lan Xang that are in contemporary Laos, and the areas of Lan Xang that are now in Thailand (almost half of the land area of the empire). Not all wats have visible stupas but for those that did, many of these brick stupas are only visible by excavation since only the bases remain and they may have disappeared, with the ruins buried. The number of Lan Xang Buddhas (not counting the Mon or Khmer Buddhas that were precious, such as the Phra Keo) could have been 50 to 100 in Vientiane and several dozens more throughout Issan. Some may have had stucco Buddhas, some immobile bronze, some moveable bronze, and some more than one type, some with less. Sites with older Buddhas from Sukhothai and Mon would not have needed additional special Buddhas. So this also makes counting difficult.

This author’s best guess would be to look for some 150 special Buddhas of the Lan Xang era of all types, including the immobile stucco and immobile cast. Since less than one fifth of this number seems to be recorded and remaining in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, one might expect to find up to but not much more than 100 in Thailand. However, there are now well more than 50 Buddhas in the Ho Phra Keo and Wat Sisaket and there is also no way of attaching many of them back to specific wats or to specific people, which would reduce the total. Many more may be in museums and in private collections as a result of theft.
Results

The survey locates some 34 identifiable Lan Xang era Buddha idols in Thailand (that are immobile and that are mobile, including nearly half; some 16 that may have been moved from Vientiane as a result of Siamese invasions: some 5 that were reported taken by the Siamese not including one reported lost and copied, 6 moved by migrating Lao from their original locations, and 5 with unclear histories). These include the pre-Lan Xang era palladium Phra Keo Buddha and copies of it and the Phra Bang. These are out of some possible 100 speculated Buddha idols, though possibly the number located is actually closer to the actual number of created idols.

A large number of these (6 defined, probably 2 others, possibly 12 more; i.e., up to 20 of the 34) seem to be idols of King Setthathirat and his family or possibly later kings, fueling the idea that Lao Buddha worship is royalty worship alongside worship of objects of wealth (gold, silver, bronze, emerald) collected by kings. Placement also suggests that the idols served to mark off territorial power, confirms other indications that they were used to define political power, and promoted identity through linkages with the power of ancestral kings like Setthathirat.

Overview of the Survey Information

The idols can be classified and examined in a series of categories: those that are royal Buddhas of Laos in two types (the palladium Buddhas, Buddha idols of King Setthathirat and his immediate family that seem to be images of the family, possibly later royal family, and related worship idols), Setthathirat era Buddhas that may or may not be likenesses of the king, and several other Lao Lan Xang era Buddhas of various types that may or may not be idols of the royal family from different eras. The idols that are surveyed are presented and described in a series of tables in the appendix and then analyzed by category, below. Each idol is presented by name (if known) and site of current location, time of creation if known, a short description of material, size and characteristics as well as how it is viewed and identified, and a capsule history of the area in which it is found and its relationship to Lao settlement (area of the Lan Xang empire and/or area of Lao migrations or other).

Annex Tables 1(a) includes those four immobile stucco “Buddhas” in Thailand that are identified by various authors (three referenced in the work of the Ngaosrivathanas, 2008) or identified locally (one by this author) as idols of Lao Lan Xang King Setthathat (1550 - 1571), that can be seen in the area of Issan, Thailand not far from Vientiane as well as one other mentioned in sources (the Ngaosrivathanas, 2008) that may be an error or misidentified. Two Buddhas in Luang Prabang, Laos, that are also mentioned as King Setthathirat are included for comparison purposes. Table 1(b) identifies a statue of King Setthathirat’s wife in a wat in Vientiane, that is distinctly a statue but not a Buddha, though the Ngaosrivathanas also suggest that there is a Buddha of Setthathirat in the same wat.

Annex 2 lists some 12 Buddhas that can be found in Thailand (11 in Issan and 1 in Chiang Mai) that are speculatively Setthathirat era Buddhas in a likeness of King Setthathirat and one other that monks mentioned to the author but that the author is unable to locate. There are also two Vientiane Buddhas, one cast of metals under orders of Setthathirat and another of stucco that was destroyed in 1955 but that can be seen in
The Worship of Lao Royalty (Buddha) Idols

photos. Of the 10 identified, one is cast of metal and too big to be moved and one other is metal and transportable but 8 others are stucco. Six of the 10 can be identified as built during the time of Setthathirat’s rule while the other four are likely built during the Lan Xang era according to information from monks and by appearance but could be later than the era of Setthathirat. The idol in Chiang Mai was built by Setthathirat during his period of rule there (1546-48), when he was still a Prince of Lan Xang while his father ruled until he returned to Lan Xang, leaving his Queen, Colapaphe to rule as regent over Lan Na (1548 – 51).

Annex 3 lists only one Buddha. It is a stucco Buddha in an area of Lao migrations of 1779, but it is a copy of a Vientiane Buddha and may or may not be a copy of a Setthathirat idol though it has a different name.

Annex 4 includes only mobile Buddhas that are identified with Lan Xang. There are 19 of these, including one stone that is now covered with stucco. One other may be a recent copy of a Buddha that existed during the Lan Xang era and was lost in the river (the Phra Souk).

These 33 idols can be classified and interpreted as follows:

1. **The Royal Buddhas of Laos: Identification and Classification (Identified):** If (and it is a big "if"), the Buddhas built by King Setthathirat are really part of a worship cult of Setthathirat (either directly of his image or of Buddha idols associated with him directly in some other way), it is possible that more than half of the Lao Buddha idols in Thailand are part of a worship cult of King Setthathirat while another 15% are worship of the palladium Buddhas that represent royal authority. There is a strong suggestion here that either Lao Buddhism since the period of Lan Xang, or perhaps the Buddhist worship by the Lao today in Thailand as a marker of their identity, or both, center around worship of an ancestral king and symbols of royal authority, perhaps in place of Buddhism.

Table 1 takes the data from the annex tables and summarizes them for analysis.

**Table 1:** Classification of Lao Buddhas in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Idol</th>
<th>Number in Sample</th>
<th>Rough Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lao Royal Family</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Setthatharat</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibly Setthathirat or other Monarch</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setthathirat Children (Som and Sai)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Suggested Siblings of Som and Sai, not including lost Suk statue or copy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
King Setthathirat, Children and Suggested 8 24%

**Possible King Setthathirat Total** 19 57%

*Palladium Buddhas and Copies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phra Keo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copies of Phra Keo and Phra Bang</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Possible Palladia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Buddhas named for the metal (including one overlap with possible Setthathirat Buddha)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Palladium Buddhas** 5 15%

Not identifiable or categorizable 8 24%

**TOTAL** 34 100%

This table is rather startling. How credible is it really?

The Phra Bang and Phra Keo palladium Buddhas are well recognized in the literature. The Phra Sing Sang in Mukdahan and the gift Chiang Saen Thong Thip are just this author’s speculation. These are just a small part of the table.

The worshipped gold buddhas, the Ong Teu (“One Ton”) precious metal Buddha is also well known and is named for its weight in precious metal. The “Luang Poo Kham” may or may not actually be “Kham” (“Gold”) and may just be glittering bronze, but Buddha idols in the region are frequently named as “Kham” or “Thong” (“Bronze”) and it is not wrong to document that what is being worshipped is an idol named for its precious metal and not for a particular Buddhist precept such as “equality” or “peace”, and pagodas are routinely named for military victory (“Xay”) or (military) unity (“Samakhee”).

The identification of Buddhas with specific kings is much less reliable. However, there is very specific historical mention of Buddhas cast in Vientiane either in the likenesses or representation of three of King Setthathirat’s daughters, Som, Suk, and Sai (in orders of oldest to youngest) and there is a cult around these Buddhas continuing in Thailand. There are also two Buddha idols that are the symbols of the cities of Nakhon Nayok and Nakhon Phanom that are both identified on site as connected with these three daughters, suggesting that they are also family members (the Phra Ruk Pak Daeng and the Phra Seng). That is already four specific Buddhas for the children of Setthathirat. It is not clear if there were Buddhas cast for any of Setthathirat’s sons during his reign. After Setthathirat’s death there was a disorderly succession, including rule by one of his generals, and Setthathirat’s son Nokeo Koumane did not rule until 1591, some 20 years after Setthathirat’s death. Perhaps this created confusion in the worship statues of the family.

While the evidence that the Ngaosrivathanas use for identifying Buddha idols as Setthathirat is not clear and may be wrong, at least two Buddhas in Thailand are clearly identified as Setthathirat; the one in Nong Bua Lamphu and one at the Phra Keo ruin in Si Chiang Mai, just across the Mekong River from Vientiane.

Figure 1 presents some of these Buddhas in a “family portrait” of Buddha images. Included are the idol of Setthathirat from the Phra Keo ruin in Si Chiang Mai and the four
Buddhas that are mentioned as his children, found in four cities in Thailand. It is hard to see these idols as actual representations of living people, but the statue that is said to be Setthathirat’s Queen is not a Buddha idol and it is also more of a representation of a figure than an actual portrait that could be used to identify a specific person on the base of particular facial or body characteristics.

Although there is no direct historical linkage of two other Buddhas to specific people, the Phra Chao Ong Luang (“Royal King”) Buddha that is called the “Luk Lek” (“Iron Child”) in Mukdahan, and the Luang Po Pra Luk (“Royal Child Buddha”) also suggest that they are members of a Lao royal family.

**Figure 1**: King Setthathirat and Family as Buddhas/Statues (six images below)
Phra Som, Wat Pathum Wanaram, Bangkok

Phra Sai, Wat Phra Chai, Nong Khai

Phra Seng, Wat Si Thep, Nakhon Phanom

Phra Rup Pak Daeng, Nakhon Nayok

Photo Credits: Hue Nhu (1 and 2); Phra Rup Pha Deng from Thailand Travel website photo from http://www.thailandg.com/684/Nakhon-Nayok/Travel-and-Transport/Luang-Phor-Daeng-Wat-Pak-Brahmanee.html; Phra Sai on Google Map, from Billionmore website at http://www.billionmore.com/article/article.php?id=69; Phra Seng on Google Map, from Eddie Hawkins; Phra Som on Google Map, from forums.apinya.com
There are certainly many reasons for confusion in identifying Buddhas as Setthathirat, himself, or other Lao kings. Part of that confusion exists among the experts. The Nong Khai museum, for example, identifies a stucco Buddha from the Wat Yod Keo, in Vieng Khuk, an ancient town across the Mekong River and a few kilometers east of Vientiane and facing the town of Hat Sai Fong on the Lao side, that was the ancient gateway to Vientiane by boat to the That Luang marshland, from about the 7th to 14th centuries, as well as a gateway south to the area of Bang Phuan, where a Setthatirat era stupa is built atop a site much like that of the That Luang, with Khmer influence and possibly an earlier temple terrace of the Gupta Empire (4th – 5th century) (Author, n.p.1). The Wat Yod Keo, itself, has laterite columns that suggest Khmer influence.

This Buddha idol head that is said to be Setthathirat is pictured in Figure 2. Next to it are two similar Buddha heads that are found in the Wat Palei Lai, that are described as from the 14th century. The classification of this Buddha as Setthathirat seems to be a mistake. But that highlights the lack of agreement on how to identify a Buddha as Setthathirat. It also raises the question of whether there already was a practice of other kings in the region copying Jayavarman VII and creating Buddhas in their image. In the 14th century, Vieng Khuk and Hat Sai Fong were under the Sukhothai empire. In 1342, the Tai-Lao leader Fa Ngum established his rule over this area and apparently replaced Sukhothai sovereignty. But there is no record of Fa Ngum Buddhas. Did Sukhothai King Lue Thai create Buddhas in his image in the early 14th century? Did an early Lao King like Samsenthai (1373 – 1417)?

What this seeming mis-identification of a Buddha as Setthathirat suggests is that the worship of Setthathirat, himself, may match the worship of Buddha in the region’s pagodas. No matter what the actual facial characteristics of statues in wats, they are all called “Buddhas”. Yet, for those Buddhas in wats built by Setthathirat, they are known as “Setthathirat Buddhas” whether or not they are the actual image of Setthathirat, himself. The understanding may be that worshippers are worshipping Setthathirat in multiple versions of his image.

**Figure 2:** Setthathirat (?) or a Sukhothai King? (three images below)
Figure 3 presents a number of the Buddha idols that are identified as “Setthathirat” side by side, along with two Buddhas (the two “Ong Tue”, “One Ton” gold, silver and bronze Buddhas) cast by Setthathirat from the same precious metals and at the same time that he cast the Buddha idols of his three daughters.

It is clear that there is no uniform style of these Buddhas as with the Jayavarman VII. Some Buddhas are standing and some are seated. There also does not appear to be any unifying characteristic or feature that differentiates them from a Buddha or that reflects a specific characteristic of Setthathirat. So what identifies them as “Setthathirat” other than the popular notion that they are “Setthathirat”? And where does it come from?

Logically, one might think that the two “Ong Tue” Buddhas, one in Vientiane and one across the Mekong River in Tha Bo, at the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, would also be named for Setthathirat. Instead they are named only for their weight in precious metal, but they are also viewed as Buddhas that Setthathirat cast. And despite being given the same name, they are also a bit different in appearance. Is their worship the worship of the teachings of Buddha, or of huge amounts of gold, of Setthathirat, or of the power and wealth represented by Setthathirat and the Lan Xang empire at its height?
Figure 3: Which Ones are Setthathirat? (six images below)

1. Setthathirat Buddha in the Wat Phra Keo Ruin in Si Chiang Mai
2. Setthathirat Buddha in Suwannakhuha Cave
3. Ong Tue, 4 m high Buddha at Wat Ong Tue, Tha Bo
4. Ong Tue, 4 m high Buddha at Wat Ong Tue, Vientiane
5. Luangpho Phra Chaiyachettha, Nong Bua Lamphu
6. Standing Setthathirat, Wat Sene, Luang Prabang

Photo Credits: Hue Nhu (1,3); Suwannakhuha and Nong Bua Lamphu photos from Thai Ministry of Culture (http://www.m-culture.go.th/nongbualamphu/images/2Travel.pdf); Wat Sene photo on Google Map (from Pallych72)
The Spread of Setthathirat Statue Buddhas (Speculative):

Whether or not the Buddhas that Setthathirat built are his actual image, their placement is indicative of attempts to mark both the center and the reach of his Lan Xang empire in much the same way that Jayavarman VII seemed to place his Buddha statues at the center and some key corners of the Angkorian Empire.

Table 2 analyzes a total of 20 Buddha idols that are either recognized as Setthathirat (4 in Thailand plus 2 in Luang Prabang) as well as 12 speculative in Thailand plus 2 in Vientiane, noted in Annexes 1(a) and 2. Although there are more speculative Setthathirat Buddha idols in Laos, these are not included in the table. However, in order to avoid distortions in the findings, the author checked sites along the Mekong River on the Lao side and found only one area with a speculative Setthathirat Buddha (across from Phon Phisai and the mouth of the Huai Luang, and near to the mouth of the Nam Ngum River, some 40 km east of Vientiane, described below).

**Table 2: Distribution of Recognized and Speculative Idols of Prince/King Setthathirat**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Rough Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Centers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitals (Luang Prabang, Vientiane/Si Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane and Si Chiang Mai alone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateways (Rivers to and from Vientiane)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Centers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Capitals and Centers</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas of Strategic Control</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Natural Sites</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conquest and Reconsecration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lan Xang Borders (including Chiang Khan, Ban Phai)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table suggests that about one third of the sites are consistent with Lan Xang’s imperial borders while another 30% were in the capitals of Vientiane, Luang Prabang and (temporarily, in alliance with Lan Na when Prince Setthathirat was King there) Chiang Mai. There is a large concentration of sites on the rivers and gateways into the capital of Vientiane around the Mekong, and Huai Nam Mong, including the holy site at the start of the river, at Suwannakhuha. There are also sites at five regional centers.

The sites are mapped in Figure 4, which shows this more clearly. Sites are clustered around Vientiane and also arranged at areas of Lan Xang’s borders in Thailand, around Issan. The later Lao migration area of Ubon and its Buddha idol that may be a copy of Setthathirat is also included for reference.

Some sites are missing here and they point to areas where more research may be needed to identify Buddhas that have perhaps been moved or destroyed, or where the
Buddhas that exist there now and are not Setthathirat could be other kings, particularly areas where there was construction by Vientiane’s last King Chao Anou.

The sites that Setthathirat reconsecrated (ancient sites that were from the Khmer era and possibly earlier 4th – 5th century Gupta Empire) with towers rarely seem to have Buddhas from the era of Setthathirat. The author speculates that the destroyed Buddha at That Luang in Vientiane (in 1955) could have been Setthathirat but it may have been later. The other ancient sites where Setthathirat built pra thats are the Bang Phuan, just south of the Mekong about 20 km east of Vientiane, the That Sikhottabong near Thakhek in central Laos, and the That Phanom, south of Nakhon Phanom. There are Buddhas at all of these sites and those at the last two are associated with Chao Anou.

The only possible Setthathirat Buddha idol that this author has identified on the Mekong going east is the one mentioned above across from Phon Phisai, at Wat Manosila in the village of Simano Tai. The Buddha idol here is inside of a small tower, much like the Setthathirat Buddha at Nong Bua Lamphu. However, there are also no Setthathirat Buddha idols mentioned around Phon Phisai, where there are also temples of Setthathirat and his father, Phothisarat.

There are speculative Setthathirat Buddhas in regional centers in the center of the empire in Issan at Nong Bua Lamphu and nearby Si Bun Rueang, as well as two in Loei city some 40 km east of the mountain border at Dan Sai where there is a speculative mobile Setthathirat at a site of one of his towers, but the map shows an absence of sites in northern Issan where there were important regional centers. No Setthathirat Buddha idols are identified in Sakhon Nakhon or Nong Han, where one might expect them.

While the holy site of the Suwannakhuha cave is marked with a probably Setthathirat Buddha, the nearby holy mountain site of Phou Couvins/Phu Prabat does not seem to have any where one might expect one.

Although not included in this analysis, there are other stucco Buddhas of the Lan Xang era that might have attributions to other Kings. For example, just inside the western gate of the Vientiane citadel, at Wat Im Peng, a stucco Buddha in a small exterior shrine is identified as “Inthathiraj” or “King Intha”. This may be an idol of King Inthavong, Chao Anou’s brother and predecessor, in the early 19th century.
The Spread of Lao Buddhas in Thailand:

Of 17 mobile Buddha idols that may have been taken from Vientiane (including the Phra Souk that is identified by lost in the Mekong) out of an unidentified total, only a small number seem to have been taken to Bangkok as war booty or symbols of power and conquest. More seem to have been taken with Lao migrant communities (forced migrated or factions allying with the Siamese) that remain part of worship in those communities as well as by the Thai there not of Lao descent, today.

Annex 4 reports a total of 20 at 19 sites. The table analyzes 18 of these, not including the gift Buddha from Lan Xang to Lan Na or the Setthathirat Buddha in Dan Sai, Loei (reported on a different table), and not including the Phra Suk that was lost in the Mekong and copied, but including one speculative site in Singburi that the author has not visited and adding the Phra Keo in Bangkok for a total of 19.
Of these, we can only be certain that 10 were moved by the Thai or by migrating Lao under rule of the Thai, since another 9 of these could have simply existed in the area of Lan Xang during the era of Lan Xang. Moreover, of 6 idols moved to Bangkok and Ayutthaya, the two in Ayutthaya could have been given as gifts during the era of Lan Xang. All that is really clear is that the Thai moved the three Buddha idols of Setthathirat’s daughters, losing one, bringing one to Bangkok and leaving another in Nong Khai, and that they also took the Phra Keo and a copy of the Phra Bang to Bangkok.

There is simply no evidence here of the massive theft of Lan Xang Buddhas that the Lao claim occurred at the hands of the Siamese. Moreover, at least two important Lan Xang Buddhas, the Phra Rup and the copy of the Phra Keo, in Ubon, stayed with Lao migrants, not with the Siamese. Similarly, not only did the Phra Sai remain with the Lao community in Nong Khai, but the important Phra Seng and copy of the Phra Bang were either brought to or remained in the area of east Issan, in Nakhon Phanom, on the Mekong, where there are also Lao communities and where they are close to the Lao border. It is also possible that the Phra Som, brought to Bangkok and placed in a wat outside of the central citadel, also remained with a Lao community.

Table 3. Mobile Lao Buddhas Identified in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location/Type of Transfer</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Rough Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lao Migration in 1770s or 1820s</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Palladium or Copies of These</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Royal Buddhas (Phra Rup)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer to Capitals (Ayutthaya, Bangkok), not counting the lost Phra Souk</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Theft of Palladium/Power Objects</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Possible Movement with Lao Community (Phra Som)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Possible Gift</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Recorded</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Palladium or Copies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Royal (Phra Sai)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The spread of these Buddha idols is shown in Figure 5. This map also partly follows the placement of existing Lao communities in Thailand, today, both remaining in Issan from the Lan Xang era and in some of the areas where they were forced migrated by the Siamese, though with many important areas not included (such as Nakhon Ratchasima).
Figure 5: Lao Moveable Buddhas, pre-19th Century, Found in Thailand
Discussion

The worship of Lao Buddhas in Thailand that are associated directly with or are idols of Lan Xang King Setthathirat and members of the royal family, or that are the palladium Buddhas of Laos or simply aggregations of precious metals and wealth, raises questions about both the actual worship of Buddhism and about the construction of Lao (and Thai) identity.

Is there really “Buddhism” in Thailand and Laos, or is what is called “Buddhism” really just a spirit and royalty worship cult that is just an extension of earlier Tai animist “phi” (spirit and “ghost”) worship that now just uses the veneer of Buddhism as part of ritual to promote ancestral allegiance? Are the Lao and Thai really worshipping the teachings and the symbols of Buddhism, or just cloaking their existing leaders and spirits in Indian robes and symbols in order to fit into a larger hierarchy?

If ideals of peace, humility, harmony with nature, and equality are all trumped by worship of the statues of kings, of material objects and power of those kings (gold and glitter), promoting wars and nationalism in the name of those kings, and for hierarchies of power and wealth that also continue and that are reinforced by those symbols, would it not be more appropriate to call the religions of Thailand and Laos, “modern Indianized ancestral king and spirit worship cults” than Buddhism?

It may not be "new" to note that the Lao and the Thai worship statues of political leaders and also continue forms of animist worship and superstitions. But it may be new to find this so deeply embedded in the idols of Buddhas, in wats. What is it that the Lao and Thai are actually worshipping in their pagodas?

Others have commented before on statue worship and cults in the region (Evans, 1998; Grabowsky and Pappe, 2011) as well as on superstitions and materialism that seem to be reflected in the worship of the Ong Tue Buddhas, with worship of a ton of precious metal. In Thailand, very recently, the worship of statues has now extended to a new cult where people worship their own “Child Angel” (“Luk Thep”) dolls and even have monks bless them in the pagodas (BBC, 2016).

For a long time now In Thailand, worship of the King and the King’s family as well as of the monarchy itself is essentially a state religion that is legally enforceable with imprisonment and there are shrines and images of the royal family everywhere in Thailand. That seems to be a direct continuation of the earlier tradition and/or for the Lao, a reinforcement of the Lao worship of their past royal family in Thailand.

In Laos, the government, much like the Thai government, has also constructed statues to specific Kings for worship, including Setthathirat at the That Luang, though there has been an avoidance of documenting Lao history and culture outside of the country’s current borders or identifying the country’s Buddhas directly with particular kings like Setthathirat. The goals seems to be to eliminate the worship of the monarchy other than for the last Vientiane King, Chao Anou, whose worship the French promoted as a way to help establish a nation-state antagonistic to Thailand and defined by its current leadership. Their goal seems to be to establish identity based on loyalty to the current regime and its foreign sponsors (though now increasingly including Thai investors, particularly in hydropower).

While Soviet Russia’s gift statue of the second to last king, Sissavong Vong, in 1974, with his hand on the constitution, ironically remain in Vientiane, but with modest
worship (Evans, 1998), the effort to promote worship of the leaders of the current government since 1995, such as the half-Vietnamese leader, Kaysone Phomvihane, Prime Minister and President from 1975-93 (pictured on the currency and in statues in front of government buildings at the regional level, as well as in front of the new national museum in Vientiane, 6 km from the Mekong) have not drawn much of a worship cult. The Lao government has also avoided promoting much of a cult around the “Red” Prince Souphannouvong, titular President from 1975-91, probably in fear of bringing attention to the royal family; recently demolishing his French era home on the Mekong. Private worship largely focuses on photos of his brother, Prince Petsarath, the last Vice King (“Maha Oupharat”) who served as Prime Minister under the French and American era regimes and died in 1959. Nevertheless, it appears that the view of identity in Laos, to create markers of difference with the Thai, whose culture has common roots, is to focus on different leaders and their worship, the different writing script of the language, and some different clothes and foods rather than any deeper cultural differences. While the Lao government allows for worship at pagodas and private fundraising for them, the destruction and sale of Lao heritage far surpasses that in the past.

In Viet Nam, the practice of ancestral leader worship and worship of the current leadership is also direct, even with much weaker Buddhist traditions. Ancestor worship, the Chinese religious practice, continues in Viet Nam in the households and in community temples (“dinh”) and spirit temples (“den”) and with it, there has long been a worship of powerful regional kings. In Viet Nam, there is often a worship of couplets, of the King and his general (e.g., Ly Thai To and Ly Thuong Kiet, from the 11th century) that is viewed today in an emerging worship for political leader Ho Chi Minh and his more recently deceased general, Vo Co-Author Giap. In addition to public worship shrines, statues of Ho Chi Minh are now increasingly worshipped in pagodas, including one in the Vietnamese community pagoda in the center of Vientiane, Laos.

The data on the worship of Lao Buddhas seems largely to confirm what anthropologist Marvin Harris noted about Buddhism and other major global religions, nearly 40 years ago, as essentially means of serving nationalist political goals, generally favoring elites.

“The demystification of the world religions begins with this simple fact: ...the ruling elites who invented or co-opted them benefitted materially from them. By spiritualizing the plight of the poor, these world religions unburdened the ruling class of the obligation of providing material remedies for poverty. By proclaiming the sacredness of human life and the virtue of compassion toward the humble and weak, they lowered the cost of internal law and order. At the same time, by convincing enemy populations that the purpose of the state was to spread civilization and a higher moral code, they substantially lowered the cost of imperial conquests” (Harris, 1979, at 110).

The worship of ancestral King Buddhas, wealth, and national palladium symbols seems to be the additional element to add to this list.

Conclusion:

Although this article does not focus on the construction of identity of the estimated 20 million Lao (in Thai Studies in 2004) within the borders of Thailand today, who continue to be assimilated into Thailand along with the Lao Phuan (from the
The Worship of Lao Royalty (Buddha) Idols northeast of Laos), one of the remaining markers along with the Lao alphabet and Lao foods and clothing is the worship of royal Lao Buddha idols personified by King Setthathirat and members of the royal family including his daughters. This specific idol worship, while described as “Buddhism”, may actually be continuing to connect the Lao with their kings in a form of ancestral worship within the form of Buddhism, inside wats.

Rather than focusing on the teachings of Buddhism, it may make more sense to look more closely at the actual form of the worship of idols, towers, and their connection with Kings, power and wealth, as well as to look at the development of Buddhism in Lao and Thailand in terms of cultural continuities from early Indianization and the transfer of a Brahmanism cult of the leaders alongside the cults of Buddhism for the masses, and to consider how these have merged.

The version of Buddhism in Issan appears to have been to replace the Buddha with the king and to replace the linga and lotus fertility and power approaches with the “tower power” of local kings as well as palladium Buddhas as signs of central authority.

If Setthathirat and his family are being worshipped today in areas where Lao Buddha idols are found, it may also be that several other kings are being worshipped as Buddha idols, as well. In areas of Issan and along the Mekong, it may be that the Buddhas of Vientiane’s last King, Chao Anou, are Chao Anou. Similarly, some of the early Sukhothai Buddhas, including those of “U-Thong” style with long faces, may be images of kings. Perhaps what is reported as the artistic style of “U-Thong” Buddhas is a representation of royal family members with ties to U-Thong who had these particular features.

The current attempts to create Lao and Thai identity by governments through maligning each other for historical events that occurred two centuries ago and by promoting worship of specific Kings and family members in order to promote an identity based on hatred and mistrust, may in fact be how identity was constructed historically between the two groups. On the other hand, it neglects any positive focus on cultural identity and difference that has meaning in the modern world. The data on Lao Buddhas presented in this study seems to suggest that the Siamese theft and destruction of Lao Buddhas is grossly overrepresented, particularly in comparison to damage done to heritage that continues today.

In blaming each other and also refusing to work together to protect heritage that is being destroyed, to promote pride in heritage that flows over borders, and to welcome the tourist revenue that it would also bring, it is also glaring that neither country focuses on the actual genocide of the Khmer, reported as some 300,000 in 1819 in the area of Khorat, which led to the forced relocation of Lao onto their lands and was a prelude to the 1827 war between Vientiane and Khorat (Ngaosrivathana, 2010 at 165). Despite their Buddhism, neither country has yet to deal with these not so distant genocides and other human rights violations.

This study also opens the door to reconstruction of Lao culture and re-imagining of Vientiane through the tracking of its Buddha idols as members of the royal family, and tracking of some of the Lao migrations. Scholars may wish to try to reconstruct Vientiane and its crafts villages, as well, by noting the spread of traditional Lao craft villages in the Lao migrations into Thailand, though this is only a small sample of crafts and many have changed, with many historic products no longer available or of value (e.g., stic lac; war elephants; clay pipes; essential oils).
References


### Annex 1(a): Identified (Immobile) Setthathirat Buddhas, 1560 (2 in Laos used for reference, 4 identified and 1 unidentified in Issan)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddha Name and Site Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dating of Buddha</th>
<th>Characteristics of Buddha</th>
<th>History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat Pha Mahathat/ Wat That</td>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>Setthathirat era</td>
<td>Stucco Buddha Described as one of three by Ngaosrivathanas (2008) (Not visited)</td>
<td>Capital of Lao/ Lan Xang from 1342 to 1560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrachao Sip Paend Sork, Wat Saen/ Wat Sene/ Wat Sensoukaram</td>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>Setthathirat era, 1560</td>
<td>Standing Stucco Buddha Described as one of three by Ngaosrivathanas (2008). The Buddha is outside in a pavilion (built in 1980) and is about 4 m high with long arms at its side. The facial features are no longer distinctive.</td>
<td>Capital City of Lao/ Lan Xang until moved to Vientiane around 1560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wat Si (Khun) Muang/ Si Muang Nong</td>
<td>Nong Khai</td>
<td>Setthathirat era</td>
<td>The Standing Stucco Buddha Statue in this wat near the Mekong, is three meters high and has been freshly painted gold color. The body and hands are elongated. It is described as one of three such stucco standing Buddhas by Ngaosrivathanas (2008). [See photo in Figure 3]</td>
<td>The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled the area across the Mekong from Vientiane extending from the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side), with Nong Khai in the middle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tham Suwannakhuha,</td>
<td>Nong Khai province</td>
<td></td>
<td>In the center of this huge mountain grotto is a 2+ m high (with another 2 m of a naga headdress behind it) stucco seated Buddha from the time of Setthathirat that has distinctive features. [See photo in Figure 3] There is an inscription stelae about 2 m high from the Lan Xang era (maybe same as the Setthathirat statue), and some small pra thats.</td>
<td>See above. This is the mountain source of the Huai Nam Mong river that heads to the Mekong River around Tha Bo, just east of Vientiane.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wat Phra Keo/ Pak Keo Phra That (in the Thai Military)</td>
<td>Si Chiang Mai, Nong Khai</td>
<td>1560</td>
<td>There is a large stucco seated Buddha on the temple ruin, facing the Mekong in the area of the Phra Keo of Si</td>
<td>Si Chiang Mai is the name given to the part of the Vientiane capital of Lao Lan Xang that is across the Mekong and is now under Thai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Worship of Lao Royalty (Buddha) Idols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Camp</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Chiang Mai. [See photo in Figure 1 and Figure 3] The Ngaosrivathanas claim that the Buddhas may have been brought here in 1779 though it is hard to see how a stucco Buddha was moved (2008).</th>
<th>control. The area of this wat was within the city walls that were built on both sides of the river.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Ngaosrivathanas claim that the Buddhas may have been brought here in 1779 though it is hard to see how a stucco Buddha was moved (2008).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luangpho Phra Chaiyachettha, Wat Si Khun Mueang/ Wat Khon Chum Nam Ok Bo Nong Bua Lamphu</td>
<td>Not dated but identified as Setthathirat</td>
<td>Nong Bua Lamphu is an ancient Lao/ Lan Xang era town within the ambit of Vientiane to the south, in a small valley.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The eroded stucco seated Buddha is about 2 meters high and is placed within what may have been a brick tower from an earlier era since there are Khmer ruins here in this wat. [See Photo in Figure 3]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Annex 1(b): Identified (Moveable) Setthathirat or Family Statues in Wats, 1560 (0 in Laos, 1 in Issan)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddha Name and Site Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dating of Buddha</th>
<th>Characteristics of Buddha</th>
<th>History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed, Wat Im Peng</td>
<td>Vientiane (?)</td>
<td>Setthathirat era, 1566</td>
<td>There are two standing female Buddhas here of stone, of different dress and proportions. The Wat brochure describes them as Setthathirat’s wife (probably Colapaphe) and the wife of the Pegu king, Bouvangnong [Bayinnaung] with the suggestion that these are statues related to a peace treaty. [See photo in Figure 1]</td>
<td>Vientiane came under Lao /Lan Xang control as of 1342 and served as a second capital, becoming the main capital in 1560 as the empire began to expand southwards in Issan and also in northern, central and southern Laos. It was less vulnerable to attacks from the north, down the Mekong, but still came under attack from the Burmese and Vietnamese in the 16th century and then the Siamese in the 18th century.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Annex 2: Possible (Immobile and Mobile) Setthathirat Buddha, Sethattirat Era (2 in Laos for comparison; 12 in Thailand, including 1 not located)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Buddha Nam and Site Name</strong></th>
<th><strong>Location</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dating of Buddha</strong></th>
<th><strong>Characteristics of Buddha</strong></th>
<th><strong>History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laos</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>1566</td>
<td>This is a 4 m high specially cast Buddha of gold, bronze and silver, said to contain one ton of precious metal. [See Photo in Figure 3]</td>
<td>Vientiane came under Lao /Lan Xang control as of 1342 and served as a second capital, becoming the main capital in 1560 as the empire began to expand southwards in Issan and also in northern, central and southern Laos. Setthathirat consecrated this ancient temple from the Mon period by casting this huge Buddha after moving the capital to Vientiane in 1560. It is said to have been finished about the time of an invasion from Burma without information on the model used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat That Luang [Destroyed]</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>Lan Xang</td>
<td>This was a huge seated stucco Buddha. [Visible in Photos (Ngaosrivathana, 2009, p. 35) but destroyed in 1955]</td>
<td>Setthathirat rebuilt the tower at That Luang that dates to at least the Angkorian Khmer era of Jayavarman VII, whose statue is on the site, and possibly to the 4th – 5th century according to legends of the city. There is currently a worship shrine for Setthathirat here at the Wat That Luang Neua where a monk protects the memory of Setthathirat but there is no Buddha at the shrine. Setthathirat would have likely placed a Buddha near to the tower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issan, Thailand</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ong Tue, Wat Ong Tue</td>
<td>Tha Bo, Nong Khai</td>
<td>Setthathirat era, 1569 (7 years to build)</td>
<td>This is also a 4 m high specially cast Buddha, made after the one of the same name in Vientiane, but it has a dark color to it. [See Photo in Figure 3]</td>
<td>The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled this area across the Mekong from Vientiane and it was already a second capital in the early 16th century with structures of Setthathirat’s father, Photthisarath, extending from here at the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat Thuen</td>
<td>Nong Khai province</td>
<td>Said to be Lan Xang era</td>
<td>The stucco Buddha here has been reconstructed with an entirely new face. This is an old temple with brick remains and a Lan Xang era pra that.</td>
<td>The area is on the Huai Nam Mong River, about 30 km from the Mekong and about about half way to Suwannakhuha and was long an area of Lan Xang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location/Idol Name</td>
<td>Location Details</td>
<td>Builder Details</td>
<td>Buddha Details</td>
<td>Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat Cham Rong?</td>
<td>Nong Khai</td>
<td>Said to be a</td>
<td>Monks in Nong Khai say that there is a Setthathirat Buddha at a site with this name but we have been unable to locate it. It may be an old name for one of the wat ruins with Stucco Buddhas along the Mekong east of Nong Khai.</td>
<td>[Same as above]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phra Chai Sri Sumang/Luang Pho Sriwichai, Wat Po Sri/Hai Sok</td>
<td>Si Bun Rueang, 40 km south of Nong Bua Lamphu</td>
<td>Built by Setthathirat, 1663 (though some sources say the wat is later, 1767)</td>
<td>The wat is recognized locally as linking to the Wat Si Khun Muang in Nong Khai where there is a Setthathirat era Bronze Buddha. [Not visited]</td>
<td>Nong Bua Lamphu is an ancient Lao/Lan Xang era town within the ambit of Vientiane to the south, in a small valley. Si Bun Rueang, 40 km south, is directly on the Pong River which is a major tributary into the Chi River and part of Lan Xang expansion from the time of Setthathirat and earlier. Photo from: <a href="http://www.m-culture.go.th/nongbualamphu/images/2Travel.pdf">http://www.m-culture.go.th/nongbualamphu/images/2Travel.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Pho Yai, Wat Mahathat</td>
<td>Chiang Khan, Loei</td>
<td>1564</td>
<td>This is a several meter tall, standing stucco Buddha. It is called the “Large Royal Idol” but no features are linked to Setthathirat.</td>
<td>This is a corner of the Mekong River as it comes south from Luang Prabang to Vientiane and it was long a part of Lao/Lan Xang in its control of the river.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat Sisonghak/Si Songrak/Srisongrak</td>
<td>Dan Sai, west of Loei</td>
<td>The tower and wat are built by Setthathirat, 1560</td>
<td>The Buddha idol has a headdress of 7 nagas and is shown only once each year. It has similarities to the one in Suwannakhua. [Seen only in photos on site at the wat].</td>
<td>The wat is recognized locally as linking to the Wat Si Khun Muang in Nong Bua Lamphu. This is the border of Lan Xang and Ayutthaya with the stupa in recognition of the border agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat Phon Chai</td>
<td>Loei center</td>
<td>Lan Xang, 16th century</td>
<td>This is a 3 m high stucco Buddha with the long ears of</td>
<td>Loei is in a river valley connecting to the Mekong River and along the mountains that create a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Province</td>
<td>Time Period</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pra Chao Yai, Wat Pra Jiao Yai</td>
<td>Ban Phai, south</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>The large stucco Buddha, called the “Big King Buddha” is about 3 m high and 2 m across. With its big lips and almond eyes, this gold leaf covered idol looks like a Lan Xang era Buddha from roughly the 16th to 18th centuries. There is no pra that.</td>
<td>The area is on the Chi River valley and is about as far south as Lan Xang extended, directly south of Vientiane about 200 km, probably reaching here around the time of Setthathirat. (The furthest southwest expansion may have been another 80 km further west to the mountains but it is possible there was Lao Lan Xang expansion here a bit further south.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of Khon Kaen</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat Klang</td>
<td>Suwannaphum</td>
<td>16th to 19th Century</td>
<td>The seated stucco Buddha here could be from the 16th century, time of Setthathirat. The two small brick pra thats seem later.</td>
<td>This area marks a southern border of the Lan Xang empire (or maybe of the later Vientiane Kingdom) into Issan. The founders of Khon Kaen are described as a migrating group from Roi Et and Suwannapoom/Suwanapum in 1797 under a chief named Piamuangpaen, coming first to the town of Baambungborn. In Roi Et, Katiyawongsa led (forced or voluntary defecting/Siamese allying Lao) migrants from Mueang Thong (Suwannaphum) in 1775 at the time of the Siamese conquest of Lao.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?, Wat Pra That Phon Than/ Pon</td>
<td>Just South of</td>
<td>Lan Xang era, 16th</td>
<td>The 3 m high, 2 m wide stucco Buddha that monks say is a Lan Xang Buddha from the 16th century. This is typical of those generally found closer to Vientiane, with an image that could possibly be that of Lan Xang King Setthathirat</td>
<td>Lao were here during the Lan Xang era and then during migrations in the era of Phra Wo from Ubon just to the southeast (described below) in the late 18th century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>Yasothon, near</td>
<td>century.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Chi River</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phra Chao Yai (“Big King”), Wat</td>
<td>Phutthaisong</td>
<td>1657, but the wat is</td>
<td>This is a seated, life-sized, (&quot;Big King&quot;) Buddha idol in Laterite covered with stucco, Lao Style.</td>
<td>The age and description of this site suggests that a Lao community was forced migrated here, probably from Vientiane though perhaps Lao Phuan (Lao originating from Xieng Khuan, northeast of Vientiane) from elsewhere, after the destruction of Vientiane in 1827. However, the dating of the Buddha and the fact that it is stucco and probably immobile suggest a Lan Xang era Lao community here at a southern border.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong/ Wat Srisarat</td>
<td>District, Sisa Raet village</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Chiang Mai

| Phra Supunychao/ Suppunyuchao, Wat Chiang Yeun | Chiang Mai, outside the northern gate | 1546 - 48 | This was a homage temple with a giant seated stucco Buddha. The stupa is connected with Lan Xang ruler Setthathirat who was selected King here while his father was King of Lan Xang, at the time Lan Na was crumbling. | Neither Lao or Thai historians are very clear on the relationship that existed between Lan Xang and Lan Na when "Prince" Setthathirat served as "King" of Lan Na; whether it resulted from conquest or a de facto alliance (against the Burmese and the Siamese) and tributary relationship. There is an indication that Lan Xang did attack Lan Na in an attempt to absorb it under Setthathirat that failed. Whatever it was, the period is limited to rule by Setthathirat and his wife. |

Annex 3: Possible (Immobile and Mobile) Copies of Setthathirat Buddhas by Lao in Thailand, Later Eras

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddha Name and Site Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dating of Buddha</th>
<th>Characteristics of Buddha</th>
<th>History (and History of Arrival and Lao Community if Outside Laos)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issan, Thailand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pra Chao Yai Indra Plaeng, Wat Luang/ Maha Vanaram/ Wat Indra Plaeng Mahaviharan</td>
<td>Ubon Ratchathani</td>
<td>1779</td>
<td>The large stucco and gold leaf covered Buddha here, 5 m high and 3 m wide, is Lao style and is claimed to be one of three; described on site as a copy of one from Vientiane. [There is a Buddha of this name that we describe below, taken from Vientiane to Ayutthaya, the Phra Im Plaeng that is a small bronze. Is this a “large” (“Yai”) copy of it?] It is more like the large stucco Buddha at the Wat Im Peng (dated to the Sukhothai period) and the one from Si Chiang Mai in Figure 1 than it is like the Ong Tue Buddhas.</td>
<td>This is the founding temple of the Lan Xang royalty who arrived here during the period of the Siamese occupation of Vientiane and the split of allegiances among the Lao royalty and regional leaders. Chao Phra Ta (the father of the lord Thao Kham Phong who founded Ubon under the Siamese), moved to this area from the east (Champassak) under the armies of Taksin in the late 18th century. Lao accounts see Phra Wo (Voraphita) as a traitor, furthering attempts to destabilize the Vientiane (and Champassak) royalty of Chao Anou by creating another faction on the “Thai” side of the river. This is an area of large Lao migrations and the center for other migrations westwards in southern Issan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1779 (?)</td>
<td>[Wat photo and description in the Nakhon Phanom Museum, but site not visited and not located. Is it the Wat Phra Indra Plang?] Information in the museum describes a stucco Buddha that is said to be one of three and similar to one in Vientiane. It sounds like it is linked with the Pra Chao Yai Indra Plaeng in Ubon that was built by Lao migrants but it is possible that it has an earlier date.</td>
<td>Nakhon Phanom was long an area of Lan Xang on the Mekong, with wats in the town dated to the 8th century, and the Buddhas in the Wat Pho Si and Wat Si Thep suggest that this was a Lan Xang town. The area history does not make it clear if there were Lao migrations here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Annex 4:** Specific (Mobile) Buddhas Identified as Lan Xang, in Thailand (20 total at 19 sites: 2 in traditional areas of Lan Xang; 4, possibly 6, taken in migrations; 5 taken as trophies including the Phra Sai and possibly 2 others; 1 given as a gift to Lan Na; and 3 to 5 unclear in Issan) and one copy of Lan Xang Buddha taken as a trophy but lost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddha Name and Site Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date of Buddha</th>
<th>Characteristics and Discussion of Buddha</th>
<th>History of its Arrival and of Community Here</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issan Thailand</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phra Seng, (another member of Setthathirat’s family ?), Wat Si Thep</td>
<td>Nakhon Phanom</td>
<td>1562 but the wat is much later, 1859</td>
<td>This is a 2 meter high seated Buddha image said to be one of the series cast at the same time as that in the Wat Pho Sai in Nong Khai. [See Photo in Figure 1]</td>
<td>The area is well down the Mekong river from Vientiane and nominally was recognized as a separate kingdom (Sri Gottapura) until it was probably fully absorbed into Lao Lan Xang during the time of Setthathirat, when his armies battled tribes to the west of here (Attapeu). The arrival date of the Buddha is unknown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy of the Phra Bang Buddha, Wat Tai Phum</td>
<td>Tha Uthen, Nakhon Phanom</td>
<td>1465 (?)</td>
<td>The 80 centimeter high copy of the Pha Bang in Luang Pra Bang, has a simple face and hair style and is in the center of a small worship house built for it, flanked by two other Buddha images</td>
<td>Similar to above. There were said to be two copies of the Phra Bang in Luang Phra Bang. It is not clear how it ended up here. (The other is said to be in Bangkok.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pho Sai in Wat Pho Chai</td>
<td>Nong Khai</td>
<td>The wat is 1562 but the Buddha was not here until 1828</td>
<td>This is a small “gold” (bronze or gilded) Buddha, seated, about one meter high. Though described as a princess, it is not clearly feminine and the facial features are not distinctive. [See Photo in Figure 1] This is one of three Buddhas in the name of Lao princesses, daughters of Setthathirat: Som, Suk (believe lost in the Mekong), and Sai. The wall murals depict the theft of the Buddhas in 1827 as part of the destruction of Vientiane, with the Phra Sai arriving and the Phra Souk sinking. (What is being worshipped here?: the destruction of Lan Xang by Lao-Issan in sadness or Siamese in victory?)</td>
<td>The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled the area across the Mekong from Vientiane extending from the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side), with Nong Khai in the middle,. It is said to have been taken from an identified site in Vientiane in 1828 and brought here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Copy” of Phra Suk, Wat Luang</td>
<td>Phon Phisai, Nong Khai</td>
<td>? The original would have been cast in 1562 and probably remained in Vientiane until falling into the river near here in 1828.</td>
<td>The original Phra Suk was lost in the river near here. It is not clear when this copy was cast or what it was modeled on. [It is said to be around the area of the Chedi Luang Pha Presouk, but we did not see it]</td>
<td>Phon Phisai is a major Lao/Lan Xang town on the Mekong, about 60 km east of Vientiane, around the place where the Huai Luang (passing Udon Thani and possibly connecting to the Chi River that goes through southern Issan) reaches the Mekong and just across from the mouth of the Nam Ngum River on the Lao side. The Lao/Lan Xang empire controlled the area across the Mekong from Vientiane extending from the mouth of the Huai Nam Mong River, east to the mouths of the Huai Luang (both on the Thai side) and the Nam Ngum (on the Lao side), with Nong Khai in the middle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phra Thong and others, Wat Pho Si Nakhon Phanom</td>
<td>Lan Xang</td>
<td>The seated Buddhas here, including the “Bronze Idol” (Phra Thong) are small and in a tiny shrine in the center, facing the river.</td>
<td>[See above] This one may have arrived during the Lan Xang era.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Phra Sing Sang, Wat Si Bun Reuang | Mukdahan | Phra Sing Sang, looks to be a 16th century Buddha similar to those of Setthathirat’s family in similar idols (like those now in Nong Khai). It is a seated Buddha with a 1 m lap and about 1.2 m high, with towered hair. - There is a palladium Buddha of Lan Na called the Phra Sing, also said to be of Sri Lankan origin and a gift from Sukhothai to Lan Na, that is now in the Wat Singh in Chiang Mai (built by founding King Mengrai’s great grandson, Khan Fu in 1345). There are said to be two copies of it in Bangkok, one the Phra Buddha Sihing at the Royal Palace. We do not know if this idol is connected, though Lan Xang may have made or taken a copy. | The Lao claim that they were here as early as 1342 and the shrines in Mukdahan and legends are used to reinforce this belief. The Lao history notes that Mukdahan was an offshoot or perhaps a twin city with Savannakhet, known in the 16th century under Setthathirat as “Tha Hae” (Mineral Port) and expanding here in the mid-18th century, though then taken by the Thai. Late 18th century Lao migrations here accepted Siamese sovereignty (though with Lao local leaders) in a break with leaders in Lao under the local leader Chao Kinnari. The origin of the Buddha here is not clear. Chao Kinnari possibly brought (stole?) the bronze Buddha from Vientiane (after 1778) unless this was a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Phra Chao Ong Luang, Wat Si Mong Khun / Si Mongkhon Tai, Royal Wat</strong></th>
<th><strong>Mukdahan City</strong></th>
<th><strong>Undated, but the wat was built in 1767</strong></th>
<th><strong>Phra Chao Ong Luang (here it is called the “Luk Lek”) is shown here in copies but is not displayed. It is said to be of steel and is a tiny Buddha, claimed to have been “found in 1767” on this site.</strong></th>
<th><strong>See above</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Luang Poo Kham, Wat Phou Kham in Ban Phon Thong</strong></td>
<td><strong>Around Prachak Silpakhom in Udon Thani</strong></td>
<td><strong>The provincial TAT guide notes it as Lan Xang without a date.</strong></td>
<td><strong>This is a bronze Buddha (“Royal Gold Man”) that is similar in size and style to the Phra Sai. It has a heart shaped face, a tower headdress, and elongated earlobes. What makes it a bit unusual is that it seems to be a smiling face with slightly bulging eyes.</strong></td>
<td><strong>The area is around the Nong Han wetlands and a tributary to the Huai Luang.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phra Lao Thepnimitr, Wat Phra Lao Thepnimitr Trakan Phuet Phon, 40 km from Amnat Charoen</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lan Xang / Lan Na era temple, with Buddha statue, 1720</strong></td>
<td><strong>“Lao Angel” Buddha? [Not Visited]</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lao began migrating to this area in the late 18th century (and earlier). The Thai claim that the area of Don Mot Daeng, along the river, was founded by Chao Phra Wo Phra Chao Voravongs [described above in connection with the migrations to Ubon Ratchathani]. Lao accounts see Phra Wo (Voraphita) as a traitor. In their view, Siamese General Taksin, a genocidal leader whose bloody excesses ultimately led to his replacement, sought to destabilize the Vientiane (and Champassak) royalty of Chao Anou by creating another faction on the “Thai” side of the river.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Same as above.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>?, Wat Chaiyatikaram Phone Muang, Tambon Mai Klon, Amnat Charoen</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lan Xang Buddha, 17th – 18th Century</strong></td>
<td><strong>The statue is described as 55 cm high. [Not Visited]</strong></td>
<td><strong>Same as above.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phra Kaeo Busarakham (copy of Phra Keo), Wat Ubon Ratchathani</strong></td>
<td><strong>Chiang Saen, 15th century or copy, 1826, in an 1855 wat</strong></td>
<td><strong>Though a huge hall is devoted to the idol, it is a tiny carved topaz crystal. The face is clearly crystal but the body</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Phra Kaew Busarakham Buddha is said to have been brought from Vientiane by the fleeing Lao lord Thao</strong></td>
<td><strong>Same as above.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sri Ubonrattamaran/ Si Thong</strong></td>
<td><strong>seems bronze (or covered over with metal). It looks more like a warrior in decorated armor rather than a Buddha. (The original Pra Keo remains in Bangkok and the second copy is in the royal palace in Bangkok.)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Khamphong. Other sources describe this as one of two copies that were actually made later (around 1826) when the original Phra Keo was stolen from Vientiane under the Thai in the 1770s and that it was one of two used in the Phra Keo temple in Vientiane (or perhaps two if the Phra Keo temple on the Si Chiang Mai side of the city, across the river, had one). According to the Thai history, Lao refugees from the destruction of Vientiane came to Dong U Phung along the Mun River and established a city here. Here, Lao Prince Thao Khampong, titled Phra Phatumwongsa, became the first governor in 1779 and his family ruled here for four generations until 1882.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Luang Po Pra Luk (“Royal Child Buddha”), Wat Sri Thum Maram/ Si Thammaram</strong></td>
<td><strong>In the new hall around the area of the pond is the 16th century Luang Po Pra Luk, (“Child Buddha”), a life sized bronze Buddha on a pedestal. Is this another member of Setthathirat’s “family”?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lao were here during the Lan Xang era and then during migrations in the era of Phra Wo from Ubon Ratchathani (described above).</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Luang Pho To, Wat Maha Phuttharam</strong></td>
<td><strong>There is a huge stucco Buddha here, some 7 m high and 3.5 m wide. Monks here say that the Buddha was a Lao Buddha taken apparently from Vientiane and black in color (not explained). There are no photos and no way to compare it because the current Buddha is bigger than the original one inside it and apparently of a different style.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lao migrants established the original town in Muang Khuhan in 1778 (possibly earlier, 1756) and then moved the center to present day Sisaket in the early 20th century. Phraya Krai Phakdi Si Nakhon Lamduan/ Ta Ka Cha, brought the Luang Pu To from Vientiane at that time.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ayutthaya Capital</strong></td>
<td><strong>Both are bronze Buddhas, roughly life sized. The Samphutta is a seated Buddha on a throne. The In Plaeng is seated with closed eyes and long ears.</strong></td>
<td><strong>These are Buddhas from Vientiane, probably taken in 1776, but they could have been brought earlier as gifts. The TAT guide says the two idols here were</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phra Samphuttha Muni and Phra In Plaeng; Wat Sensanyarak/ Suea</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ayutthaya</strong></td>
<td><strong>?</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Bangkok Capital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phra Som/Phra Serm, Wat Pathum Wanaram (other sources claim it is at the Royal Palace, Ho Yai)</td>
<td>1566</td>
<td>This is one of three Buddhas in the name of Lao princesses: Som, Suk (believe lost in the Mekong around Nong Kong village near Phon Phisai according to one account), and Sai. It is said to be larger than the Phra Suk and Sai. [See Photo in Figure 1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy of the Phra Bang Buddha, ?</td>
<td>1562</td>
<td>There were said to be two copies of the Phra Bang in Luang Phra Bang with one of them somewhere in Bangkok. [Not Located]</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Central Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pha Som Buddha (?)/Phra Rup Pak Daeng in Wat Phramman</td>
<td>Nakhon Nayok (though questionable)</td>
<td>Said to be Lan Xang era. The Lao Buddha here with red lips (the Phra Rup Pak Daeng) is described as the &quot;brother&quot; to the Pha Suk and Pha Sai, meaning that it is the Pha Som or another royal family member. It does not appear to be cast with the same material and is slightly darker. [See Photo in Figure 1]</td>
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<tr>
<td>?, Wat Khwang Weruwan</td>
<td>Singburi</td>
<td>late 18th century</td>
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### Northern Thailand

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pra Chao Thong Thip, Wat Lan Thong</td>
<td>Before 1550</td>
<td>[Not visited] - Note: There is also a Chiang Saen Buddha from 1477 called the Phra Thorn Tip that is in the Wat Singh in Chiang Mai that could be this Buddha or a copy.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Note: Setthathirat’s mother was from Chiang Saen and he came here to study. This Buddha was a gift from Lan Xang.