

The challenge for Lao historiography

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Abstract: This article examines the political dimension of historiography in contributing to the Lao nation-state building project, with particular reference to institutional and social forms of Lao political culture, the role of minority groups during the Revolution and the lingering shadow of the country's aristocratic past. Reference is made to several key issues in current Lao historiography. The article also raises the issue of the respective political responsibilities of Lao and foreign historians in helping to construct a national history.

Keywords: nationalism; historiography; monarchy; Laos

Although we live in an age of globalization, the nation-state remains the key component of the current international political order.¹ While many post-colonial nation-states, Laos among them, are arbitrary constructs – the result of historical accident and outside political forces – they are not about to be replaced by alternative ‘spatial identities’. Moreover, since nation-states define citizenship and identity, and since history provides the temporal dimension of these elements, writing the histories of nation-states remains a political task that must be accomplished. This political need is little understood by those who argue that writing the histories of nation-states (‘the old national story’) ‘has served its purpose’ and is ‘on its way out’, and that historians should move on to more cutting-edge and exciting, postmodern historical studies.²

¹ This is strongly argued in, for example, Ellen Meiksins Wood (2003), *Empire of Capital*, Verso, London.

² On ‘spatial identities’, see Thongchai Winichakul (2003), ‘Writing at the interstices: Southeast Asian historians and postnational histories in Southeast Asia’, in Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, eds, *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, p 7. Thongchai makes a number of other contentious claims in this article, not least of which is that ‘the *raison d’être* of a national history in many postcolonial countries [is] anti-colonialism’ (p 9). He makes no reference to the demands of modern power relations, elite interests or group identities. In this, he reflects the reluctance of many postmodernists to engage with the hard questions of politics and power.

Histories of nation-states remain important because of the essential contribution they make to the shared identity of citizens, and because the legitimacy of the ruling elite of any nation-state rests in large part on the support provided by just such a sense of shared identity.³

In this article, I want to argue that the continued significance of the nation-state in the international political order makes it politically incumbent upon any ruling elite to promote a sense of national identity in order to reinforce its ideology of legitimation. One crucial dimension of this process, both for legitimacy and for identity, is historical. This is why ruling elites take such an interest in the way in which their national histories are portrayed. This is certainly the case in Laos, where the ruling elite represented by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has gone out of its way to control the discourse and production of history. However, the production of history presents peculiar challenges, and I shall also argue that the LPRP regime has proved to be particularly inept in meeting the challenge of how to construct a historiography of the nation-state in post-socialist Laos.

First, however, I need to outline the theoretical perspective on which my argument is based. This must necessarily be abbreviated. All I shall attempt to do is to suggest some of the key relationships contingent upon the nation-state as a historical construct. These relationships centre notably upon how the articulation of power, in the extended institutional and social forms of political culture, interacts with history to create and sustain new identities required by the politics of the nation-state in the current global context.

Politics and the nation-state

Let me begin by clarifying my use of the term 'nation-state'. A 'state' comprises a set of institutions that concentrate certain forms of social power (notably coercive), while regulating the distribution of others (notably economic). Political and ideological power may be concentrated or distributed, depending on the form of the state.⁴ 'Nation' is a

³ This is not to argue that nationalism, much less the nation-state, is a product of 'elite manipulation', although nationalist historiography may be. Nationalism may be used by elites, but it must have some basis in the first place; nationalisms may be constructed, but they are not invented *ex nihilo*. See Roger Brubaker (1998), 'Myths and misconceptions in the study of nationalism', in John A. Hall, ed, *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 272–306.

⁴ I am drawing here on the analysis in Michael Mann (1986), *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Ch 1.

much more problematical concept, constructed far too often on some presumed racial or cultural (linguistic, religious) basis. Deconstruction of myths associated with such forms of nationalism has been instrumental in allowing alternative definitions of the nation to be constructed on a secular legal basis of shared citizenship.⁵ I use the term 'nation-state' to refer to a community of people sharing both a defined territory and a set of political and legal institutions, whose functioning establishes a characteristic political culture. Modern nationality refers to shared citizenship; it has no basis in race or ethnicity. 'Race' plays no part, therefore, in the definition of the nation-state, although in the odd case of Laos it does officially designate one level of communal identity.⁶ 'Nationalism' is the ideology that places the interests of the nation-state before those of individual citizens, communities or humanity as a whole. There is, of course, a vast literature on nations and nationalism, far too vast to engage in this brief article.⁷ Let me therefore simply make a number of points.

The first is that discussion on the meaning of the terms 'nation' and 'nationalism' has been going on now for well over two centuries. As in any such discourse, meanings have changed, partly in response to ideology and partly to historical events and their interpretation. Thus the biological basis for race and its mystical link to place in Johann von Herder's notion of the *Volk* was fatally compromised by the obscenities of Nazism, while recognition of the artificiality – and thus the 'constructedness' – of nations was stimulated by the historical contingency of many post-colonial states. This discourse continues; the nation today is no longer thought of as some organic natural form.⁸ Even in

⁵ This is a valid historical labour, so long as it is also recognized that the study of the historical continuity of such myths is equally so, for they cannot just be dismissed. For example, the myths of the three gourds, Khun Borom and the Buddha's presence in Laos all deserve historical consideration for the role they have played in Lao history; see Martin Stuart-Fox (1998), *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline*, White Lotus, Bangkok. A general discussion of constructions of nation is to be found in Anthony Smith (1986), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell, Oxford.

⁶ While all Lao citizens have Lao 'nationality' (*sonsat*), those of Vietnamese and Chinese origin are not classified as being of Lao 'race' (*seuasat*). All other ethnic groups are indicated as being of Lao race on all official internal identification documents; Vathana Pholsena (2001), 'Minorities and the construction of a nation in post-socialist Laos', University of Hull dissertation, Hull, p 152.

⁷ Influential contributions include Benedict Anderson (1983), *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London; and Ernest Gellner (1983), *Nations and Nationalism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY. For Southeast Asia, see also Nicholas Tarling (1998), *Nations and States in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

⁸ Anthony D. Smith (1998), *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*, Routledge, London.

Japan, where this sort of thinking still remains marked, a trickle of refugees and migrants, the presence of guest workers and debate over the status of the Korean community have begun to introduce a more composite picture.⁹ All nation-states today are collections of communities based on perceived common identities and/or common interests that more or less transcend differences.

My second point is that even though modern nation-states cannot anchor their identity in universal membership of some biological descent group (race) or in universal adherence to a common culture or even language, their citizens do share – in the sense that important aspects of their lives are shaped by – common political institutions, including those necessary for the nation-state to be accepted as an actor in the international political order.¹⁰ These institutions define a political culture, from which individuals and communities may feel alienated, marginalized or excluded, but the effects of which they cannot escape, for political culture determines how power is exercised within the nation-state (concentrated, shared, diffused, articulated). It is the political culture that determines the form and extent of civil society and the degree of influence this can exert on government. Political culture thus forms the framework for a sense of national identity.

My third point is that political culture, like other forms of culture, is historically contingent; even those based on revered constitutions, such as the USA, change over time in response to changing historical circumstances.¹¹ So any identity based upon political culture changes, too. No

⁹ Yumiko Iida (2002), *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan: Nationalism as Aesthetics*, Routledge, London and New York; Stephen Vlastos (1998), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

¹⁰ To be such an actor, a nation-state must accept certain responsibilities – notably (since the prevailing order functions in the interests of global capitalism) to facilitate foreign capital investment and, post-11 September 2002, to prevent any persons within its border, whether citizens or not, from threatening those interests. Nation-states that fail to do this are threatened with pre-emptive regime change (Afghanistan, Iraq); failed states are to be resuscitated, not colonized or eliminated (Solomon Islands). Anthony D. Smith argues for the continuing importance of nation-states on the grounds that they are 'historically embedded' and 'pre-eminently functional for modernity'; Anthony D. Smith (1995), *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp 155, 157.

¹¹ William J. Duiker defines nationalism as 'the result of a process by which a people become conscious of themselves as a separate national identity in a modern world, a process by which they become willing to transfer their primary loyalty from the village, or the region, or the monarch, to the state'; William J. Duiker (1976), *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, p 15. Almost 30 years later the process continues, but the subject has shifted from 'a

timeless essence is involved in being identified as belonging to any nation-state. All identities are constructs, whether individual, built on personal experience and memory; communal, built on communicated and shared experience and oral history; or national, built on taught history of the nation-state, its constituent communities, its political system and its relations with other polities.¹² At each level there is a historical dimension that is essential if identity is to provide meaning. Moreover, as these different levels suggest, all of us possess multiple identities, reflecting the multiple communities of which we are members – as belonging to extended families, communities (ethnic, linguistic or religious communities) or professions and associations; or as coming from home provinces or regions, belonging to nation-states or representing supranational entities. As the hierarchy of these identities is extended, common and defining characteristics must be ‘imagined’ rather than encountered. This requires an expansion of consciousness beyond the local, based on knowledge of the extent of wider communities and an understanding of how individuals and local communities come to be included in these wider entities at each higher level. Both require education.

Finally, political culture is about power, the means of its concentration and the forms in which it is exercised. Of the forms of social power – economic, coercive, political and ideological – the ruling elite in control of the state has perforce to share economic power (even in states still proclaiming themselves as socialist), but monopolizes coercive power while attempting to maximize political power, in part through manipulating the ideological power that derives from political legitimation. It is here that history comes in by bolstering the legitimation of power; in so doing, it intrudes into how power is distributed within any society through the influence it has in shaping political culture.

History, politics and identity

Since legitimation is of such crucial importance for ruling elites, it is not surprising that they should take an interest in history – particularly the version taught to children in school, for this will impart the historical

people’ to include everyone associated with communities situated within national boundaries, while the emphasis has shifted from race, ethnicity and culture to citizenship and the expansion of consciousness that comes with education.

¹² On history, memory and identity, see David Lowenthal (1985), *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; and Jacques Le Goff (1992), *History and Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York.

dimension of state-sponsored national identity.¹³ History, however imperfectly understood, provides the common bond that allows members of various constituent communities to imagine themselves as having some form of identity and associated interests in common, and to accept that pursuit of these interests should be entrusted to a ruling elite claiming to represent the nation-state. Conversely, history may undermine the legitimacy of a ruling elite, or at least legitimize the empowerment of other social groups and political claimants. If this process becomes too divergent, it may lead to civil conflict, and even to the failure of the nation-state.

Not all history has political impact, of course. Social and cultural history may be written with no reference to politics, as little more than descriptive antiquarianism. All social and cultural change happens, however, in a context of prevailing power relationships, and any explanation of change must take this into account (for example, the changing relations between majority and minority, or dominant and dominated, social groups.) Power remains central: use of it, competition for it, exploitation by it. The history of political institutions and culture cannot avoid politics, so when it comes to the history of the political construct that is the nation-state, 'history is past politics and politics, present history'.¹⁴

In any political culture, history is produced by an educated elite as the product of an ongoing discourse that includes not just professional historians, but also public intellectuals, teachers, journalists, artists and filmmakers, bureaucrats and politicians. Like any discourse, the discourse of history takes place over time: it is historical. In other words, historiography is a historical product; it evolves in response to historical circumstances. What is past does not change, but the relationship between the past and an ever-changing present does change, and needs continuously to be reinterpreted. Historical interpretation is always contested: no single history can ever hope to claim universal assent, even though one interpretation may be exclusively endorsed by an authoritarian ruling elite. There always exist alternative histories – local, community, oral – which are also the product of human discourse and

¹³ Marc Ferro (2003), *The Use and Abuse of History: Or How the Past is Taught to Children*, rev ed, Routledge, London and New York.

¹⁴ J. G. A. Pocock (1996), 'The historian as political actor in polity, society and academy', *Journal of Pacific Studies*, Vol 20, p 91. On power, see Steven Lukes (1974), *Power: A Radical View*, Macmillan, London; Keith Dowding (1996), *Power*, Open University Press, Buckingham; and Stephen Gill (2003), *Power and Resistance in the New World Order*, Palgrave, London.

are no less ‘constructed’, and no less political, than national histories. Whether to prefer one or another is ultimately a *political* choice reflecting a combination of epistemic, axiological, ethical and often emotional, commitments. Histories of component communities of the nation-state (ethnic or cultural communities, gender groups, regions, associations) both contribute to defining the identity of those communities and empower them.

It is usual for historians to claim a privileged position in the writing of history, based on formal training in, and professional commitment to, a methodology that embraces the ideal of ‘objectivity’ – even if this can never be achieved in practice since every history is historically contingent.¹⁵ This involves giving priority to epistemic values over all others, to the best of the historian’s ability, in the selection of what to include and what to exclude from the narrative constructed and in the derivation of interpretation from evidence. Yet histories are not lists of facts; they are interpretive narratives, which, whether written by professional academic historians or not, can claim no more than hypothetical status, being open both to criticism and to the challenge of alternative interpretations.

That no history can claim to be absolute truth in no way diminishes the social value or political importance of history, for these lie not predominantly in knowledge of the past *per se* (although this undoubtedly holds its own fascination for and enriches the lives of many), but in the support history provides for constructions of identity and in the legitimation of power. At the individual level, a sense of identity is essential for psychological well-being and social integration. At the community level, a sense of identity is essential for communal self-esteem and purpose, and for understanding how the community relates to the nation-state. At the national level, a sense of identity promotes both national cohesion and integration of the nation-state into the prevailing international order. These are the minimum multiple identities of citizens of the modern world.

The fact that both histories and identities are constructs – in the sense that they are selective, partial and contingent – does not make them fictions. The elements that comprise them are real, whether historical sources or lived experiences; the methodologies and beliefs that underlie them are held to with real conviction, bolstered by the presuppositions of world views that usually remain unquestioned (whether Buddhist,

¹⁵ Peter Novick (1988), *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

animist, scientific or some idiosyncratic personal combination). It is always easy to criticize and ‘deconstruct’ histories and identities built on contestable historical claims whose presuppositions we do not share. Into such criticisms, assumptions of superiority easily insinuate themselves.¹⁶ Yet criticism remains essential for the ongoing public discourse of history.

Memories and life experiences are individual, but histories, of whatever subject, are communal and so shared; this is what gives them their political dimension. Communal histories, whether passed on orally or given form in written accounts or local museums and monuments, reflect communal needs and initiatives. Their politics are argued out by those in the community sufficiently interested in what is at stake – including those who will gain politically or in terms of wealth or social status. Ideally, the discourse over national history should include the widest possible national participation. At the national level, however, more is at stake politically, and elites often use their power to attempt to limit and confine the debate. Yet this does not detract from the political significance of what is at stake. In different political cultures, debate may be more or less freely entered into, but the political significance of history still remains the legitimation of power; and if more democratic governments cannot control either the academic or popular debate, they are often adept at ensuring that their preferred spin gets included in school curricula.¹⁷

In Laos, as elsewhere, elites have always controlled historical debate for their own political purposes. In the process, they have shaped identities that were superimposed on equally historically contingent local and communal identities that were stronger and more resilient. These rested above all on oral tradition mapping the origins and relationships of difference, and they continue to influence Lao political culture.

¹⁶ The ‘intellectual imperialism’ of some Western historians has always worried me. Because *we* now write histories in certain ways, we take it for granted that everyone else should too, even though the stage of construction of political and social institutions in a country might be better served by other forms of historiography practised there – better served, that is, in terms of its political and social impact on the cohesion of communities and their identities. That requires a judgment that is again political, however. See Robert Young (1990), *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Routledge, London and New York.

¹⁷ The debate over ‘black arm-band’ history in Australia is a case in point. There has, for example, been intense public discussion over whether children in school should be told that white people ‘settled’ or ‘invaded’ the continent; Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, eds (2003), *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic.

They can never be ignored, even though in what follows I shall concentrate on the politics of elite Lao historiography.

Historiography and political legitimization in Laos

In an earlier work, I showed how history was used to legitimate power in Laos under four different political regimes: in the Kingdom of Lan Xang, under French rule, during the Kingdom of Laos, and by the Pathet Lao and the LPDR.¹⁸ For each of these, history was a means of constructing and legitimizing a political entity (kingdom, colony or state) in which the ruled would give allegiance to the rulers. During the period of Lan Xang, from the mid-fourteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, the court chronicles of successive reigns established both the Buddhist credentials of the king, and hence his karmic right to rule, and his genealogical connection to the mythical Khun Borom, the divine progenitor of the Tai–Lao people. The chronicles thereby established royal legitimacy and the king's claim to the allegiance of the rulers of constituent *meuang*.¹⁹ The nested hierarchy of smaller *meuang* within larger and more powerful *meuang* continued to the level of the *mandala*, which comprised *Meuang Lao*, the Kingdom of Lan Xang. Only the court ruling elite would have conceived of the *mandala* as a whole, and identified themselves accordingly. Even after Lan Xang split into three constituent kingdoms (Luang Phrabang, Viang Chan and Champasak), it is notable that the ruling elite of each continued to claim the inheritance of Lan Xang.

French histories of Laos and of French–Lao interaction, though based on a far more rigorous methodology, were no less political in their intent and implications. French historians concentrated particularly on the division of Lan Xang, the destruction of Viang Chan and its ruling family following the Lao–Siamese war of 1827–28 and the role of France in reconstituting a Lao political entity. French histories of colonial Laos legitimized French rule not just in terms of France's *mission civilisatrice*, but also as defending the Lao from their aggressive Siamese neighbours. The irony, of course, was that no similar claim was made of defending the Lao against Vietnamese expansion, understandable in

¹⁸ Martin Stuart-Fox (2004), 'Historiography, power and identity: history and political legitimisation in Laos', in Christopher E. Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, eds, *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, NIAS Press, Copenhagen, pp 71–95.

¹⁹ I have discussed this at greater length in Stuart-Fox, *supra* note 5.

the light of French intentions to absorb Laos into what was to all intents and purposes a greater Vietnam.²⁰

After the first seizure of Lao territory in 1893, French officials had hoped to recover the full extent of the Kingdom of Lan Xang by including all of what is now north-east Thailand, thus creating a 'Greater Laos'. Once this plan was abandoned in favour of a comfortable relationship with Bangkok, the Laos that was left could lay little claim to the historical territory of Lan Xang. What the modern Lao nation-state could, and did, lay claim to was the political legacy of Lan Xang, but not until the colonial venture was itself in jeopardy. In the meantime, France remained the protecting and civilizing power, ruling over a population it portrayed as comprising grateful and cooperative ethnic Lao and rebellious and primitive '*Montagnards*'.

While historical discontinuity was emphasized in French colonial historiography of Laos, historical continuity became a central theme in the historiography of the Lao nationalist movement and the Kingdom of Laos to which it gave birth.²¹ The most important evidence for the claimed continuity of Lao history was that the royal family of Luang Phrabang had continued uninterruptedly to rule over what had always been a Lao kingdom, recognized as such by all neighbouring polities and by the French through the Protectorate that applied to Luang Phrabang, as opposed to the direct administration of the rest of Laos. It is hardly surprising that research into the continuity of Lao history was first encouraged by Prince Phetsarat Rattanavong, scion of the family

²⁰ As I have argued in Martin Stuart-Fox (1995), 'The French in Laos, 1887–1945', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 29, No 1, pp 111–135; reprinted in Martin Stuart-Fox (2002), *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: The Making of Modern Laos*, 2 ed, White Lotus, Bangkok, pp 23–50. An example of colonial historiography is Roland Meyer (1931), *Le Laos*, Exposition Coloniale et Internationale de Paris, Hanoi.

²¹ Some scholars reject any continuity between Lan Xang and the modern Lao nation-state. Thus Grant Evans argues that 'One cannot write a history of Laos or a history of Thailand or Cambodia because these entities did not exist until the modern nationalist period'; Grant Evans, ed (1999), 'Introduction', *Laos: Culture and Society*, Silksworm Books, Chiang Mai, p 16. This argument has been well refuted in Anthony D. Smith (2000), *The Nation in History: Historical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism*, University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, particularly Ch 3 on 'Social construction and ethnic genealogy'. Smith argues for what he calls an 'ethnosymbolic' account of nations and nationalism that takes seriously persistent belief in 'national myths' as *historical phenomena*. My own position is set out in Martin Stuart-Fox (1993), 'On the writing of Lao history: continuities and discontinuities', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 24, pp 106–121, reprinted in Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Breazeale, eds (2002), *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on the Seventh to Twentieth Centuries*, Silksworm Books, Chiang Mai, pp 1–24.

of the *Uparat* (Viceroy) of the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang, a good decade before it came to form the core of Lao nationalist discourse in the 1940s.²²

The political purpose of historiography in the Kingdom of Laos is nowhere more apparent than in the writings of Katay Don Sasorith, a leading intellectual and politician. Katay argued for continuity between the Kingdom of Lan Xang and the Kingdom of Laos on the grounds that while none of the three Lao kingdoms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could assert an exclusive claim to be *Meuang Lao* because of the existence of the other two, the political unity of all Lao people was always recognized in Lao discourse (through use of the term *Meuang Lao*) and so remained the ideal in all Lao hearts. In making the claim that the Kingdom of Laos inherited the mantle of *Meuang Lao*, Katay effectively excluded all Lao no longer living within the borders of Laos. More seriously, he claimed a spurious homogeneity for the population that was included, which effectively denied the separate cultural identity of minority communities.²³ Despite some perfunctory gestures towards the Hmong, this essentially remained the attitude of successive Royal Lao governments towards minorities.

Pathet Lao historiography, and subsequently the historiography of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), has been even more relentlessly political. The continuity of Lao history for Lao Marxist historians lay not in the political culture of the *meuang* or the communal memory of *Meuang Lao*, but in the struggle for liberation of the Lao people of all ethnicities against all who attempted to enslave or dominate them – a struggle culminating in ultimate victory under the leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.²⁴ During the '30-year struggle' (1945–75), the political importance of the Marxist interpretation of Lao history lay principally in its legitimation of the Pathet Lao revolutionary movement. Given the geographic location of revolutionary base areas away from ethnic Lao population centres, the movement required the support of ethnic minority communities. By particularly stressing the historical importance of opposition to French

²² The best study of Phetsarat's role is in Christopher Goscha (1995), *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887–1954*, NIAS, Copenhagen.

²³ Katay Don Sasorith (1959), 'Historical aspects of Laos', in René de Berval, ed, *Kingdom of Laos*, France-Asie, Saigon, pp 24–31, especially p 30.

²⁴ Thus the publication, Anonymous (1971), *Un quart de siècle de lutte opiniâtre et victorieuse*, Éditions du Neo Lao Haksat, np, proclaims the history of the Lao people to be 'a secular struggle for independence and liberty' (p 53).

colonial rule by ethnic minorities, and by raising the leaders of anticolonial rebellions to the level of national heroes, on a par with the great rulers who had fought the Burmese (Xetthathirat) and the Siamese (Chao Anuvong), Pathet Lao historiography integrated minority communities into the history of the Lao nation-state more inclusively than any previous regime.²⁵ It also, of course, legitimized the LPRP as providing political leadership for the last stage in the grand narrative of Lao emancipatory struggle.

The dilemma of historiography in post-socialist Laos

The drawn-out seizure of power by the Pathet Lao in 1975 resulting in abolition of the monarchy and establishment of the LPDR posed new problems of political legitimation, of which the regime seems initially to have been largely unaware. A revolutionary movement has only to justify itself in opposition to the holders of state power. Once successful, however, it must justify its own right to exercise that same power. This entails a legitimacy of succession that necessarily delegitimizes the previous regime, while at the same time incorporating most of those who once supported it. It is not enough to base such legitimacy on superior force and the reality of victory; at the very least, a legitimizing history must claim some improvement, some progress. Moreover, the new regime must demonstrate its right to rule by carrying through on its assertions made while in opposition, to be able to deliver better outcomes in terms of its promised programme of reform. As the Lao economy collapsed in the immediate aftermath of the Pathet Lao seizure of power, this was difficult to do.

Early historiography in the LPDR simply reiterated Pathet Lao narratives. This is not surprising, since the same leadership took power. Questions arose only after Marxist ideology became progressively threadbare. The regime ran into difficulties on several fronts. An early sign was peasant opposition to cooperative agriculture, which forced its abandonment.²⁶ The government was no more successful in raising sufficient revenue to balance the budget than the previous Royal Lao

²⁵ See Phoumi Vongvichit (1968), *Le Laos et la lutte victorieuse du peuple lao contre le néo-colonialisme américain*, Éditions du Neo Lao Haksat, np.

²⁶ Martin Stuart-Fox (1980), 'The initial failure of agricultural cooperativization in Laos', *Asia Quarterly*, No 4, pp 273–299; reprinted with some modification as 'The failure of agricultural cooperativization', in Stuart-Fox, *supra* note 20, at pp 153–178. See also Grant Evans (1995), *Lao Peasants under Socialism and Post-Socialism*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai.

and French colonial administrations had been. Exacerbating this by the mid-1980s were a chronic balance of payments deficit and diminishing aid from socialist countries, particularly the Soviet Union. These forced a rethinking of economic policy, foreign aid and investment and foreign relations, which resulted in the New Economic Mechanism (NEM), justified by comparison with Lenin's New Economic Policy – that is, in terms of history rather than ideology.

History was always of considerable interest and importance to the LPRP. From its early years, the Party developed its own interpretation of Lao history (outlined above). Members of the Politburo (notably Kayson Phomvihane and Phoumi Vongvichit) and the Central Committee of the Party (Sixana Sisane) took a close interest in history and how it was presented, as both a means of propaganda and a mode of legitimation of the revolutionary movement. After the Party seized power in 1975, responsibility for historical research and writing was divided between two ministries: Information, Propaganda, Culture and Tourism under Sixana Sisane (later Information and Culture); and Education, Sport and Religious Affairs under Phoumi Vongvichit (later Education). In 1983, the National Institute for Artistic and Literary Research was established under the auspices of the Ministry of Information and Culture, followed two years later by the Social Sciences Research Institute within the Ministry of Education. To the latter was entrusted the task of compiling an official history of Laos to be used for teacher education. (Phoumi outranked Sixana.) The project was assisted by a delegation of Vietnamese historians, whose task it was to ensure that the Lao history was written from both a properly Marxist and a pro-Vietnamese perspective. Debate became so heated at one point that the Vietnamese historians were sent back to Hanoi on the express orders of Phoumi Vongvichit, although some later returned.²⁷

The original plan was for three volumes to cover the periods from the origins of the Lao people down to the founding of Lan Xang in 1353, from 1353 to 1893, and from 1893 to the present. In the event, initially only the third volume was published.²⁸ The Social Sciences

²⁷ Personal communication from a Lao source. One matter of contention was over how to deal with the Vietnamese invasion of Lan Xang in 1478, which the committee-authored Vietnamese history of Laos (Anonymous [1982], *Laos: An Outline of Ancient and Contemporary History*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Hanoi) simply ignored, but which Lao historians wanted to mention.

²⁸ Thongsasanyavongkhamdi *et al* (1989), *Pavatsat Lao Lem III: 1893 theung Pachuban [Lao History Volume 3: 1893 to the Present]*, Ministry of Education and Social Science Research Institute, Vientiane.

Research Institute was disbanded and responsibility for historical research shifted to the Historical and Archaeological Institute under the direction of Sixana's Social Sciences Committee. This reorganization reflected political tensions within the Party both over responsibility for history and over Vietnamese involvement. These tensions continued, leading in 1992 to the dissolution of the Social Sciences Committee and formation of a Cultural Research Institute within the Ministry of Information and Culture, one of whose tasks was to continue research into Lao history in cooperation with the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS).²⁹ Although drafts of some parts were written, however, the first two volumes of the official history failed to appear.

I have recounted these developments to illustrate two things: first, that history has always been a matter of intense interest and concern in the LPDR; and second, that debate has at all times been strictly confined by and within the Party. Here lies the problem, then, for Lao history has become so thoroughly politicized that it reflects not the need for a unifying narrative in which all the country's ethnic groups can locate their identities and which they can accept as legitimizing the Lao nation-state (not just its rulers), but rather the balance of political forces within the ruling Party in respect of how best to legitimize its claim to monopolize political power.

The shift in post-socialist Laos away from historical legitimization in terms of the Marxist metanarrative to one that reaches back to early Lao history has not been an easy transition to make, and it is still incomplete. Already in the late 1980s, as the legitimation provided by its revolutionary victory began to fade into the past, the regime moved to reinstate Buddhism in Lao social life.³⁰ The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe further undermined the legitimation provided by socialist revolution, which was seen to be not the product of historical inevitability, but of historical contingency. By the late 1990s, the regime had begun to lay renewed stress on early history, and historians attached to the Ministry of Information and Culture worked on the period prior to 1893. Eventually a new single-volume work appeared in 2000, just under half of which was devoted to pre-

²⁹ Houmphanh Rattanavong (1994), 'Histoire de la recherche lao en sciences humaines', in Pierre-Bernard Lafont, ed, *Les recherches en sciences humaines sur le Laos*, Centre d'Histoire et Civilisations de la Péninsule Indochinoise, Paris, pp 18–19.

³⁰ Martin Stuart-Fox (1999), 'Laos: from Buddhist kingdom to Marxist state', in Ian Harris, ed, *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*, Continuum, London and New York, pp 153–172.

colonial history, with the rest reproducing the material covered in the earlier Volume Three.³¹ Even the production of this text was not without controversy and drama. The text was reportedly submitted to the Vice-Minister of Information and Culture, who appointed a committee to examine it for error. Differences arose primarily over the period prior to the founding of Lan Xang. The authors were reluctant to accept some of the suggested changes, however, and the text was published after being endorsed by the Politburo. In the political wrangling that followed, the principal author, Souneth Phothisane, lost his position as director of the National Museum and had no option but to accept a research position at Mahasarakham University in Thailand.

This is a crucial time, both in Lao history and for the present regime. Apart from the Stalinist remnant of North Korea, there remain only three nominally communist states in Asia: China, Vietnam and Laos. In all three, Marxism is accorded little more than lip service.³² All three are in fact one-party authoritarian regimes promoting capitalist economic development, and thus more akin to previous Asian military or single-party dictatorships (in Taiwan, South Korea or Thailand) than to the Soviet Union. Like these precursors, China and Vietnam have been relatively successful in improving living conditions (at least for the majority) and generating wealth (even if maldistributed), and so provide models for Laos to follow. Laos lags far behind, however. Its material resources are difficult to exploit, its human resources underdeveloped. As a consequence, it is far more dependent than either China or Vietnam on foreign aid, as opposed to foreign investment. All of these pose problems for the legitimation of the LPDR and its ruling party.

The right of any government to rule a nation-state, in the eyes of its citizens, depends on how effectively it governs and whether it achieves promised outcomes. In democracies, if a government fails to do these things, it can be replaced at the next election. Successive governments draw on the same constitutional legitimation, but the move assuages popular resentment and frustration. In a one-party state this does not happen, so theoretically pressures to perform should be even greater if

³¹ Souneth Phothisane and Nousai Phoummachan (2000), *Pavatsat Lao (Deukdamban–Pachuban)* [*Lao History (Ancient Times to the Present)*], Ministry of Information and Culture, Vientiane.

³² The Marxist argument is that Marx was right: countries cannot skip the capitalist stage. The role of the LPRP is thus to preside over a capitalist economy until the forces of production have increased sufficiently to allow the transition to socialism.

the ruling party wants to retain popular support. As a one-party government cannot be replaced, however, the reverse occurs: corruption grows, and with it popular resentment. More of the burden falls, therefore, on the ideology of legitimation to underwrite the party's right to rule despite its shortcomings. This is the situation in which the LPRP finds itself.

The ruling party is fully aware of popular resentment in the Mekong towns inhabited by ethnic Lao over corruption, inefficiency and its authoritarian rule. The reinstatement of Buddhism and pride in Lao history are primarily aimed at this constituency.³³ However, these moves inevitably prioritize the role of the ethnic Lao in the long course of that history, and so reduce the significance of the revolutionary period and the historical role of ethnic minorities in helping to establish the LPDR. Here lies the danger for the regime, for there is also growing dissatisfaction and resentment among minority communities – particularly evident, as Vathana Pholsena has shown, among those who participated most fully in the revolutionary movement and who seek a place in the political culture of the LPDR.³⁴ Such adverse sentiments threaten not just to undermine regime legitimacy, but also to fracture the inclusiveness of Lao political culture and national identity.

The dissatisfaction of minority communities derives primarily from the failure of the regime to make good on its revolutionary promises to improve living standards and opportunities for those groups. To this is added doubts about official commitment to equal participation in the political culture of the regime, signs of which are evident in the reduced political prominence of the Lao Front for National Construction (the successor to wartime united fronts). This still leaves the Party and the Army, in both of which minority representation remains higher than under any previous regime (if we accept the Hmong 'secret army' as a creation of the USA rather than part of the Royal Lao army). Should greater priority be given to ethnic Lao in recruitment and promotion in these organizations, though, minorities would feel still more excluded and marginalized. A historiography that reduces the revolutionary contribution of minority communities will only exacerbate such feelings, and so threaten social cohesion.

Laos has a weak base on which to build the institutions of a modern

³³ Any attempt to establish Buddhism as the Lao 'national religion' – Buddhist proselytization already has unofficial Party endorsement – threatens further to alienate minorities who have converted to Christianity.

³⁴ Vathana, *supra* note 6, at pp 166–177.

nation-state, both economically and politically, and a weak sense of national identity. For these reasons, an inclusive legitimizing historiography is a pressing political requirement for the present regime. Yet so it would be for any government, given the present historical stage of development of the Lao nation-state, its limited human and economic resources, and the political responsibility of any ruling elite to meet the demands placed upon this nation-state to be a responsible actor in the international order. So how should such a legitimizing Lao historiography be constructed, and what form might it take? I have argued above that such a historiography effectively provides the temporal dimension for national identity. At the same time, it is obvious that national identity is never exclusive: we all have multiple identities. There is a political necessity for all citizens of Laos to see themselves as in some sense 'Lao' in order to be included in the political culture of the nation-state, but that does not preclude their having other identities. Indeed, these other identities (local, ethnic, cultural) may very well be stronger than their sense of being 'Lao'. The more they are educated to an awareness of the existence and function of the nation-state, however, and the more they are involved in its prevailing political culture, the stronger will be their sense of national identity.³⁵

If the emphasis of historiography in the LPDR is to shift from its recent revolutionary phase to the longevity of ethnic Lao history in mainland South East Asia, then attention also needs to be directed to the equally long histories of minority communities. Historical claims that Laos has always been 'Lao' can only rest on the presence of aboriginal Austro-Asiatic-speaking Lao Theung communities, not on ethnic Lao migration. The prior presence of minority communities was recognized in the annual New Year rituals performed in Luang Phrabang, but never adequately recognized in historical texts or incorporated into modern historiography.³⁶ It should be, and until it is, we can expect resentment from minority communities (as I have heard expressed by a Khamu scholar over the alleged failure of Lao historians to accept that

³⁵ This is the educative component of nation formation that Benedict Anderson (*supra* note 7) stresses, along with the role of the popular media. On secondary education for ethnic minorities, see Manooch Faming (2004), 'Education for the national integration of ethnic minorities in the Lao PDR', paper presented at the workshop in Singapore but not included in this issue.

³⁶ As Bruce Lockhart shows in his article in this issue, there is confusion over just this point in the *Pavatsat Lao* text (Souneth Phothisane and Nousai Phoummachan, *supra* note 31). On the rituals, see Charles Archaimbault (1973), *Structures religieuses lao: Rites et mythes*, Vithagna, Vientiane.

Cheuang, the hero of the epic *Thao Hung Thao Cheuang*, was really Khamu, not Lao).³⁷

Minorities must also be accorded a prominent place in later Lao history – in recruitment into armies of Lao kings, in resistance to French rule, in the ‘30-year struggle’ and in the political culture of the LPDR – if they are to identify as citizens of the Lao nation-state. There is little sign that this is fully understood, however. Lao history is being written as a history of the ethnic Lao, with the obligatory reference to minority opposition to the French and participation in the revolution. Take, for example, the recent book in English by Phongsavath Boupha entitled *The Evolution of the Lao State*.³⁸ The only minority communities deemed worthy of separate mention are the Hmong (twice), Yao (once) and Tai groups (Tai Dam, Tai Deng, Leu and Phu Tai), all in relation to the ethnic make-up of the Lao population. As for leaders of rebellions against French rule, Pachai is identified as Hmong, but Ong Kaeo and Ong Khammadan only as ‘clan leaders’ of the Lao Theung, rather than being identified with specific ethnic groups. The only other mention of minorities in the entire book is their representation in the office of Vice-Presidents of the Central Committee of the Nao Lao Hak Xat (the wartime Lao Patriotic Front). In other words, this is a history of the Lao state as the construction of ethnic Lao.³⁹

The sad fact is that any analysis of the current state of Lao historiography can only conclude that the Party has lost its way and has very little idea of where it is going. The decision has been taken to raise four great kings of the past to hero status. These are Fa Ngum, Xetthathirat, Surinyavongsa and Anuvong (Chao Anou). Xetthathirat is associated with the That Luang, before which his statue sits, and is celebrated at the annual That Luang festival. Elaborate celebrations were held in 2003 to mark the 650th anniversary of the founding of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, culminating in the erection of a statue of Fa

³⁷ I have not seen the detailed two-volume study of this work recently published in Laos: Maha Sila Viravong (2000–03), in Duangduan Bunnyavong *et al*, eds, *Thao Hung Thao Cheuang: Mahakap [Thao Hung Thao Cheuang: The Great Epic]*, National Library, Vientiane.

³⁸ Phongsavath Boupha (2002), *The Evolution of the Lao State*, Konark Publishers, Delhi.

³⁹ In the much more important *Pavatsat Lao* (Souneth Phothisane and Nousai Phoummachan, *supra* note 31) (see the article by Bruce Lockhart), the role of minorities in rebellions against the French and in the ‘30-year struggle’ is given full recognition, as it is in Thongsasanyavongkhamdi *et al*, *supra* note 28, on which it is based.

Ngum, before which LPRP leaders bowed in reverence.⁴⁰ An officially organized two-day public seminar in January 2000 was devoted to Chao Anou, last ruler of Vientiane. This attracted great interest and enthusiasm and was televised live, an almost unheard-of event in the LPDR, since the speeches of participants had not been scripted. At the conclusion, it was spontaneously decided to set up a Chao Anou Foundation that would promote study of his life and times; money was donated and a committee elected. At this point, the Party got cold feet: control over how the figure of Chao Anou was to be interpreted appeared to be slipping away from it. This posed a danger, in the view of the Party, for Lao–Thai relations.⁴¹ The Foundation was disbanded on orders from the Ministry of Information and Culture. A statue is still due to be erected to Chao Anou, but how he is to be memorialized is unclear. The decision will rest with the Party; it will not emerge from scholarly discourse and public debate. Finally, a statue will also be erected to Surinyavongsa.

There is a logic to the choice of these four kings: Fa Ngum, the founder of the Kingdom of Lan Xang; Xetthathirat, who established Vientiane as the capital and defied the Burmese in the sixteenth century; Surinyavongsa, who presided over the kingdom at its apogee in the 1600s; and Chao Anou, who fought and died for Lao independence from Siam. What has not been thought through is what these kings and their aristocratic entourages stood for in relation to the Lao people; how this ‘feudal’ monarchy, if it is to be the foundation for Lao nationalism, relates to the revolution; and how the elimination of the monarchy in 1975 is to be justified.⁴² These matters need to be debated, free of

⁴⁰ *Vientiane Times*, 3–6 January 2003, p 12.

⁴¹ Lao and Thai interpret the war of 1827–28 very differently, particularly the motivation and role of Chao Anou. For the Lao, he was fighting for Lao independence; for the Thai, he was a disloyal vassal who was duly punished. This period has been exhaustively studied from the Lao perspective by Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn (1998), *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, 1778–1828*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY. This book has never been translated into Lao; an earlier and much shorter study in Lao was published, but only after considerable political manoeuvring: Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn (1988), *Chao Anu, 1767–1829: Pasason Lao lae Asi Akhane [Chao Anou, 1767–1829: The Lao People and Southeast Asia]*, LPDR Publishing House, Vientiane.

⁴² The most perceptive discussion of these issues can be found in Grant Evans (1998), *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975*, Silksworm Books, Chiang Mai, especially pp 168–184. One approach would be to condemn the Luang Prabang monarchy both for failing to support Chao Anou and for collaborating with the French, and thus for having betrayed the cause of Lao independence.

the political constraints of the Party, across as wide a cross-section of Lao opinion as possible. Only out of such debate can a more creative, comprehensive and inclusive national historiography emerge. The outlines of such a new historiography are not yet clear, but the essential elements can be critically discussed – as I have attempted to do in a preliminary way above.

This brings me finally to the role that foreign, including expatriate Lao, historians and scholars can play in the writing of Lao history. Of course, this history is written in many forms, even in tourist brochures, for foreign readers who seek some background knowledge of the country. Histories of Laos in languages other than Lao are not written primarily for Lao to read – at least not those living in the LPDR (except for a tiny group of interested intellectuals). There is some evidence, however, that Lao historians do read foreign histories of their country. Phongsavath Boupha refers to some Russian studies, although the only English-language authors cited are Wilfred Burchett and Arthur Dommen, and the French do even more poorly. Souneth Phothisane in his *Pavatsat Lao* includes more Russian and Vietnamese sources in his bibliography than French and English. To some extent this is understandable, as both Russian and Vietnamese scholars have made some contribution to the study of Lao history. One suspects, however, that the reason for their preponderance has more to do with political correctness than with the quality of their scholarship.

To some extent, therefore, mutual interaction and influence are already occurring. As levels of education improve and foreign languages are more widely learned, alternative foreign histories may come to have a wider political impact on the discourse of historical interpretation in Laos. This is what should be happening. The present Lao regime, however, is determined to control the discourse of historiography. Like their Soviet mentors before them, the Politburo collectively believes that history is far too politically important to be left to historians. Historical discussion remains tightly circumscribed; the result is an impoverished historical debate that is failing to foster an evolving, inclusive sense of national identity.

Given the low level of historical debate, is there any role foreign historians can play? Should it be our responsibility, for example, to reveal those aspects of Lao history that official Lao historiography ignores, such as the history of minority groups? Should we deconstruct official historiography? And should we consider the effect of doing this on fragile social cohesion and a weak sense of national identity? It

is all very well to argue, from the postmodern perspective of post-industrial Western societies, that multiple views of what it is to be 'Lao' are a good thing. Paradoxically, though, to argue thus is to presume a much stronger underlying sense of national identity than exists in Laos. We can see how this has developed in the case of Thailand, where a resurgence of regional studies (of Lanna and Isan, for example) has occurred that would earlier have been politically unacceptable for fear that they would divide the nation-state.

No historiography is politically neutral: every historical interpretation serves, or can be made to serve, the political interests of one group or another. Every ruling elite will attempt to use history to legitimize its claim to power. In this, the present Lao regime is unexceptional. As historical conditions change, though, and as the regime itself changes, so does the basis for political legitimation. The construction of history, just like any other social construction (including, notably, national identity), is a historical process, the product of a discourse through time. Foreign scholars with an interest in Lao history can contribute to this process – through interaction with Lao historians at conferences and workshops, exchanges of interpretations and two-way translations.⁴³ They cannot, and probably should not, drive the process, however, for in the end, only Lao historians can write their own history.

Acknowledgments

This is a very different version from my earlier paper presented at the workshop in Singapore. I would particularly like to thank Bruce Lockhart for his useful comments on the paper.

⁴³ A project is under way for a Lao translation of Grant Evans (2002), *A Short History of Laos*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW. If this comes to fruition, it will be the first work by a foreign scholar translated into Lao since the foundation of the LPDR (personal communication, Grant Evans, February 2004).