

Statue and Mine: Chao Anouvong, Chinese Capital, and Rescaling the Lao Nation

Al Lim¹

ABSTRACT:

Chao Anouvong's 8-meter bronze statue stands in the middle of Vientiane, the country's capital. The statue was built as part of Vientiane's 450th-year anniversary, commemorating the fallen hero of Vientiane, who died at the hands of the Siamese after a failed rebellion in the 1820s. He occupies a central place in the Lao landscape and state-sponsored narrative of liberatory struggle for a multi-ethnic nation. This article unpacks the hegemonic narrative of Chao Anouvong through three processes of rescaling, troubling the nationalistic imaginary that has been stretched to fit Laos's geobody. The first section of the paper unpacks the complex situation in the 1820s, as Chao Anouvong attempted and failed his geopolitical gambit. The inclusion of regional geopolitics challenges one-dimensional, pejorative renderings of Chao Anouvong by Siamese historiographers. The second section attends to the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP)'s production of national cultural heritage to construct their political legitimacy, balancing regional dynamics, colonial legacies, and a heterogeneous population. The third section then traces the origins of the statue's materials—a copper gift from Sepon mine. While the copper was gifted by a Chinese-owned mining company, the negotiations were brokered between Lao and Australian parties. Nonetheless, the Chinese acquisition of this mining company parallels a multi-scalar expansion of Chinese capital and labor in Laos, which begs the question—can Chao Anouvong's legacy continue to anchor the Lao national narrative, or will emerging socio-political fissures result in larger cracks in the national façade?

KEYWORDS: Chao Anouvong, nationalism, copper, Laos, China

Introduction

My first encounter with Chao Anouvong was on a warm, balmy night along the Mekong in 2012. I was walking along the river with colleagues from the National University of Laos after organizing a conference on clinical legal education. Chao Anouvong (r. 1804-28) stands in the heart of Laos's capital, Vientiane, incarnate in bronze, overlooking the Mekong River from his 8-meter height. Right hand outstretched and the left clasping a sword, residents and tourists alike stop to pay their respects. Despite losing, he valiantly resisted the Siamese state and occupies a vital martyr position in the country's historical narrative. The inscription below the statue reads, "Monument to Chao Anouvong: Hero King of Laos, the Kingdom of Lan Xang, Vientiane." At that point,

¹ Department of Anthropology and School of the Environment, Yale University

it had been two years since the Chao Anouvong Park opened in 2010 to commemorate the 450th anniversary of Vientiane.



Figure 1: Chao Anouvong Statue (picture by author, 2022)

We strolled through open-air markets as the smell of fried fish permeated the air, eventually approaching the formidable statue. We watched as many folks paid their respects by pressing their palms together to *wai*. This act in itself is a typical one, as one might *wai* to any series of sacred images, statues, or objects. But there was something distinct about this statue. Turning to me, my Lao colleague asks, “Do you know why the statue is facing Thailand?” I shook my head, at a loss for ideas. Noting my confusion, she said, “The reason that it faces Thailand is that our butts face you [as a Thai person] as we *wai*.” We laughed. Well, that was unexpected. I thought there would be some deeper socio-political or religious rationale behind that explanation.² With none forthcoming, we walked off into the cool evening.

This humorous barb against Thais is a symptom of a complicated and often fraught relationship between the two countries. The pathos that accompanies Chao Anouvong’s loss and the demise of Vientiane felt through this statue can be understood as what anthropologist Michael Herzfeld calls “cultural intimacy,” which is a recognition

² Hongsuwan, Pathom, “The Politics of the Chao Anouvong Monument and the Deconstruction of King Representation in Present-Day Laos,” *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 44 (2023): 657. Hongsuwan states that multiple rumors circulate regarding why the statue faces the Mekong River instead of its initial plans to face the president’s office in the east. One rumor suggests that a shaman communicated with Chao Anouvong’s spirit, who expressed a desire to face west. Additionally, the gesture of his hand is described as one of forgiveness toward Thailand.

of parts of one's culture that is externally embarrassing but assures one of common sociality.³ Many resonate with Chao Anouvong's position of fending against a larger power like Siam. The day after the Chao Anouvong Park opened, a Lao national posted publicly on Facebook about how he encountered an old lady crying in front of the statue, speculating that she was "so proud to see our King's face and sacrifice for Laos. I cry like her too when listening to our King's history."⁴

Centuries of rivalry continue to animate contemporary questions of national identity. As linguistic anthropologist Nick Enfield states, "The Lao are keenly aware of the need to maintain and delineate their nationhood in the face of pressures from outside, most notably from Thailand."⁵ These pressures include the dominance of the Thai culture industry through their television shows and the widespread disrespect of those they consider to be *bān nōk* (country bumpkin), especially from those in the Bangkok center. More pointedly, historians Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuipanh Ngaosyvathn posit that "politics in Laos and Thailand today are still spoiled by miscues, misrepresentations, and conflicting assertions regarding the 1827 conflict, and these lapses continue to mar relations between our two neighboring countries."⁶

Yet the story of Chao Anouvong cannot start or end with this dualistic enmity between Laos's neighbor Siam (Thailand) and itself. Expanding beyond this two-country frame, this article explores Chao Anouvong's role in Laos's nationalism, as the country proclaims a multi-ethnic outlook centered on a liberatory struggle. More pointedly, across disparate geographies of north and south, differentiated historical trajectories, and diverse ethnic groups, how has Chao Anouvong come to the forefront of the singular, national Lao imaginary? Sociologist Himani Bannerji explains that those in power at the national level did not attain their position by ascending a natural cultural community, but they reworked cultural elements to create a hegemony that cements their position.⁷ Hegemony works through common sense and ideologies found in civil society, where history has been rewritten or substituted for a curated set of traditions and beliefs.⁸ This article thus unpacks the hegemonic nationalistic narrative of Chao Anouvong through three processes of rescaling, troubling how the nationalistic imaginary has been stretched to fit Laos's geobody.⁹ To do so, I connect scholarship from three dimensions: historiographic work on Chao Anouvong in the 1820s, analyses of post-1975 efforts by

³ Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (2005).

⁴ Tommy Thongsithavong, "yesterday i went to chao anouvong park," *Facebook*, November 9, 2010, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02A9a1cEGgjVJFcKPRBDC49TR374KUafdin49bqY8njodTmgYEQWJLzYR9T5LA5JgUl&id=1131944187.

⁵ Nick J. Enfield, "Lao as a National Language," in *Laos: Culture and Society* (1999), 258.

⁶ Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuipanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 1998), 13.

⁷ Himani Bannerji, "Making India Hindu and Male: Cultural Nationalism and the Emergence of the Ethnic Citizen in Contemporary India," *Ethnicities* 6, no. 3 (2006): 362–90.

⁸ Gillian Hart, "Why Did It Take So Long? Trump-Bannonism in a Global Conjunctural Frame," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 102, no. 3 (2020): 239–66.

⁹ The term "geobody" is adapted from Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994), to capture the territory, practices, and values of a nation. Also, the idea of "rescaling" is adapted from Bob Jessop, "Spatiotemporal Fixes and Multispatial Metagovernance: The Territory, Place, Scale, Network Scheme Revisited," in *Spatiotemporal Fixes and Multispatial Metagovernance: The Territory, Place, Scale, Network Scheme Revisited* (2019), 48–77, to emphasize the structuring practices where scale and networks (international relations) are placed into a relational analysis.

the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) to craft a national identity, and an investigation of the Chao Anouvong statue's materials from the Sepon mine alongside emergent Chinese capital in Laos.

The first two sections of the paper attend to Laos's nationalistic narrative's historical and contemporary dimensions and their role in shaping Lao identity. First, I draw on the work of historians to nuance the skewed perspectives on this figure, previously dominated by Siamese historiography, pointing out the role of Vietnam and Britain in the historical period.¹⁰ Second, I investigate how the LPRP has crafted the state's national liberatory narrative by instituting a series of silences in their curated narrative. Chao Anouvong has emerged as part of a pantheon of national heroes, but this construction has occurred with the simultaneous silencing of past royalty and the role of the French in imagining and materializing the Lao nation. In doing so, the LPRP extends a national narrative that smooths over forms of differentiation in regional dynamics, colonial legacies, and a heterogeneous population. The statue also remains entrenched in monumental nationalism despite growing global movements of counter-monuments, which invite alternative imaginaries and voices. This section thus rescales contemporary nationalistic narratives, exposing the conditions of possibility for socio-political fissures at the heart of Lao official nationalism.

The third section turns to the statue's materials—a copper gift from Laos's Sepon mine. Drawing from a series of semi-structured interviews, maps, reports, corporate press releases, and newspaper articles, I unpack the historical and socio-spatial conditions around the mining company's development, growth, and eventual acquisition by the Chinese. Here, I emphasize that Chinese capital is not monolithic. While the Sepon mine was acquired by the Chinese during the time of the gift, it was the efforts of Deputy Prime Minister Somsavath Lengsavath and an Australian management team that secured the donation for Chao Anouvong's statue. It was only in subsequent years that the mine shifted further under Chinese control. Paralleling the multi-scalar expansion of Chinese capital and influx of migrants,¹¹ it remains to be seen whether the LPRP can rescale their nationalistic narrative or risk exacerbating social and political fissures within and beyond Laos.

1. Chao Anouvong: The Figure

The life and afterlife of Chao Anouvong is a politically charged leitmotif, infused with nationalist anxieties. Chao Anouvong remains a central part of Laos's nationalistic history, caught up in a dichotomous conflict with Siam. As anthropologist Grant Evans points out, the intense interest in Chao Anouvong stems from the “cultural recognition that it is the figure of a king which most effectively expresses this desire [to be

¹⁰ Ryan Wolfson-Ford, “Memories of Chao Anu: New History and Post-Socialist Ideology,” *Journal of Lao Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 104–26.

¹¹ Jessica DiCarlo, “Grounding Global China in Northern Laos: The Making of the Infrastructure Frontier” (PhD diss., University of Colorado Boulder, 2021); Kearnin Sims, “High Modernism in a Small Country: China 'Develops' Laos,” in *The Deer and The Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century* (2020), 271–98; Juliet Lu and Oliver Schönweger, “Great Expectations: Chinese Investment in Laos and the Myth of Empty Land,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, no. 1 (2019): 61–78.

independent of the Thai], something which cannot be expressed explicitly.”¹² Two extreme perspectives usually frame the figure: one is a Siamese or Thai-inflected view of him as a rebel and an ungrateful prince; the other is a martyr-like and hagiographic perspective that he fought for the Lao nation, even if it cost him everything—one that the LPRP promotes.¹³ These viewpoints reinforce a dichotomous conflict between Laos and Siam, overlooking much of the complexities during the 1820s. This section explores the multi-scalar processes preceding the rebellion and redistributes agency across multiple stakeholders, such as Britain and Vietnam. In this manner, it opens the historical conditions of possibility to think beyond a dominant Laos-Siam frame.

The 1820s: a complicated socio-political context

To briefly reconstruct the series of events that occurred as part of this conflict: Chao Anouvong was the King of Vientiane after he was chosen by Siam to succeed his brother in 1804. He cultivated good relations with Vietnam and Siam (both to whom tribute was paid), and his son took over the southern Lao kingdom of Champasak. However, an unpleasant encounter in Bangkok in 1825 resulted in Chao Anouvong beginning to foment rebellion. He had hoped the British would attack Siam, which would open a gap for him to rebel. Instead, Siam signed a treaty in 1826 with Britain, the opposite of what Chao Anouvong wanted. King Rama III then ordered the violent quelling of Chao Anouvong’s rebellion, resulting in Vientiane being razed.

The unpleasant encounter in 1825 refers to how Chao Anouvong made a list of demands that the Thai court considered absurd, where he was affronted, and had a new aim “to take Bangkok and all of Siam.”¹⁴ Thai sources focus on a simple rendering of his retaliation and emphasize the frivolity of his appeals, such as the request for the Princess and a troop of female dancers; they consider Chao Anouvong’s act as an ambitious attempt to demonstrate this influence at the Bangkok court.¹⁵ However, the Ngaosyvathns posit that these sources fail to grasp the logic behind these requests and connect it to an accumulated history of subjection, which made Vientiane the “rallying point” for rebellion against the dominant Siamese.¹⁶

The person whom Chao Anouvong had requested be returned to Lao was the Princess who was abducted in 1779 when Siam had attacked Vientiane. Princess Khiekkhom was the “femme fatale of 1778,” famed for her beauty; she was originally destined to be brought to King Taksin but was sent away after the king learned that she was raped by his commander-in-chief.¹⁷ This violence roused the anger of many Lao during that period, as it symbolized a “political rape” influenced by Siamese armies.¹⁸ The group of female performers was Saraburi Lao, who was also abducted in 1779. Most

¹² Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (1998), 180.

¹³ This article builds on Simon Creak and Keith Barney’s conceptualization of the LPRP’s party-state governance in Laos, which utilizes centralizing structures of rule. See Simon Creak and Keith Barney, “Conceptualising Party-State Governance and Rule in Laos,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 5 (2018): 693–716.

¹⁴ Walter F. Vella, *Siam under Rama III, 1824-1851* (1957), 81.

¹⁵ Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 148, 151.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

important of all remains the Emerald Buddha. Currently housed in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew, this statue was previously the sacral center of Vientiane since they brought it from the Lanna Kingdom in the 1550s. The statue's loss has scarred and haunted the nation. It follows that the rationale for Chao Anouvong to be asking for the return of his sister, a group of Lao dancers who had been forcibly taken, as well as the Emerald Buddha, does not appear to be absurd. This rejection of absurdity is part of Ngaosyvathns' historiographic aim. They reconstruct the silence of Chao Anouvong's intentions through the narrative creation, drawing from both Thai and Lao historical works. Nevertheless, the list of demands was indeed designed to be provocative enough to instigate a rebellion.

To further grasp why this was a triggering point for Chao Anouvong's rebellion, the event should be further contextualized in a series of accompanying circumstances, such as enforced labor, the humiliation of Chao Anouvong's son, and the tattooing policies enacted by Siam. In 1825, during Chao Anouvong's travels to Bangkok for King Rama II's funeral, his entourage was requested to provide laborers to fell sugar palm trees, which was considered filthy and difficult.¹⁹ No other tributaries were expected to do this, and the leader of this expedition was to be Chao Anouvong's son, Chao Ratsavong.²⁰ The humiliation and outrage from this event frustrated what was already a fraught and asymmetrical relationship.

The Siamese subjected the Lao to forced labor, characterized by ostracism and exhaustion.²¹ King Rama III established a measure of tattooing his subjects with a brand, which involved using a fiery red stiletto to tattoo a Siamese census number and the name of a person's town on their wrists.²² The policy's economic aim was to integrate Lao areas into Siamese fiscal administration, registering tribute and tax payments accordingly.²³ It also achieved a political flattening of Lao principalities and kingdoms to that of Siamese provinces.²⁴

Given that the tattooing policies decreed by King Rama III was established in 1824, Chao Anouvong began requiring town elders to train and arm villagers on his way to Bangkok, even before being rebuffed at the Siamese court.²⁵ As part of his efforts to resist the Siamese, he put into place a three-prong plan, which included evacuating the ethnic Lao from Khorat into Laos, conscripting them into armies, and convincing the rulers of Lan Na, Khukha, Sisaket, and Surin to support him.²⁶ Despite these plans that ended up failing, it is key to note that the war of 1827 and Chao Anouvong's rebellion were the outcome of a complex set and tense build-up of violence and premeditated aggressions from both Siam and Laos.

According to historian Ryan Wolfson-Ford, the Ngaosyvathns' historical account consistently portrays the Siamese with malicious intent: while the Lao are depicted as virtuous and noble in their struggles, the Thai are seen as perpetually driven by evil

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

²² *Ibid.*, 145.

²³ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156–8.

motives.²⁷ To support this narrative, the Ngaosyvathns delve into various policies, such as the “swallowing of Laos” by marking Lao people with symbols of servitude in Isan, the Governor of Khorat’s manipulative schemes, or the importation of British firearms; these are contrasted with Bangkok’s clear ambition to annex the whole of Laos.²⁸ Further, Wolfson-Ford proposes that there could be more attention paid to who exactly constitutes the Lao beyond the emphasis of Chao Anouvong’s heroic agency.²⁹ The term was designed as a catch-all for those who were not Siamese, and this category conflates the struggles and dynamic role of the Luang Prabang kingdom.³⁰ Furthermore, the history of Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, and Sam Nua before the 1760s is obscured, and Vientiane is left holding power over these kingdoms after the war in 1787–92.³¹ The Ngaosyvathns attribute this to the Siamese role in spurring “fratricidal war.”³² Therefore, intra-Lao historical relations, struggles, and dynamics must be critically reconsidered amid forms of strategic essentialism that uphold the centrality of Vientiane as the center of resistance. The stakes in this article are not simply to achieve some version of enhanced historical truth value but invite closer attention to the scales at work that constitute what the “Lao” identity refers to, as well as Chao Anouvong’s role in shaping this identity.

British Distance

The British are key stakeholders during this conflict, albeit playing an active role of distancing themselves. After the Ngaosyvathns’ publication of their work, the vice-Minister of Culture in Laos rejected their work because he claimed that the Siamese invasion of Laos was masterminded and supported by the British.³³ The basis of the claim was that Chao Anouvong moved his army within three days of Bangkok without alarming the Siamese because he had falsely warned of an impending attack by the British, a stance that accorded with the anti-capitalist vein of the Lao PDR’s orthodox historiography.³⁴

Rather, the British position in this war seems to be far more ambivalent, given the prior diplomatic meeting between Chao Anouvong and John Crawfurd, the diplomat sent by the British government. On May 19, 1822, Chao Anouvong visited John Crawfurd, which the latter writes about in his diary:

²⁷ Wolfson-Ford, “Memories of Chao Anu”.

²⁸ Wolfson-Ford, “Memories of Chao Anu,” 114.

²⁹ The Ngaosyvathns reject a common characterization of Khun Ying Mo as having successfully led an insurrection against Chao Anouvong. They claim that her heroism was exaggerated by Khorat authorities in an attempt to please Bangkok, based on detailed reports, including those by her husband. Having a staunchly Lao perspective, in this case, is a palliative against what appears to be regional Siamese propaganda. See Wolfson-Ford, “Memories of Chao Anu,” 116; Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

³² Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 67, quoted in Wolfson-Ford, “Memories of Chao Anu,” 117. This section is not an exoneration of Siamese actions. A deeper consideration of the chain of events leading to the conflict instead challenges one-dimensional caricatures of Chao Anouvong as a rebel or martyr.

³³ Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, “Lao Historiography and Historians: Case Study of the War Between Bangkok and the Lao in 1827,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (1989): 66.

³⁴ Wolfson-Ford, “Memories of Chao Anu,” 111; Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, “Lao Historiography and Historians,” 66.

In the afternoon I had a visit from a native chief... His conversation was frank and intelligent, and he appeared well-informed respecting his own country, which forms so interesting and so considerable but to Europeans so little known, a portion of the present Siamese Empire.³⁵

This was a diplomatic strategy that Chao Anouvong was hoping to leverage amid political tensions between the British and Siam. Nevertheless, as Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn state, his “exploratory overture toward John Crawford was so modest and circumspect that it failed to convince the British ambassador that he ought to recognize and treat Laos as an important regional entity.”³⁶ Chao Anouvong’s diplomatic mission and strategy had failed, and based on a famous poem *Sān leuphasūn*, Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn claim that the British were too distant to provide assistance.³⁷ The British ended up taking a more nonchalant role, settling back to watch the events that destroyed Vientiane rather than intervening.³⁸

Taking this prior connection and varying diplomatic overtures into account challenges the vice-Minister’s attribution of a sinister role to the British; the British did not set out to destroy Laos. The vice-Minister projected anti-capitalist and sinister intentions to the British, whereas the Ngaosyvathns interpreted the British silence as one of ambivalence, especially with evidence of previous diplomatic relations with Chao Anouvong.

Vietnamese Refusal

The court of Huế in present-day Vietnam was also a significant player in this geopolitical context, usually not considered to a great extent in popular reconstructions of Chao Anouvong’s history. For instance, the *Pavatsat Lao*, an authoritative text endorsed by the LPRP through the Ministry of Information and Culture in 2000, neglects the Vietnamese; it only mentions occasional warfare with Vietnamese feudalism, as well as emphasizing how Lao and Vietnamese peoples enjoyed mutual ties of affection.³⁹

In the early 19th century, relations between Emperor Gia Long in Huế and King Rama I in Siam were relatively peaceful, despite strains due to the Siamese invasion of Cambodia in 1811 and the politicking of the Burmese against Siam.⁴⁰ Laos was caught between these two powers and had to manage diplomatic relations carefully.

In 1821, Chao Anouvong levied taxes on territories claimed by Huế and neglected to send tributary missions, which offended the court of Huế.⁴¹ When Emperor Minh Mang,

³⁵ John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (1830), 240, quoted in Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, “Lao Historiography and Historians,” 111.

³⁶ Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, “Lao Historiography and Historians,” 112.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 129. The *Sān leuphasūn* resists simple interpretation; Peter Koret notes how romantic, religious, and political interpretations have emerged. See Peter Koret, “*Luep Phasun* (Extinguishing the Light of the Sun): Romance, Religion and Politics in the Interpretation of a Traditional Lao Poem,” in *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads* (NIAS Press, 2003), 181–208.

³⁸ Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, “Lao Historiography and Historians,” 129.

³⁹ Volker Grabowsky and Oliver Tappe, “‘Important Kings of Laos,’” *Journal of Lao Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 1–44; Bruce M. Lockhart, “‘Pavatsat Lao’: Constructing a National History,” *Southeast Asia Research* 14, no. 3 (2006): 373.

⁴⁰ Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration*, 97–8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

the successor to Emperor Gia Long, heard that Chao Anouvong was planning to rebel, he sent an embassy in November 1826 to tell Laos to capitulate to Siam.⁴² Emperor Minh Mang was likely fearful of the delicate balance and potential instability this could cause in regional geopolitics, on top of that period being one of domestic fragility.⁴³ But what this also meant was that Emperor Minh Mang was not offering their help to Chao Anouvong.

In 1827, when Chao Anouvong's resistance had crumbled, he sought refuge in Huế despite being *persona non grata*.⁴⁴ This put Emperor Minh Mang in a difficult position, as he did not want to get involved in the war against King Rama III but was obliged to provide some level of humanitarian aid to his vassal. He managed the diplomatic position carefully and initially accepted him into Vietnam, although eventually, relations deteriorated between the two, and Chao Anouvong had to leave.⁴⁵

In 1828, Chao Anouvong staged his comeback to Vientiane. Upon his return, he made a preemptive strike against the Thai garrison at Vientiane.⁴⁶ This infuriated King Rama III and military leader Chao Phraya Bodindecha, who then completely destroyed Vientiane and captured Chao Anouvong and his family, torturing them to death.⁴⁷ In addition, the Vietnamese support of the Lao resulted in King Rama III massacring thirty Vietnamese envoys, which set the tone for a precipitous decline in Bangkok- Huế relations and subsequent wars.⁴⁸ Without a doubt, the Vietnamese played a vital role in the war, both directly and indirectly, as a powerful regional stakeholder. Their refusal to help Chao Anouvong all but spelled his demise.

Reading these historical works in conversation with each other shows critical depth surrounding the figure of Chao Anouvong, providing a generative bridge to consider the relationships between this figure, his history, and what it means for the Lao nation. The Ngaosyvathns' hope to restore "a piece of their [Lao] lost history" against the nefarious Siamese troubles their concurrent claim to an objective, historical truth where the "documents, the archives, and the testimonies" can speak for themselves,⁴⁹ attempting to balance what may be perceived as anti-Thai bias with historical rigor. Nevertheless, their impressive scholarship presents a vital contribution to illuminating the history of Chao Anouvong beyond flattened hagiography. The agentive qualities and shrewdness that the Ngaosyvathns grant to Chao Anouvong in relation to the wider socio-political processes adds nuance to this historical narrative, countering previously pejorative depictions of Chao Anouvong. Their work also addresses the gaps deployed by the Lao state, who project a conspiratorial role on the British and an absent one for the Vietnamese.

These historiographic contestations reveal the constructed nature of Lao identity and the politics of scale undergirding a hegemonic Laos-Siam dualistic framework. Divisions between north and south Laos, such as Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Sam

⁴² *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 225, 236.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 239–41.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 242–3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

Nua, and Champassak, as well as dynamic movements of Lao or Siamese people in the Khorat Plateau are subsumed within a nation-state territory that is pit against the enemy Siam. Even with these rescaled layers of history and regional politics, the narrative remains nationalist in nature, showing the valiant but failed gambit of Chao Anouvong. The following section further expands on the politics of scale through an examination of the statue's relationship to more contemporary tensions around nationalism.

2. Chao Anouvong: The Statue

The fanfare for the opening of the Chao Anouvong Park turned on the recognition of his status as a Lao hero, glorified by the LPRP. In the Lao newspaper *Vientiane Mai*, the headlines proclaimed, "Enshrining the Statue of Chao Anouvong."⁵⁰ There were numerous performances and a ribbon-cutting ceremony that was inaugurated by President Choummaly Sayasone. This 450-year mark celebrates and demonstrates the country's approach to national and cultural heritage, with the statue as a manifestation of state-sanctioned public memory. There is an odd bringing together of Buddhist-infused kings of merit in line with the liberatory struggle of the LPRP through a grand narrative of *kantosou kou xat* (national liberation struggle).⁵¹ Here, a signaling to the history of the anti-colonialist history of Laos is coupled with a longer set of proto-nationalist military engagements among Laos's kingdoms. In this manner, the LPRP evokes Chao Anouvong as a statue among a larger strategy of national heritage to construct and cement political legitimacy in a nationalist idiom. This section unpacks the strategies around the LPRP's projection of a national liberatory struggle and considers how silences are embedded in them through Benedict Anderson and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's respective notions of the nation and silences.⁵² To ground this, I discuss three silences, including those of other kings, the French and regional entities, and counter-monuments, as critical gaps in the nation's strategic narrative.

A key component of this strategy is the design and framing of Lao history to support the country's national identity.⁵³ Statues are at the center of this nation-building effort. Evans argues that "the uneven and combined development of the world of modern nationalism has seen the borrowing of cultural elements from an emerging nationalistic and democratic Europe by autocratic Asian states, demonstrated so clearly by the study of statue building."⁵⁴ Statues have become an essential component of demonstrating one's political prowess, which takes the place of earlier forms of merit-making and political symbolism. Prior to the 20th century, there were only statues of Buddha and *thevadas* built, but a double movement occurred where there was an elevation of mortals towards deities and secularization of these deities.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *Vientiane Mai*, "Enshrining the Statue of Chao Anouvong," November 8, 2010.

⁵¹ Grabowsky and Tappe, "Important Kings of Laos," 1–44; Oliver Tappe, "Faces and Facets of the Kantosou Kou Xat – The Lao 'National Liberation Struggle' in State Commemoration and Historiography," *Asian Studies Review* 37, no. 4 (2013): 433–50.

⁵² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995).

⁵³ Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (1997).

⁵⁴ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (2002), 177.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

The LPRP had shifted its strategy, in this case, to go beyond Buddhist iconography and include these leaders as part of cultural heritage. As Evans notes, the state has also integrated the That Luang and its annual festivities, spirit mediums, and other mandalas in a constellation of reviving “tradition” in a Lao politics of ritual and remembrance.⁵⁶ Hence, the LPRP draws upon a Buddhist metaphysical lexicon of previous statues and rituals but retrofits its contents, such as cultivating a national pantheon of heroes as part of its liberatory legacy.

Laos: a Nation of Buddhism and Liberation

Chao Anouvong has been elevated as a key part of this pantheon and the urban landscape in the LPRP’s official projections of nationalism. During his reign, Chao Anouvong undertook a pilgrimage to That Phnom, reconstructed the previously razed Ho Pha Kaeo in 1779, repaired the damaged city walls, and ordered the construction of Wat Sisaket.⁵⁷ As part of his legacy, this period was “marked by energetic building and renovation of shrines, monuments, and fortifications.”⁵⁸ The LPRP’s construction of Chao Anouvong signals this historical moment of merit-making, drawing from this aura in a Buddhist idiom. As James E. Young writes on traditional monuments, the “state-sponsored memory of a national past aims to affirm the righteousness of a nation’s birth, even its divine election.”⁵⁹ Chao Anouvong is portrayed as a national hero—both resisting the Thais and being a Buddhist king to convey political legitimacy from two angles.

In addition to Chao Anouvong, the state has also highlighted several other royal figures. Prominent among them are Chao Fa Ngum, who is attributed with uniting the Lan Xang kingdom in the 14th century with a statue constructed in 2003, and Chao Setthathilat, who led a military campaign against invaders from Burma in the 16th century. These military conquerors and Buddhist kings are recognized as proto-nationalist icons that bolster national identity. Besides kings, the LPRP has also integrated its own national leaders into this pantheon, including Kaysone Phomvihane, Souphanouvong, Phoumi Vongvichit, Phoun Siphaseut, and Sisomphon Lovanxay.⁶⁰ These forms of Great Tradition are often privileged as national heritage, reinforcing official discourses of history and national identity.⁶¹ These figures have materialized through statues around the city and country, playing key roles in representing the legacies of Laos’s national liberatory struggle.

Place matters and Vientiane has been the locus, site, and landscape to develop these symbols of national heritage. The Chao Anouvong Park was built as part of the Department of Public Works and Transport, and its construction references the Han River Model in South Korea or Hong Kong through its urban planning models and

⁵⁶ Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (1998).

⁵⁷ Marc Askew, Colin Long, and William Logan, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao Landscape* (2006), 66, 199.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁹ James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992), 270.

⁶⁰ Tappe, “Faces and Facets of the Kantosou Kou Xat,” 2013.

⁶¹ Marc Askew, Colin Long, and William Logan, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao Landscape* (2006), 199.

elements such as the riverside night market.⁶² The state has granted a concession to the Dao Heuang Group and Fujiwara Enterprise as a joint venture from 2011 for 30 years to manage the space. It has since been the center of daily practices, from paying respects to the statue, walking along the river in the evening or to the night market, as well as the site for nearby festivities.

Silences and Nationalism

Materializing heritage through the frame of a nation-state and the LPRP's continued emphasis on a national liberatory struggle has several consequences. Nationalism comes into sharp relief, which Anderson has famously framed as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."⁶³ These entities have finite boundaries and sovereign inasmuch as they have emerged in opposition to the prior dynastic realms through the popularization of print capitalism and Enlightenment thinking.⁶⁴ A given citizen would not meet the other million other citizens that comprise that nation yet be in solidarity in "horizontal comradeship."⁶⁵ His work has charted a path to investigate the production of national imaginaries through print-capitalism, with attention to its affective qualities. Anthropologists have since been building on this study with ethnographic work to trace organic, everyday practices constitutive of producing national narratives or forms of solidarity.⁶⁶

Decades after its publication, these imagined community insights remain vital but require historical specification across scales (micro/macro; everyday; world-historical), registers (affective; ideological; material; institutional), and conjunctures.⁶⁷ In reconstructing history and national heritage, silences across these dimensions of historical specificity are necessary and political. To qualify what I mean by historical silences, I draw on Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*, stating that, "In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of the facts, both "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened."⁶⁸ The first meaning emphasizes the sociohistorical process, while the second focuses on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.⁶⁹ Power controls history, which is produced in a specific context by historical actors as narrators.⁷⁰ Historical specificity is again emphasized, and here, with attention to power relations.

Trouillot pushes further by tracking a richer view of historical production through the ways that silence enters historical production in four moments—fact creation (making of sources), fact assembly (making of archives), the moment of fact retrieval

⁶² Kesone Kanhalikham, "Redefining and Contestation of Public Space in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR" (PhD diss., Chiang Mai University, 2020).

⁶³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁶ Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (1997); Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy* (2005).

⁶⁷ Manu Goswami, "Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983)," *Public Culture* 32, no. 2 (2020): 441–48.

⁶⁸ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

(making of narratives), and retrospective significance (making of history in the final instance).⁷¹ Put together, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.”⁷²

In the epilogue of his book, Trouillot wanders around Port-au-Prince where the old statue of Christopher Columbus used to be, asking people for hours where the statue had gone.⁷³ He did this to test public memory and to see how the removal of a statue shifts the way space is produced. He is testing the production of space surrounding that silence, illustrating the way collective memory is woven and unwoven through this statue. Therefore, the imagined community and its historical narratives consist of a range of disjointed moments, practices, and symbols, punctuated by processes that create and recreate certain moments of silence.

Silences in Laos’s Nationalist Projections

To be sure, a comprehensive tracing of multiplicity of silences that one can consider in terms of how Lao is constituted as a nation is far beyond the scope of this paper.⁷⁴ Instead, I focus on three key silences in Laos’s construction of history and its limits, referring to other kings who did not make the pantheon, the legacies of the French, and the silencing of alternative narratives.

First, the choice of particular kings warrants attention to who was not chosen or elevated to this pantheon. This is particularly sensitive and uncomfortable, especially with questions around the empty throne when the current regime came into power.⁷⁵ In other words, the glorification of this royal pantheon contrasts with the secrecy around King Sisavang Vatthana’s death. In 1975, King Sisavang Vatthana abdicated his throne and was later flown to Camp No. 1 in Sop Hao District in 1977, which was a “death camp.”⁷⁶ Here, he spent his remaining years with the queen and crown prince and eventually died in March 1980.⁷⁷ The Lao Foreign Ministry denied the time and cause of death, claiming that the King was healthy in the “seminar” during this time, and only in 1989 did party leader Kaysone Phomvihane state that the king had died in 1984 of malaria.⁷⁸

Kings like Sisavang Vong or King Kham Souk of Bassac have also been subject to removal by the regime as a way to show the tearing down of old regimes. Though ironically, King Sisavang Vong’s statue could not be destroyed as it was gifted by the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷⁴ Wolfson-Ford points out that, “Laos did not suffer from a lack of nationalism, but an overabundance of it.” He details the tensions between multi-ethnic and nationalistic Xāt Lao visions of the country, proposing that it stemmed from the 1890s and developed alongside key institutional transformations in the 20th century. See Ryan Wolfson-Ford, “Xāt Lao: Imaging the Lao Nation through Race, History and Language,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Nationalism in East and Southeast Asia*, (2023), 506.

⁷⁵ Wolfson-Ford, “Memories of Chao Anu,” 123,

⁷⁶ Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (2009), 415.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Soviet Union, a fraternal polity.⁷⁹ Phil Wilcox adds further complexity to this by unpacking the significance of King Sisavang Vong's statue through Luang Prabang's role in the LPRP's management of political legitimacy.⁸⁰ The inclusion and exclusion of these kings thus revolve around a set of silences and gaps within the national liberatory narrative, as a Vientiane-centric perspective the state continues to uphold.

Second, the anticolonialism and liberatory struggle neglects the significant influence of French cosmopolitanism on Laos. Historian Simon Creak investigates Lao nationalism through physical culture and the history of sport, proposing an important and palimpsestic historical process of French colonialism, the royalist period, the revolutionary uprising, and the post-socialist era.⁸¹ These different stages of nationalism owe an outsized role to the French in defining and creating the Lao nation, and he also claims that nationalism emerged from an adapted and enduring legacy of the French rather than anticolonialism.⁸² Further, Patrice Ladwig advances a notion of "Indochinese Buddhism" as a French-sponsored Lao Buddhism through the renovation of monuments and religious architecture through ceremonial governmentality.⁸³

The regional context is also significant: Creak begins his book with a violent clash between the Annamese (Vietnamese) and Lao during the 1936 Beider Cup, and highlights how Laos shifted regional alliances during the Cold War, initially looking to Thailand as a model for sports during its royalist period, and later to the Soviet Union and China after 1975.⁸⁴ Again, the flattened image and historiography of Chao Anouvong and the accompanying pantheon works against, or in other words—silences—these alternative historical imaginations of the nation.

The third silence lies in the lack of engagement with global movements that challenge and reconsider the legacies of large monuments, as the statue continues to be a natural part of Vientiane's cityscape. In the early 2000s, with waning realist statues, Evans remarks, "statuemanía as a form of nationalist iconography may have had its day."⁸⁵ There have been increasingly popular notions of counter-monuments, which invert the dominance of statues and authoritative impositions onto public spaces. These arose in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, attempting to grapple with the horrific atrocities of the Holocaust.⁸⁶ These counter-monuments, such as the Hamburg Monument in Germany, refuse a single metanarrative to represent multiple voices as a postmodern spatial memory.⁸⁷ They could simultaneously offer unique possibilities to democratize public memory in sacred spaces such as the Fetterman Battlefield or

⁷⁹ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (2002); Oliver Tappe, "Faces and Facets of the Kantosou Kou Xat" (2013).

⁸⁰ Phil Wilcox, "Consolidating Lao-Ness: China in Laos in the Age of the BRI," in *New Nationalisms and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Exploring the Transnational Public Domain* (2022).

⁸¹ Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* (2015).

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Patrice Ladwig, "Imitations of Buddhist Statecraft: The Patronage of Lao Buddhism and the Reconstruction of Relic Shrines and Temples in Colonial French Indochina," *Social Analysis* 62, no. 2 (2018): 98–125.

⁸⁴ Creak, *Embodied Nation*.

⁸⁵ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (2002), 178.

⁸⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003).

⁸⁷ Young, "The Counter-Monument."

Haymarket Square.⁸⁸ Memories evolve over time, with the meanings of counter-monuments shifting, refitting, and interrupting in ways that expand the lives of the grieved.⁸⁹ In spite of these global movements to depart from the recentering of the singular male hero that arises from a romanticized, traditional proto-national history, there have been no alternative voices or overt questioning surrounding the central role and place that Chao Anouvong possesses in the middle of Vientiane and Laos.⁹⁰

Silences are embedded in the overt, performative narrative of state hagiography through iterations of curating retrospective significance. These three silences discussed above, constitute the limits and fragility of the current regime's projection of a version of autonomous history. Oliver Tappe claims that "the performance of the 450-year anniversary of Vientiane as capital dramatized Lao history and the perennial Lao national struggle with the LPRP as heroic protagonist and final liberator of the *paxaxon lao banda phap* [Lao multi-ethnic people]." ⁹¹ Socio-spatial relations across an uneven polity are not a central part of the Chao Anouvong story, and in fact, part of its silences, which instead focuses on the unifying effect of Chao Anouvong for a homogenous population of "Lao" people across several polities, with ire directed at Siam.⁹² What this does is it creates a static frame of what this figure should mean and straitjackets a political interpretation through the materialization of the statue.

Therefore, the first two sections demonstrate how the state has crafted a nationalistic history and identity through mechanisms of rescaling. As Charles F. Keyes notes, "a national heritage is an abstraction, but it is made concrete by being linked to physical objects which can be pointed to as national treasures because they represent some significant aspect of the past which has been accorded national significance." ⁹³ The framing of Chao Anouvong as part of a pantheon of heroes in a Buddhist-liberatory struggle sets the foundational narrative for the materialization of the statue as part of national heritage. This narrative glosses over the agentive roles of other polities, kings, and voices, as well as the fragmented politics between different parts of Laos—from its historic inter-kingdom struggles and more recent splits between ethnicities, and how they have been or might differently imagine the nation. Chao Anouvong has been regarded as a potent national symbol, despite — or perhaps because of — these fissures.

⁸⁸ Ryan Erik McGeough, "The American Counter-Monumental Tradition: Renegotiating Memory and the Evolution of American Sacred Space" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2011).

⁸⁹ Ryan Erik McGeough, Catherine Helen Palczewski, and Randall A. Lake, "Oppositional Memory Practices: U.S. Memorial Spaces as Arguments Over Public Memory," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 51, no. 4 (2015): 231–54.

⁹⁰ This is not to say that the Government of Laos was expected to be building counter-monuments. This is to bring up an example of a global trend, and the very distance from the realm of possibility for the Government of Laos to build these are productive of its current politics and the shape that its nationalism is taking.

⁹¹ Tappe, "Faces and Facets of the Kantosou Kou Xat," 445.

⁹² The state promotes a singular notion of culture, as evident in the Culture Village model, which is centered on an LPRP-constructed narrative aligned with the Chao Anouvong historiography. This approach often dismisses or denounces local or autonomous forms of cultural expression. See Yves Goudineau, "The Ongoing Invention of a Multi-Ethnic Heritage in Laos," *Journal of Lao Studies* 2 (2015): 33–53; Holly High, *Projectland: Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village* (2021).

⁹³ Charles F. Keyes, "The Case of the Purloined Lintel: The Politics of a Khmer Shrine as a Thai National Treasure," in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*, (2002), 212–37.

3. Chao Anouvong: the Materials

In the summer of 2022, ten years after my first encounter with Chao Anouvong and in the middle of writing this paper, I pay my respects again to Chao Anouvong. I had finally been able to enter Laos after waiting for two years since the country was closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. My colleagues and I parked next to the empty New World complex, and we walked over to the park. We passed several food stalls nearby, selling various foods like barbecued meat, pizza, and *khai look* (balut). There was little shade immediately around the statue, and the only ones around the statue were a couple nearby, hiding away from the intense heat, watching cars zoom past. Later in the evening, that same road closes as the place transforms into a larger communal area connected to the night market. Many more people visit the area around the statue and the park, gathering with family and friends to sit nearby or stroll through the grounds. The statue has remained an integral part of Vientiane's urban fabric and rhythms, a central axis to orient oneself despite an array of dizzying challenges—rising inflation, the rapid drop of the *kip*, and of course—the fallout from years of the pandemic. In this section, I return to the statue and examine it through re-materialization.⁹⁴

In my efforts to rethink this statue's role in the contemporary currents of nationalist history, what I have found most striking is the materials themselves—copper from Laos's Sepon mine. Here, I trace the corporate ventures of the mining company that gifted the copper. While the company was acquired by Chinese capital in 2009, the gift was an arrangement between the LPRP and Australian executives. Further, there are claims that copper practices around Sepon mine by "Lao people" stemmed from 2,000 years ago, adding to the potency of the materials. Chinese influence in the company subsequently increased, which parallels the expansion of Chinese capital manifesting across Laos through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Attending to the specificity of the manifestations of these forms of transnational capital allows for an important granular perspective to account for what is perceptibly a macro-transformation sweeping across Laos's geobody.

Corporate Developments at Sepon Mine

Chao Anouvong's statue was wrought from copper gifted from Minerals and Metals Group (MMG) and Lane Xang Minerals Limited (LXML)'s Sepon mine.⁹⁵ According to corporate affairs executive Richard Taylor in August 2010, "MMG is excited by the prospect that copper produced in Laos will be used to cast the King Anouvong statue, and we are proud to be able to help Vientiane celebrate its 450th Anniversary."⁹⁶ This donation consisted of eight tons of copper, which the company claims is the largest single donation of copper. The company has also donated copper to construct Buddha images elsewhere in Savannakhet province, the City Pillar Shrine, and various national emblems.

⁹⁴ I borrow the term "re-materialization" from Ladwig's (2018) work on Buddhist statecraft and how these traditions were re-materialized by the French through the building of religious architecture, like the That Luang Stupa.

⁹⁵ The processes that I identify here are Large-Scale Mining (LSM) ones in Sepon, rather than Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) ones. For more information on ASM in Laos, see Oliver Tappe's (2021) "Artisanal, Small-scale and Large-scale Mining in Lao PDR."

⁹⁶ MMG Sepon, "Sepon Mine Awards Logistics Contract to Lao Company," *ENP Newswire*, August 19, 2010.

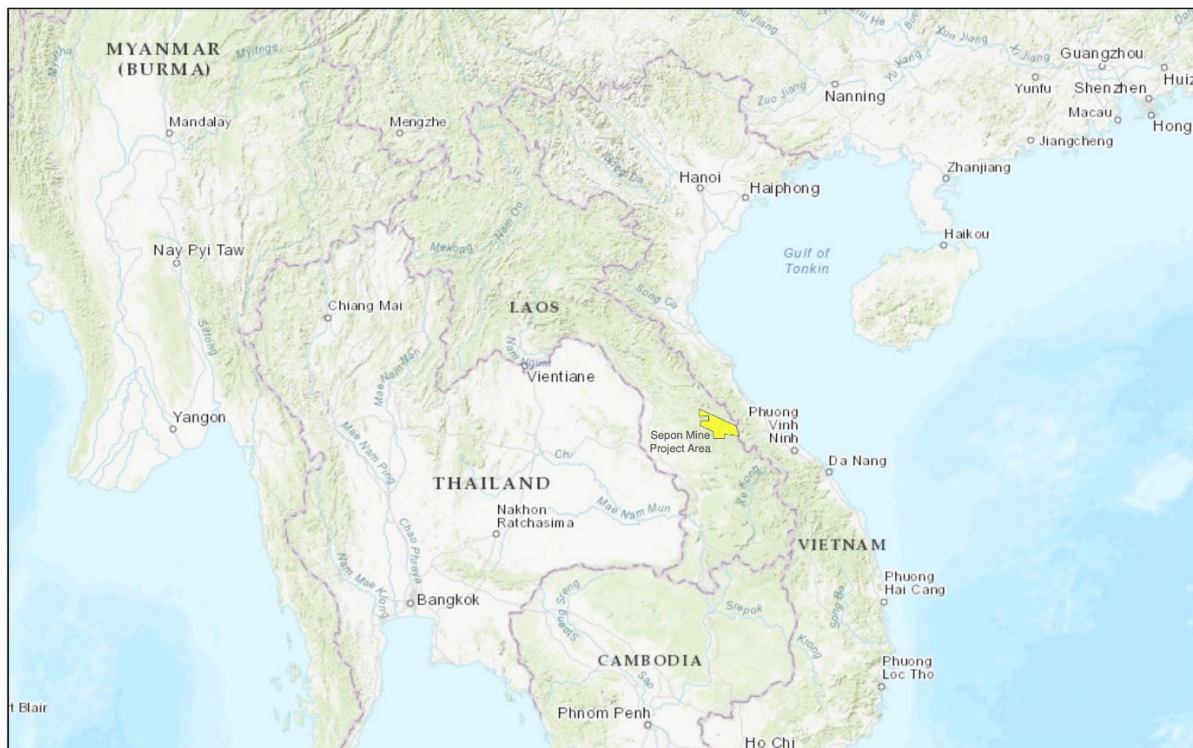


Figure 2: Location of the Sepon project in south-central Laos (Adapted from Cromie, 2010)

The Sepon mine is located in the Savannakhet province of south-central Laos (Figure 2), and it has been mined for gold and copper since the early 2000s (Figure 3).⁹⁷ The mine's scale and timing set a precedent for hundreds of other mines and projects to emerge around the country. Creak distills a report from the Centre for International Economics' report about the Sepon mine's economic impact, showing that it contributed to over 5% of the Lao GDP since production began in 2003.⁹⁸ Figure 4 shows the beginnings of Lao copper production, starting from 2004 and 2005. According to LXML's

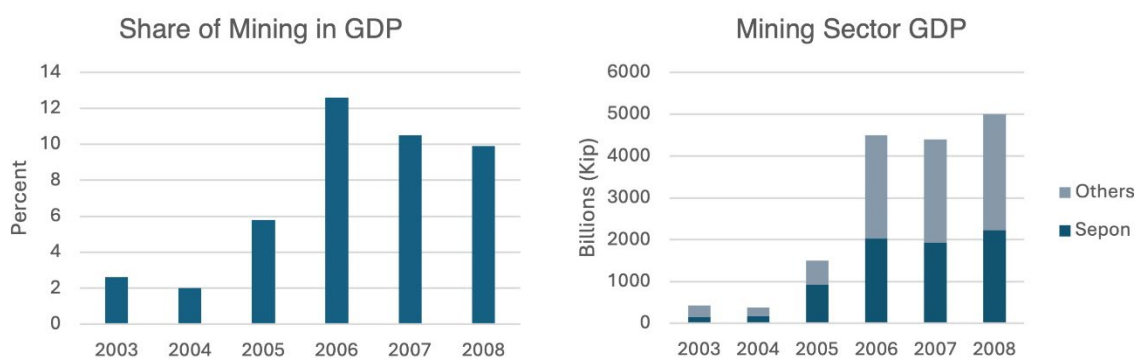


Figure 3: Share of Mining in GDP and Mining Sector GDP in Laos (Adapted from CIE, 2010)

⁹⁷ Most contemporary documents state that the mine occupies a 1947 km² area, rather than the 1250 km² area in Figure 2.

⁹⁸ Simon Creak, "Economic Impact of the Sepon Mine," *New Mandala*, June 25, 2010. <https://www.newmandala.org/economic-impact-of-the-sepon-mine/>.

Commodity	Units	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Barytes	tonnes	4,400	12,695	18,070	18,000	18,000
Coal	tonnes	122,942	233,823	212,819	332,907	232,934
Copper, mine	tonnes (metal content)	—	—	—	1,700	30,500
Copper, refined	tonnes	—	—	—	—	30,500
Gold, mine	kilograms (metal content)	—	—	5,300	4,392	6,232
Gypsum	tonnes	121,220	119,514	101,727	*102,000	131,508
Salt	tonnes	2,635	5,410	16,130	*15,000	*15,000
Silver, mine	kilograms (metal content)	—	—	4,400	2,735	3,100
Tin, mine	tonnes (metal content)	570	430	420	*400	*600
Zinc, mine	tonnes (metal content)	11,500	540	1,200	1,000	1,500

Figure 4: Laos Production in Report on China and Southeast Asia Mineral Production (2001–2005) (Adapted from Brown, 2007)

reports, they have paid over USD 1.6 billion to the Lao government in taxes, royalties, and dividends.⁹⁹

In the 1990s, mining company Conzinc Riotinto (CRA) began conducting initial assessments and explorations in Sepon after their geologists recognized potential minerals to mine from the United Nations Development Program’s mineral occurrence data sourced from the Lao Department of Geology and Mines.¹⁰⁰ According to the Department of Geology, this builds on a set of French exploration maps produced in the 1960s.¹⁰¹ The British Geological Survey (Figure 5), funded by the Asian Development Bank, also produced a map to show gold and copper deposits around Sepon in 1990. After additional explorations and prospecting, Rio Tinto decided in 1999 that the Sepon project did not meet its size criteria and sold the mine to Oxiana.

⁹⁹ Lane Xang Minerals Limited (LXML), “Home,” 2021. <https://lxml.la/>.

¹⁰⁰ Tony Manini and Peter Albert, “Exploration and Development of the Sepon Gold and Copper Deposits, Laos,” Oxiana Limited.

¹⁰¹ Phouphet Kyophilvong, “Mining Sector in Laos,” *BRC Report 2: Major Industries and Business Chances in CLMV Countries* (2009).

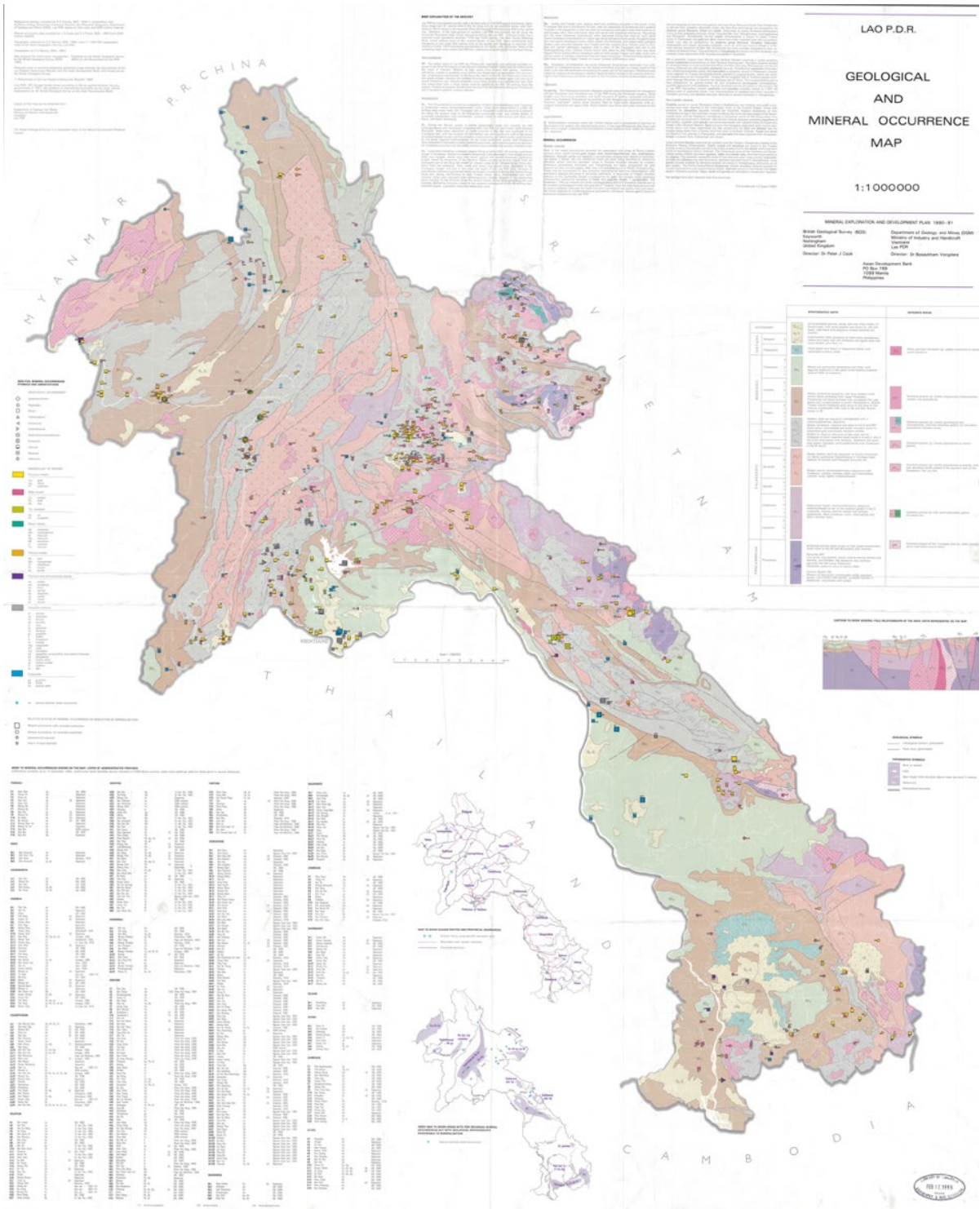


Figure 5: British Geological Survey in 1990 (Source: Library of Congress)

Oxiana, an Australian-based company, focused on Sepon as its main project and produced large amounts of copper cathode from 2005. Global politics and financial mechanisms that Paul Robert Gilbert calls “technologies of the imagination” play out through these mines, emphasizing the importance of political risk and rating as mechanisms for investment.¹⁰² Oxiana had to position and produce gold first to show its potential profitability, weighed against the risks of investing in a country with a socialist government. Once they were able to demonstrate their gold extraction, they were subsequently able to raise more funds to construct their copper mine operations. In a *Forbes* article entitled “Commodities Boom” in 2006, Oxiana is depicted as a small Australian company showing the Lao government the profits to be gained from commodity extraction:

There's not a lot of money in Laos, one of the world's poorest countries, but there is a lot of gold and copper. For years these rich deposits just sat there as complex politics, and even more complex geology, kept miners out of one of the world's last full-blown communist countries. Today that is rapidly changing, thanks to a small Australian company, Oxiana, that is reaping fat profits from the country's first big mine and showing Laos' government the benefits of the commodities boom.¹⁰³

The numbers and international press depicted a highly successful venture, and this was reflected in interviews with executives who worked at Sepon, as they recalled this early period of the mine with fondness. They described having beers in the jungle with a tangible optimism in the air, narrating how “there were boulders as large as Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) of pure copper lying around.” This project's scale was also one of the largest investments in the country with thousands of workers coming to the site. Sepon mine even had its own camp and airport.

In 2008, Oxiana merged with Zinifex, another Australian company primarily producing lead and zinc, to form OZ Minerals in a USD 10.7 billion deal.¹⁰⁴ Subsequently, with the 2008 financial crisis, OZ Minerals was in dire financial straits and sold its assets to MMG. During an interview with an executive at Oxiana during that time, he called this arrangement a “fire sale.” The Australian government initially blocked these plans to merge and acquire the organization in 2009, citing national security concerns.¹⁰⁵ After further negotiations, MMG purchased its assets for USD 1.7 billion, except for the Prominent Hill gold and copper mine.¹⁰⁶

In this manner, the MMG company was founded in 2009 with the motto “We mine for progress” with other mines in Australia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Peru. MMG's majority shareholder is China Minmetals Corporation, a Chinese state-owned enterprise in operation since 1950, though it is headquartered in Australia and

¹⁰² Paul Robert Gilbert, “Speculating on Sovereignty: ‘Money Mining’ and Corporate Foreign Policy at the Extractive Industry Frontier,” *Economy and Society* 49, no. 1 (2020): 16–44.

¹⁰³ *Forbes*, “Commodities Boom,” December 25, 2006. <https://www.forbes.com/global/2006/1225/020.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Michelmore, “Oz Minerals Corporate Update,” Australian Securities Exchange, September 2008.

¹⁰⁵ ABC News, “Minmetals Launches New Company amid Flat Demand,” June 18, 2009. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-06-18/minmetals-launches-new-company-amid-flat-demand/1324742>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. At the beginning of this merger, there was little actual involvement by the Chinese company that had acquired the company. Several senior executives whom I interviewed agreed on this point. One of them explained that despite this Chinese takeover, “for many years after [the act of the takeover], all management was Australian and didn’t change to Chinese, and decision-making capacity was still retained in Melbourne.” It was only until a few years after the takeover that everyday operations of the company transitioned towards a Chinese managerial team.

CSR, the Gift, and a Lao-Australian Arrangement

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been a key part of the Sepon mine’s development. As anthropologist Alex Golub writes in his study of the Ipili-speaking people in Papua New Guinea and their interactions with a large international gold mine operating on their land, “as the scale and complexity of problems grew, it seems more difficult to know whom to condemn. I am amazed that as the issues of Porgera get more and more complex, people seek answers that are morally and empirically simpler and simpler.”¹⁰⁷ The clarity of advocacy becomes murkier given the vast complexities and nuances occurring across time, space, and scales. To be sure, the mine has resulted in socio-environmental degradation.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, Oxiana and subsequent iterations of the mining company have actively participated in a diverse range of social and community development endeavors, with the Chao Anouvong copper donation being a notable example.

Warren Mayes and Nigel Chang posit that a “fortunate coincidence” of interests emerged in Sepon, where local communities of Phou Thay and Brou participate substantively in cultural heritage programs.¹⁰⁹ Several mining executives have also cited the importance of creating jobs for local workers, “There were thousands of Lao workers making thousand-dollar salaries per month. They opened shops, and had training in engineering, certifications, and workshops. We were investing in the people and their future,” mentioned one of the MMG executives in an interview. Over a decade after having

¹⁰⁷ Alex Golub, *Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea* (2014), 212.

¹⁰⁸ A briefing from Friends of the Earth International raised objections to the mine’s initial development, citing harmful consequences such as indigenous dispossession, threats to endangered species, aquatic diversity, deforestation, and human rights violations, with little opportunity for participation; see Rod Harbinson, “Undermining Lives in Laos: Objections to the Sepon Project 2 Copper Mine Expansion of Oxiana Ltd in Lao PDR,” Friends of the Earth International, 2003. Despite MMG’s efforts to minimize environmental damage, scientists detected elevated levels of toxic metal contamination in the Nam Kok River near the mine, affecting aquatic life; see Latsamy Soulivongsa, Bundit Tengjaroenkul, and Isara Patawang, “Cytogenetic, Serum Liver Enzymes and Liver Cell Pathology of the Hampala Barb Fish (*Hampala Macrolepidota*) Affected by Toxic Elements in the Contaminated Nam Kok River near the Sepon Gold-Copper Mine, Lao PDR,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 11 (2021): 5854; and Latsamy Soulivongsa, Bundit Tengjaroenkul, and Lamyai Neeratanaphan, “Effects of Contamination by Heavy Metals and Metalloids on Chromosomes, Serum Biochemistry and Histopathology of the Bonylip Barb Fish Near Sepon Gold-Copper Mine, Lao PDR,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 24 (2020): 9492. These critiques align with the work of engaged anthropologists like Stuart Kirsch, who have been deeply involved in supporting communities impacted by mining operations; see Stuart Kirsch, *Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text* (2018).

¹⁰⁹ Warren Mayes and Nigel Chang, “Discovering Sepon: Cultural Heritage Management and the Making of a Modern Mine,” *The Extractive Industries and Society* 1, no. 2 (2014): 237–48.

left the mine, the executive had bumped into Sepon workers elsewhere in Laos, who told him about how their engineering skills from Sepon had enabled them to work on other infrastructural projects in Laos.

Part of these social and community development efforts involved gifting copper to communities around the mine, seen as a way to make merit. A USD 53,000 gift was presented to the Vilabouly Cultural Center's exhibition space to help rebuild the Thad Nang Lao Stupa.¹¹⁰ The company states that "the settlement of the stupa dates back to the reign of King Anouvong Maharaj at around 1825. It is considered one of the most valuable assets of Savannakhet as well as our Sepon mine communities."¹¹¹

The donation of copper for Chao Anouvong's statue was one aspect of these efforts, led in large part by Deputy Prime Minister Somsavath Lengsavath, who had fundraised and initiated many of the efforts to build statues as acts of making merit.¹¹² He had negotiated with the MMG team, still based out of Melbourne, to arrange for the copper to be donated. They had even managed to locate one of Chao Anouvong's descendants to model the statue after.¹¹³

In particular, sourcing the materials from the Sepon mine has been regarded as particularly potent for the nation. Archaeologists discovered a range of artifacts, such as Dong Son drums and copper ingots buried at least 2,000 years ago that were related to similarly dated mining shafts.¹¹⁴ Further digs revealed crucibles and slag related to copper smelting and pottery from potentially the Neolithic period, which is over 3,000 years ago.¹¹⁵ The Deputy Director General of the Department of National Heritage at the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture claims that:

We learn from the past, cultural heritage is an important source of evidence, proving the revolution of the national history. It is also a precious legacy that can not [sic] be remade or irreplaceable by other objects. Every change or destruction of the past is a great loss. Therefore, protecting the cultural heritage is a duty and responsibility of everyone in the society...

the archaeologists have found that Lao ancestors at the Vilabouly area knew how to use copper. There had been also exchanges of goods and trading with other countries more than 2,000 years ago. Thus, the research into this area would greatly contribute to record another page of the national history.¹¹⁶

There is an emphasis on a Lao tradition that extends to over 2,000 years ago, which forms part of "national history," long before the advent of the nation. The director of MMG LXML

¹¹⁰ MMG LXML Sepon, "MMG LXML Supports Restoration of Thad Nang Lao Stupa," ENP Newswire, January 14, 2018.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² He was also the chairman of the 2009 SEA Games organizing committee, helming one of the largest events and sporting spectacles for the country; see Philip Taylor, "The Descendants of Chao Anouvong," *The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50, no. 3 (2019): 345–65; Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation*.

¹¹³ Taylor, "The Descendants of Chao Anouvong."

¹¹⁴ Mayes and Chang, "Discovering Sepon."

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ MMG Sepon, "Leading Miner, MMG Sepon, Recognises Value of Cultural Heritage," ENP Newswire, August 23, 2010.

further claims that copper artifacts in Asia dated from over 2,000 years ago, and this continues in that long historical arc, such that “Lao copper, which is made by Lao people, is still being used today for cultural and national symbols.”¹¹⁷ Chao Anouvong’s narrative not only echoes to his martyr status from the 1820s, but to a much earlier “Lao” practice and tradition.

Since 2010, when the copper was gifted, MMG and the company have been slowly taken over by Chinese business interests. Previously, many executives were from Australia, though this has subsequently changed to increasing numbers of Chinese executives. MMG ended its gold production in 2013 and sold it in 2018 to Chifeng Jilong Gold Mining Company. The copper mine's life was projected to end in 2020. Since that happened, Chifeng has pivoted to pursuing gold through an underground mine and extended its extraction timeline beyond 2033.¹¹⁸

Chinese Capital's Expansion in Laos

Next to where we parked when visiting Chao Anouvong, there were large signs for *zhong guo lao chengdu* and *zhong can huo guo* (Chinese hotpot) with a Lao transliteration of it (Figure 6). The New World development is overtly a Chinese development adjacent to the Chao Anouvong Park, stretching across Don Chan Island. As Lao scholar Kesone Kanhalikham notes, the Vientiane New World project confiscated large amounts of farming land from Don Chan Island residents for modern development as a joint venture between China’s CAMC Engineering and the Lao Krittaphong Group.¹¹⁹ This encompasses a huge shift in the built environment, as various areas (*khet*) in the city are known to be dominated by the Chinese.

¹¹⁷ MMG Sepon, “Sepon Copper Reinforcing Lao Culture,” February 20, 2013.

¹¹⁸ Manyphone Vongphachanh, “Chifeng Jilong Gold Partners with Lao Mining Development State Enterprise,” The Laotian Times, July 14, 2022. <https://laotiantimes.com>.

¹¹⁹ Kanhalikham, “Redefining and Contestation of Public Space.”



Figure 6: New World Complex, next to Chao Anouvong Park (picture by author, 2022)

This particular socio-spatial process of Chao Anouvong and Sepon mine can be situated amid parallel processes of Chinese capital. This relational form of capital has been expanding across global geographies.¹²⁰ In Latin America, geographer Andrea Marston argues that “China is unique in that it is simultaneously driving the global upswing in resource nationalism by contributing to global demand, facilitating resource nationalist agendas abroad by investing in mining operations in countries that have rejected western involvement, and developing its own resource nationalist agenda, often accompanied by processes of internal colonialism.”¹²¹ China is ushering in an era of geoeconomics, expressing the logic of war through the securitization of economic policies and commerce to extend its dominance.¹²² Similar dynamics can be traced in Laos, as China enacts a form of resource nationalism and uneven development through mining. These transnational developments involve a dual spatial strategy of upward engagement with multilateral organizations and Mekong governments and downward implementation through Yunnan and Guangxi.¹²³

¹²⁰ Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (2017); Helen F. Siu, “Financing China’s Engagement in Africa: New State Spaces along a Variegated Landscape,” *Africa* 89, no. 4 (2019): 638–61.

¹²¹ Andrea Marston, “Alloyed Waterscapes: Mining and Water at the Nexus of Corporate Social Responsibility, Resource Nationalism, and Small-Scale Mining,” *WIREs Water* 4, no. 1 (2017): e1175, 6.

¹²² Gregory Raymond, “Religion as a Tool of Influence: Buddhism and China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Mainland Southeast Asia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 3 (2021): 346–71.

¹²³ Natalia Scurrah and Philip Hirsch, “Land and Capital across Borders: A Regional Geopolitics,” in *Turning Land into Capital: Development and Dispossession in the Mekong Region* (2022), 21.

In Laos, the impact and spread of Chinese capital have manifested through infrastructures such as the BRI,¹²⁴ agri-businesses across the country,¹²⁵ economic enclaves,¹²⁶ and urban civic associations.¹²⁷ As part of the BRI, the China-Laos railway has been fully operational since December 2021. The 1,013-km railway connects Kunming in China's Yunnan province and the Lao capital, Vientiane, as part of efforts to make Laos a land-linked instead of the landlocked country. The railway is a spectacle of modernity that promises economic growth through increased tourism, transporting goods, and enhancing public services to attract more overseas investment.

The BRI has been heralded as a gift, much like how Deborah Brautigam characterizes Chinese development in Africa.¹²⁸ Yet the USD 5.9 billion railway that was financed by a 30-70% joint venture between Lao and Chinese companies and governments has elevated Laos's debt burden towards what might be a looming sovereign debt crisis.¹²⁹ Moreover, ethnographers have brought up issues of labor dispute, ecological damage, and inadequate land compensation that accompany the construction of this railway.¹³⁰ Lao residents also complain that the train brings little benefit to Laos, as it is used primarily as a channel to transport Chinese goods and extend the railway past Laos. These dynamics reflect how much of the mine investments in Laos work, where much of the value capture goes towards Vietnamese and Chinese business owners and laborers, not the local population.

Again, the notion of what constitutes "Lao" comes into question as the political category of ethnicity becomes salient and fractious amid claims for a multi-ethnic nationalism and incoming Chinese migration. The Chinese company's takeover is one instance in a wider constellation of Chinese investments and influence in Laos. Thinking about the statue's role in Laos's nationalism, many Chinese do not participate in venerating the statues like practicing Lao Buddhists, and they occupy a vastly different set of onto-epistemological positions.¹³¹ As Wilcox notes on China-Lao interactions, "My

¹²⁴ Jessica DiCarlo, "Grounding Global China in Northern Laos: The Making of the Infrastructure Frontier," PhD diss., University of Colorado Boulder, 2021; Kearrin Sims, "High Modernism in a Small Country: China 'Develops' Laos," in *The Deer and The Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century* (2020), 271–98.

¹²⁵ Michael Dwyer, *Upland Geopolitics: Postwar Laos and the Global Land Rush* (2022); Miles Kenney-Lazar, "Governing Dispossession: Relational Land Grabbing in Laos," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108, no. 3 (2018): 679–94; Juliet Lu and Oliver Schönweger, "Great Expectations: Chinese Investment in Laos and the Myth of Empty Land," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, no. 1 (2019): 61–78

¹²⁶ Pinkaew Laungaramsri and Souksamone Sengchanh, "Negotiating Post-Resettlement Livelihoods: The Chinese Special Economic Zone and Its Impact in Northwestern Laos," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 40, no. 4 (2018): 482–98; Pál Nyíri, "Enclaves of Improvement: Sovereignty and Developmentalism in the Special Zones of the China-Lao Borderlands," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 3 (2012): 533–62; Danielle Tan, "Chinese Enclaves in the Golden Triangle Borderlands—An Alternative Account of State Formation in Laos," in *Chinese Encounters in Southeast Asia: How People, Money, and Ideas from China Are Changing a Region* (University of Washington Press, 2017), 136–56.

¹²⁷ Wanjing (Kelly) Chen, "Harnessing the Sending State: Pragmatic Improvisations and Negotiated Memberships of the Chinese Diaspora in Laos," *Political Geography* 89 (2021): 102425.

¹²⁸ Deborah Brautigam, *The Real Story of China in Africa* (2009).

¹²⁹ Wanjing (Kelly) Chen and Jessica DiCarlo, "Laos–China Railway," The People's Map of Global China (blog), September 2, 2021, <https://thepeoplesmap.net/project/laos-china-railway/>.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ There has been a surge in the outreach efforts of the Chinese government using Buddhism as a cultural resource since 2013 to foster shared values with Southeast Asian countries, despite the Chinese party-government forbidding its members to practice religion in this way; see Gregory Raymond, "Religion as a Tool

suggestion here is that across the Lao population and including the ethnic minorities, there is a clear sense of “we, citizens of Laos,” as opposed to “they, citizens of China,” which is developing. In private spaces of the Lao population, the Chinese are subject to all sorts of jokes and stereotypes that reinforce a sense of us/them.”¹³² The homogenous expansion of the ‘multi-ethnic’ and national Lao narrative thus encounters the frictions between a heterogeneous Lao population and the social, economic, and political aspects of Chinese expansion. For all the state’s claims of multi-ethnic nationality, attention is needed to reconsider the multiplicitous role of ethnicity in the state’s nationalist projections.

Conclusion: Chinese Capital vs the Lao Capital Vientiane

The statue remains standing, quietly overlooking the Mekong, as Laos continues to undergo radical transformations. Chao Anouvong has been the center of a state-sponsored narrative painting a proto-nationalist and Buddhist iconic figure going up against an evil Siamese polity, as both martyr and rebel. Through a nationalistic narrative, the LPRP has covered the socio-political fissures across the geo-body of Laos by placing the iconic figure of Chao Anouvong among a pantheon of heroes in a Buddhist-liberatory struggle. Tappe states, “The iconicity of the monuments and other materialities of the *kantosou* allow slightly shifting meanings that have to be anchored by the hegemonic LPRP narratives.”¹³³

This article has rescaled this dominant perspective through three axes, providing a basis to critically reconsider the question of “Who is Lao?” Historians have depicted how this is far too simplistic a picture, contextualizing the socio-political circumstances in the 1820s around Chao Anouvong’s failed geopolitical gambit. They unpack the intentional distancing by the British from this conflict and the refusal of support from the Vietnamese, which expedited the downfall of Chao Anouvong and the destruction of Vientiane. But if Laos traces its history to three kingdoms in that period, only one of which Chao Anouvong was king, what does this mean for northern and southern Laos (and everywhere in-between)?

From a different angle, the silences around the national narrative also destabilize the Lao identity. The kings who are left off the narrative and poised as enemies of the state, as well as the denouncing of the French, are the products of a particular anticolonial stance. This anticolonial resistance is what the state has been using to construct its political legitimacy and define its subjects. Additionally, despite growing counter-monuments since the 1980s, the Lao state has further chosen to reinscribe monumental nationalism through Chao Anouvong.

The decaying façade and broken glass windows of the New World complex refract these contradictory and difficult questions of national identity. Even with the acquisition of the Sepon mine by Chinese capital, Lao and Australian parties were able to negotiate a donation of copper materials for the statue of Chao Anouvong. This copper material holds

of Influence: Buddhism and China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Mainland Southeast Asia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 3 (2020): 346–71.

¹³² Wilcox, “Consolidating Lao-Ness,” 124.

¹³³ Tappe, “Faces and Facets of the Kantosou Kou Xat,” 447.

particular significance for the national narrative, given 2,000-year-old mining practices by the “Lao” in Sepon. Parallel to the takeover of the mining company, Chinese capital has been materializing its investments across the built and unbuilt environments and social landscape in Laos. These accumulations are poised to force a reckoning with Laos’s nationalistic narrative. With the socio-political fissures hidden behind the state’s *paxaxon lao banda phap* narrative and new ones emerging, will it be Chao Anouvong’s peaceful adornment or the sword in his hand that will usher in the next chapter of Laos’s national history?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Erik Harms and Jake Kosek for their insightful feedback. I am also grateful to Simon Creak, Anna Koshcheeva, and Floramante S. J. Ponce for their generous and incisive comments at the 7th International Conference on Lao Studies. Ryan Wolfson-Ford and Amelia Moore at the Library of Congress helped me during the unexpected snowstorm in DC to gather materials on Laos. My friends and colleagues in Laos have been the source and inspiration for this paper, and I have immense gratitude to my research participants who have helped me navigate a tricky conceptual and empirical terrain. This research was funded by the Charles Kao Fund, Alan H. Smith Fund, and Pre-Dissertation Fellowship from the Yale MacMillan Center.

References

- ABC News. 2009. “Minmetals Launches New Company amid Flat Demand,” June 18, 2009. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-06-18/minmetals-launches-new-company-amid-flat-demand/1324742>.
- Anagnost, Ann. 1997. *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London, UK, and New York, NY: Verso.
- Askew, Marc, Colin Long, and William Logan. 2006. *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao Landscape*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Bannerji, Himani. 2006. “Making India Hindu and Male: Cultural Nationalism and the Emergence of the Ethnic Citizen in Contemporary India.” *Ethnicities* 6 (3): 362–90.
- Brautigam, Deborah. 2011. *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- British Geological Survey. 2007. “China and Southeast Asia Mineral Production (2001-5).” UK.
- Brown, T J. 2007. “China and South-East Asia Mineral Production 2001-2005.” Nottingham, UK: British Geological Survey.
- Centre for International Economics (CIE). 2010. “The Economic Impact of the Sepon Mine.” Canberra and Sydney, Australia.

- Chen, Wanjing (Kelly). 2021. "Harnessing the Sending State: Pragmatic Improvisations and Negotiated Memberships of the Chinese Diaspora in Laos." *Political Geography* 89: 102425.
- Chen, Wanjing (Kelly), and Jessica DiCarlo. 2021. "Laos–China Railway." *The People's Map of Global China* (blog). September 2, 2021. <https://thepeoplesmap.net/project/laos-china-railway/>.
- Crawford, John. 1830. *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China; Exhibiting a View of the Actual State of Those Kingdoms*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. 2 vols. London, UK: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley.
- Creak, Simon. 2010. "Economic Impact of the Sepon Mine." *New Mandala*, June 25, 2010. <https://www.newmandala.org/economic-impact-of-the-sepon-mine/>.
- . 2015. *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Creak, Simon, and Keith Barney. 2018. "Conceptualising Party-State Governance and Rule in Laos." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48 (5): 693–716.
- Cromie, P. W. 2010. "Geological Setting, Geochemistry and Genesis of the Sepon Gold and Copper Deposits, Laos." PhD Dissertation, Tasmania, Australia: University of Tasmania.
- DiCarlo, Jessica. 2021. "Grounding Global China in Northern Laos: The Making of the Infrastructure Frontier." PhD Dissertation, Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Boulder.
- Dwyer, Michael. 2022. *Upland Geopolitics: Postwar Laos and the Global Land Rush*. Culture, Place, and Nature. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Enfield, Nick J. 1999. "Lao as a National Language." In *Laos: Culture and Society*, 258–90. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- Evans, Grant. 1998. *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975*. Honolulu: HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- . 2002. *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between*. Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- . 2009. *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- Forbes. 2006. "Commodities Boom," 2006. <https://www.forbes.com/global/2006/1225/020.html>.
- Gilbert, Paul Robert. 2020. "Speculating on Sovereignty: 'Money Mining' and Corporate Foreign Policy at the Extractive Industry Frontier." *Economy and Society* 49 (1): 16–44.
- Goswami, Manu. 2020. "Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (1983)." *Public Culture* 32 (2 (91)): 441–48.
- Goudineau, Yves. 2015. "The Ongoing Invention of a Multi-Ethnic Heritage in Laos." *The Journal of Lao Studies* 2: 33–53.
- Grabowsky, Volker, and Oliver Tappe. 2011. "'Important Kings of Laos.'" *Journal of Lao Studies* 2 (1): 1–44.
- Harbinson, Rod. 2003. "Undermining Lives in Laos: Objections to the Sepon Project 2 Copper Mine Expansion of Oxiana Ltd in Lao PDR." Friends of the Earth International.
- Hart, Gillian. 2020. "Why Did It Take so Long? Trump-Bannonism in a Global Conjunctural Frame." *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 102 (3): 239–66.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York and Oxon: Routledge.

- High, Holly. 2021. *Projectland: Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Hongsuwan, Pathom. 2023. "The politics of Chao Anouvong monument and deconstruction of king representation in present-day Laos." *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 44: 653–64.
- Huyssen, Andreas. 2003. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jessop, Bob. 2019. "Spatiotemporal Fixes and Multispatial Metagovernance: The Territory, Place, Scale, Network Scheme Revisited." In *Spatiotemporal Fixes and Multispatial Metagovernance: The Territory, Place, Scale, Network Scheme Revisited*, 48–77. De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
- Kanhalikham, Kesone. 2020. "Redefining and Contestation of Public Space in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR." PhD Dissertation, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Chiang Mai University.
- Kenney-Lazar, Miles. 2018. "Governing Dispossession: Relational Land Grabbing in Laos." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108 (3): 679–94.
- Keyes, Charles F. 2002. "The Case of the Purloined Lintel: The Politics of a Khmer Shrine as a Thai National Treasure." In *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*, edited by Craig J. Reynolds, Revised edition, 212–37. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- Koret, Peter. 2003. "Luep Phasun (Extinguishing the light of the sun): romance, religion and politics in the interpretation of a traditional Lao poem." *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, edited by Christopher E. Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, 181–208. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Kyophilvong, Phouphet. 2009. "Mining Sector in Laos." BRC Report 2. Major Industries and Business Chance in CLMV Countries.
- Ladwig, Patrice. 2018. "Imitations of Buddhist Statecraft: The Patronage of Lao Buddhism and the Reconstruction of Relic Shrines and Temples in Colonial French Indochina." *Social Analysis* 62 (2): 98–125.
- Lane Xang Minerals Limited (LXML). 2021. "Home." 2021. <https://lxml.la/>.
- Laungaramsri, Pinkaew, and Souksamone Sengchanh. 2019. "Negotiating Post-Resettlement Livelihoods: The Chinese Special Economic Zone and Its Impact in Northwestern Laos." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement* 40 (4): 482–98.
- Lee, Ching Kwan. 2017. *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lockhart, Bruce M. 2006. "'Pavatsat Lao': Constructing a National History." *Southeast Asia Research* 14 (3): 361–86.
- Lu, Juliet, and Oliver Schönweger. 2019. "Great Expectations: Chinese Investment in Laos and the Myth of Empty Land." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7 (1): 61–78.
- Manini, Tony, and Peter Albert. n.d. "Exploration and Development of the Sepon Gold and Copper Deposits, Laos." Oxiana Limited.
- Marston, Andrea J. 2017. "Alloyed Waterscapes: Mining and Water at the Nexus of Corporate Social Responsibility, Resource Nationalism, and Small-Scale Mining." *WIREs Water* 4 (1): e1175.
- Mayes, Warren, and Nigel Chang. 2014. "Discovering Sepon: Cultural Heritage Management and the Making of a Modern Mine." *The Extractive Industries and Society* 1 (2): 237–48.

- McGeough, Ryan Erik. 2011. "The American Counter-Monumental Tradition: Renegotiating Memory and the Evolution of American Sacred Space," 163.
- McGeough, Ryan Erik, Catherine Helen Palczewski, and Randall A. Lake. 2015. "Oppositional Memory Practices: U.S. Memorial Spaces as Arguments Over Public Memory." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 51 (4): 231–54.
- Michelmores, Andrew. 2008. *Oz Minerals Corporate Update*. Australian Securities Exchange. September, 2008
- MMG Sepon LXML. 2013. "Sepon Copper Reinforcing Lao Culture." February 20, 2013.
- . 2018. "MMG LXML Supports Restoration of Thad Nang Lao Stupa." *ENP Newswire*, January 14, 2018. LexisNexis.
- MMG Sepon. 2010a. "Chinese Ambassador to Laos Addresses Sepon Employees on Australia Day." January 27, 2010.
- . 2010b. "Sepon Mine Awards Logistics Contract to Lao Company." *ENP Newswire*, August 19, 2010. LexisNexis.
- . 2010c. "Leading Miner, MMG Sepon, Recognises Value of Cultural Heritage." August 23, 2010.
- Ngaosyvathn, Mayoury, and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn. 1988. *Chao Anou 1767-1829: Lueang Kao, Banha May (Chao Anou 1767-1829: Old Story, New Problems)*. Vientiane, Laos.
- . 1989. "Lao Historiography and Historians: Case Study of the War Between Bangkok and the Lao in 1827." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, no. 1: 55–69.
- . 1994. *Kith and Kin Politics: The Relationship Between Laos and Thailand*. Manila, Philippines, and Wollongong, Australia: Journal of Contemporary Asia Publishers.
- . 1998. *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Nyíri, Pál. 2012. "Enclaves of Improvement: Sovereignty and Developmentalism in the Special Zones of the China-Lao Borderlands." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (3): 533–62.
- Pholsena, Vatthana. 2006. *Post-War Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Raymond, Gregory. 2020. "Religion as a Tool of Influence: Buddhism and China's Belt and Road Initiative in Mainland Southeast Asia." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42 (3): 346–71.
- . 2021. "From Neoliberalism to Geoeconomics: The Greater Mekong Subregion and the Archaeology of the Belt and Road Initiative in Mainland Southeast Asia." *Made in China Journal* 6 (2).
- Scurrah, Natalia, and Philip Hirsch. 2022. "Land and Capital across Borders: A Regional Geopolitics." In *Turning Land into Capital: Development and Dispossession in the Mekong Region*, 3–28. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Sims, Kearnin. 2020. "High Modernism in a Small Country: China Develops Laos." In *The Deer and The Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*, 271–98. Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University.
- Siu, Helen F. 2019. "Financing China's Engagement in Africa: New State Spaces along a Variegated Landscape." *Africa* 89 (4): 638–61.
- Soulivongsa, Latsamy, Bundit Tengjaroenkul, and Lamyai Neeratanaphan. 2020. "Effects of Contamination by Heavy Metals and Metalloids on Chromosomes, Serum Biochemistry

- and Histopathology of the Bonylip Barb Fish Near Sepon Gold-Copper Mine, Lao PDR.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17 (24): 9492.
- Soulivongsa, Latsamy, Bundit Tengjaroenkul, Isara Patawang, and Lamyai Neeratanaphan. 2021. “Cytogenetic, Serum Liver Enzymes and Liver Cell Pathology of the Hampala Barb Fish (*Hampala Macrolepidota*) Affected by Toxic Elements in the Contaminated Nam Kok River near the Sepon Gold-Copper Mine, Lao PDR.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18 (11): 5854.
- Stuart-Fox, Martin. 1997. *A History of Laos*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tan, Danielle. 2017. “Chinese Enclaves in the Golden Triangle Borderlands - An Alternative Account of State Formation in Laos.” In *Chinese Encounters in Southeast Asia - How People, Money, and Ideas from China Are Changing a Region*, edited by Pál Nyíri and Danielle Tan, 136–56. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Tappe, Oliver. 2013. “Faces and Facets of the Kantosou Kou Xat – The Lao ‘National Liberation Struggle’ in State Commemoration and Historiography.” *Asian Studies Review* 37 (4): 433–50.
- . 2021. “Artisanal, Small-Scale and Large-Scale Mining in Lao PDR” by Oliver Tappe.” 44. ISEAS Perspective. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-44-artisanal-small-scale-and-large-scale-mining-in-lao-pdr-by-oliver-tappe/>.
- Thongchai Winichakul. 1994. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Thongsithavong, Tommy. 2010. “yesterday i went to chao anouvong park.” Facebook, November 9, 2010. https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02A9a1cEGgjVJFcKPRBD C49TR374KUafdin49bqY8njodTmgYEQWJLzYR9T5LA5JgUl&id=1131944187.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Vella, Walter F. 1957. *Siam under Rama III, 1824-1851*. Locust Valley, NY: Association for Asian Studies.
- Vientiane Mai. 2010. “Enshrining the Statue of Chao Anouvong,” November 8, 2010.
- Vongphachanh, Manyphone. 2022. “Chifeng Jilong Gold Partners with Lao Mining Development State Enterprise.” *The Laotian Times*, July 14.
- Wilcox, Phill. 2022. “Consolidating Lao-Ness: China in Laos in the Age of the BRI.” In *New Nationalisms and China’s Belt and Road Initiative Exploring the Transnational Public Domain*, edited by Julien Rajaoson and Mireille Manga Edimo, 117–28. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wolfson-Ford, Ryan. 2011. “Memories of Chao Anu: New History and Post-Socialist Ideology.” *The Journal of Lao Studies* 2 (2): 104–26.
- . 2023. “Xāt Lao: Imaging the Lao Nation through Race, History and Language.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Nationalism in East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Lu Zhouxiang, 504–18. New York and London: Routledge.
- Young, James E. 1992. “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today.” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (2): 267–96.