Asian Studies Review

ISSN: 1035-7823 (Print) 1467-8403 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/casr20

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To cite this article: Martin Stuart-Fox (1998) Laos in Asean: dilemmas of development and identity, Asian Studies Review, 22:2, 223-237, DOI: 10.1080/10357829808713196

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10357829808713196

Asian Studies Review. ISSN 1035-7823
Volume 22 Number 2 June 1998

LAOS IN ASEAN: DILEMMAS OF DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY

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In July 1997, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) expanded its membership from seven—Vietnam had joined in July 1995—to nine with the inclusion of Laos and Burma (Myanmar). Only Second Prime Minister Hun Sen's grab for power a month before prevented Cambodia from joining at the same time to complete the regional membership. For Laos, membership had something of the inevitable about it—pressures to join were too great to resist. Yet some Lao did harbour misgivings, mainly about whether Laos could meet the requirements for membership. ASEAN makes substantial demands on member states which extend far beyond the financial costs involved in joining the organisation and participating in its many forums. These additional costs include sending delegations to meetings, providing venues for meetings, translating, printing and distributing materials, and other such expenses. In addition, there are other, less evident, costs including the demands on human resources, pressures to open up to the outside world, to welcome foreign investment and expand tourism, to be part of a regional transportation and communications network, and the unknown impact these cannot help but have on a fragile culture and an uncertain sense of national identity. Now that the Lao People's Democratic Republic has joined ASEAN, it is subject to just such demands and pressures. Of course, many of these would apply whether Laos had joined ASEAN or not, but membership of ASEAN makes them more insistent and concentrates them within a reduced time frame.

This article will canvass some of these less evident challenges, and assess current responses and the resources Laos has to meet them. Many of the points raised centre on questions of identity and legitimacy, but this article is not a hard analysis of sources of legitimacy available to the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) or of threats to them; nor is it a study of how the Lao regime is coping with its ASEAN responsibilities. Its tone is deliberately more contemplative. This paper is based on twenty years of observation of the Lao People's

Democratic Republic as it has made its often uncertain way in the modern world. It is therefore written from the perspective of a sympathetic, if critical, outsider who has observed most of the time from afar, a perspective which permits those twin Buddhist values of detachment and compassion. This article should thus be considered as a personal view, the fruit of frequent visits to Laos over the last several years talking to friends and officials in Viang Chan (Vientiane).[1]

Informed and educated Lao, not least those within the governing Party, are well aware of the more subtle and indirect pressures their country will face in joining ASEAN. Not all are sure such pressures can be resisted. It seems that Laos is a country on the defensive, unsure of its own capacity to absorb and respond to the impact of modernising forces, or of the capability of its officials to negotiate and deal with their more sophisticated ASEAN counterparts. Of course, some are more positive, eager to embrace the opportunities they see ahead in areas of economic development such as transportation and communications, hydroelectricity, mining, agriculture and tourism. Even their optimism, though, is tempered by concern that Laos will not get the best deal, that without the presence of an honest broker to advise them, Lao resources will end up in the hands of rapacious and exploitative foreigners. Such concerns, rather than some ideological divide between conservative Marxists and free-market reformers, seem to lie behind the decisions of the Sixth Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in March 1996 which have effectively slowed the pace of investment and development if only through the simple expedient of bureaucratic indecision.

It is ironic that there is a pool of well-educated worldly Lao, who would be prepared to offer their services to their country at this crucial time of adjustment —but they live outside Laos. The Lao diaspora in Australia, Canada, France and the United States could potentially provide the human resources with the technical and linguistic skills that Laos now needs. So far, however, the Lao regime has sought to make use of only the economic contribution such people can bring to the development of the country through returning to invest in and operate businesses.[2] Under certain conditions, properties have even been returned to previous owners, although whether such provisions will apply in the future is not certain, for there is naturally opposition from those presently in residence.

The regime has been reluctant to create conditions and opportunities designed to make official use of returnees. One barrier is the nationality law, which specifically excludes the dual nationality sought by the diaspora. All Lao who fled Laos after the communist seizure of power in 1975 are deemed to have renounced their allegiance to their country—and this rankles. If overseas Lao wish to return to Laos, they must re-apply to become Lao citizens, and if accepted they must relinquish their acquired nationality. There is no guaranteed right of return, which is what overseas Lao seek, both for themselves and their foreign-born children. An even greater barrier to the return of expatriate Lao, however, is political: the

regime fears anything that might undermine its monopoly of political power. But although one would hardly expect returnees to be appointed to senior positions in government, they could be employed in useful ways, such as in an advisory capacity in preparing submissions or position papers for ASEAN meetings, or as contract teachers in the newly established National University of Laos.

In the absence of the national reconciliation such a pragmatic policy would require, the Lao PDR is left to meet the challenge of ASEAN with its own limited resources. It seems, however, to lack a sense of national confidence and commitment. Some in Viang Chan suggest that the principal reason Laos decided to join ASEAN was that Vietnam had already joined, and that the Lao themselves were somewhat reluctant. They were swept along by Vietnamese enthusiasm (the Vietnamese have no lack of national self-confidence; besides, the Vietnamese see ASEAN as a counterweight to China), and by pressures from outside organisations such as the Asian Development Bank and aid donors (Japan, Sweden, Australia) who sought to promote a more closely integrated Southeast Asia.[3]

MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT

Two questions need, therefore, to be asked about Laos today: how does the country see itself with respect to its neighbours in ASEAN?; and what form do Lao reservations about the future take, and why? As inhabitants of the poorest country in Southeast Asia, the Lao are aware of the need for economic development. The Political Report delivered by Party President Khamtai Sīphandôn to the Sixth Party Congress set goals of 8–8.5 per cent annual economic growth to the year 2000, by which time the per capita income is projected to reach US$500 per annum.[4] To this end, the Congress reaffirmed the regime's commitment to "the market economy mechanism" under "the management of the Government". In other words, the Party, whose "leading role" was strongly endorsed, will continue to exercise overall control to ensure that development does not become too uneven—a direct acknowledgment of regional and ethnic minority demands. To the contradiction implicit in this continuing economic role for the Party was added the political contradiction implicit in both enhancing "the leading capability of the Party" and enlarging "the self-mastery rights of the people". As the continuing incarceration of three senior former civil servants identified with the abortive social democracy movement made clear (Amnesty International 1993), democracy forms no part of the Party's vision for the future of the country. In this at least it is in line with the majority of ASEAN members.

The Party does envisage the rapid development of the country's natural resources, including agriculture, forestry, mining and hydro-electricity. Construction of the US$1.2 billion Nam Theun II dam (a massive undertaking by an

Australian, French and Thai consortium with a Lao government stake and World Bank backing, which will produce 300 megawatts of electricity for sale to Thailand by the turn of the millenium) is about to begin (Souryavong 4–10 October 1996).[5] This will certainly assist government revenue, but its trickle-down effect is likely to be slight, unless revenue is channelled into programs, primarily education and health, of benefit to the seventy per cent of Lao people who are still peasant farmers. Greatly improved education and better health facilities will undoubtedly make life easier for this majority of the population, but the real challenge facing the Lao government is how to increase rural productivity to the point where rural families can enter the market economy; that is, where most of the population are no longer trapped in a subsistence economy.

How can this be achieved? One way would be through increasing agricultural production to produce surplus. For this to be possible, however, there needs to be both demand and the means of getting produce to market. As roads are built and trucking times reduced, it is possible to envisage Lao farmers supplying specialised agricultural produce, including a wide variety of fruit and vegetables grown in upland areas with a "clean, green" image, to markets in Thailand and Vietnam. In the meantime, however, small-scale border trade with neighbouring countries probably offers the best opportunities for wealth generation in remote provinces.

Another means of increasing rural wealth would be through the encouragement of cottage industries, in particular the traditional handicrafts that village women have always produced. Once again there needs to be both demand and a means of exchange—which is where tourism comes in. Laos is already experiencing a massive increase in tourism (Thalemann 1997, 98). New hotels have opened not only in Viang Chan and the principal Mekong towns of Luang Phrabāng, Savannakhēt and Pākxē, but also in more remote provincial centres such as Sālavan and Xiang Khuang. The potential for tourism in Laos is enormous and virtually untapped. Adventure tourism, environmental tourism and cultural tourism ventures could all take parties of tourists to remote villages, thereby creating market demand not only for local handicrafts, but also for services (food, accommodation, guides) and cultural entertainment (music, dance, ritual performance). Properly regulated culturally and environmentally sensitive tourism would not only provide much-needed economic stimulus for remote areas, but also encourage protection and preservation of both the natural environment and the cultural heritage of minority groups. In fact, so great is the potential for tourism in Laos that Professor Hans Luther, an economist teaching at the National School of Administration and Management in Viang Chan, predicts that it will become "the future engine of growth" for the Lao rural economy (Luther n.d.).

Various models for the future development of the Lao economy have been proposed. Some claim Laos has the potential to become the Kuwait of Southeast

Asia by developing its massive hydro-electric potential and selling energy to the region—renewable energy, unlike that of Kuwait. But other countries have hydro-electric potential which they would rather develop than buy electricity from Laos. Myanmar has swift rivers it can harness. China is already constructing a series of dams on the upper Mekong. Vietnam too has fast-flowing rivers which could be dammed. In Cambodia the demand for electricity will be negligible for some years. This leaves Thailand as the only substantial market, able as sole buyer to force down prices, and so reduce Laos to a state of economic dependency.

Hans Luther prefers Switzerland as a model for Laos to emulate (see Saritdet 1995, 3). Both Laos and Switzerland are land-locked countries; in both, a multi-ethnic population inhabits often remote mountain valleys with relatively few resources. Switzerland is the wealthy country it is today because in addition to developing agriculture, its industrious population produces specialised items for export (such as watches), or services (banks that ask no questions about the source of money). However, Switzerland enjoys a privileged position with respect to the European Economic Community, even though it remains outside the EEC, while Laos is a full member of ASEAN, a transportation crossroads centrally situated in mainland Southeast Asia, which is not walled off from the rest of the world, but open to powerful economic and cultural influences. The comparison is thus rather fanciful, and certainly over-ambitious.

The geographic disadvantages and ethnic and cultural divisions that Laos must overcome are more considerable than those faced by any modern European country. Independent Laos has had difficulty in establishing a clearly defined and broadly endorsed national identity. Moreover, Laos looks back over a history that might easily have resulted in division and/or absorption by one of its powerful neighbours—and the fear remains for many Lao. It is the very fragility of the Lao sense of national and cultural identity that accounts for Lao defensiveness and unease, regardless of any prospects for economic development.

HISTORY AND IDENTITY

To understand the reasons for Lao reservations over ASEAN membership requires an excursus into history and an examination of the nexus which links history, culture and identity. The independent Lao state that emerged from French colonial embrace in 1949 established its legitimacy as direct descendent of the Kingdom of Lān Xāng, formerly comprising all of the middle Mekong basin from the Sipsông Phan Nā (now the Xishuangbanna in southern Yunnan) to the falls of Khôn on the Cambodian border. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Lān Xāng was a powerful state, capable of holding its own against Siam, Vietnam, and even Burma. In the eighteenth century, however, it was

divided into three, sometimes four, separate Lao kingdoms, each of which eventually came under the suzerainty of Siam—although Luang Phrābang, Viang Chan and Xiang Khuang all also at times paid tribute to Vietnam; and Luang Phrābang also paid tribute to China (Stuart-Fox 1998).

For the Siamese rulers in Bangkok, the Lao kingdoms formed part of the Siamese empire. When the last Lao king of Viang Chan, Chau Ānuvong, attempted to throw off Siamese suzerainty in 1827, his rebellion (as it was viewed by the Siamese) was crushed and his capital destroyed. Thousands of Lao families were forcibly relocated west of the Mekong, altering for ever the demographic distribution of those people ethnically, culturally and linguistically Lao. The result of the struggle for territory between France and Siam in the late nineteenth century left the majority of Lao under Siamese rule, to be assimilated over time as Thai citizens—an outcome which also befell the "Western Lao" inhabiting the northern Thai state of Lān Nā (with its capital in Chiang Mai).

These events posed a dilemma for the Lao of Laos, for on what basis could they define their identity as differing from the great majority of Lao in Thailand? Linguistically and culturally, despite attempts by Bangkok to impose Central Thai as the national language and the growing influence of Central Thai culture, the Lao of Laos were identical with those of northeastern Thailand. History offered a way out of this dilemma by differentiating between the Lao of Laos as those whose links to the Kingdom of Lān Xāng were direct and unbroken, and the Lao of Thailand who had lost that connection. It was a demonstrably erroneous construction which glossed over too much to be convincing, but it was all the newly independent Kingdom of Laos could reach for in 1946. The dangers inherent in seeking such legitimation—most notably its failure to include almost half the population—only became apparent when the legitimacy of the government was challenged.

The Pathēt Lao sought to legitimise their revolutionary movement by quite different historical means. For the revolutionary movement, Marxism provided a universal context drawing upon concepts of elite (class) domination and popular (class) resistance within which to ground specifically Lao historical experience. The struggle for freedom from exploitation and national independence was against both internal and external foes. The same feudal ruling class whose internal divisions and incompetence had delivered the Lao principalities into the clutches of the Siamese had later collaborated with French imperialism, and was even prepared to do a deal with US imperialism. Yet throughout Lao history popular resistance had never waivered. When feudal demands became too heavy, Lao peasants had migrated, opening up new farming lands. When Siamese arrogance and their demands for *corvée* labour became insufferable, the Lao rebelled under King Ānuvong; and when the Lao had been defeated, resistance continued in the form of popular songs sung by itinerant singers (*mô lam*).

Resistance to French colonialism had primarily come from minority peoples which had formerly existed on the margins of the Lao world—the Lao Thoeng of the Bolovens region in southern Laos, and the Khamu, Hmong, and Tai-Lue in the north. Their revolts in the face of increased taxation and the French impact on traditional lifestyles brought them into the mainstream of national resistance, and gave them an honoured place in its history. Recruitment into both the Pathēt Lao armed forces and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in the struggle against US imperialism continued a proud tradition. Through this Pathēt Lao construction of the past—part nationalist, part Marxist—all ethnic groups were drawn into a national crusade that gave rise to a new sense of national unity, and that provided a new basis for the legitimation of power (Stuart-Fox 1997, 79–80, 149).

The regime that overthrew the six-century-old monarchy on 2 December 1975 established a Marxist government which was determined to exercise a dictatorship of the proletariat (in Laos defined as comprising both a tiny working class and the broad mass of subsistence peasant farmers). The Party and its administration were open to membership from all ethnic groups. No autonomous areas were set aside, although two provinces were later created, one (Xēkông) in the southeast and the other (through dividing Luang Namthā) in the northwest, to place administrative control in the hands of minority cadres. The Party was not open, however, to former class enemies. They were consigned to long periods of re-education, thus both reinforcing the social and ideological divisions which had opened up during the war, and provoking a massive exodus of educated refugees which the country could ill afford.

All political regimes depend for their legitimacy in part on how efficiently they manage national economies, but Marxist regimes, because they make far-reaching economic claims, are particularly vulnerable to economic failure. It is only possible to blame nefarious imperialist conspiracies for the failings of ideologically driven policy for so long. Moreover, a Marxist regime in an underdeveloped country is under additional pressure to prove the superiority of the socialist mode of production in promoting development. The attempted co-operativisation of agriculture in the Lao PDR was a major disaster which forced a comprehensive re-thinking of economic policy that had both internal and external dimensions. It was not sufficient just to free up internal economic controls; Laos required external sources of development capital that by the mid-1980s the Soviet Union was no longer willing or able to provide. Aid therefore had to be sought from both international lending agencies such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and private foreign investment.

To this economic reality was added the political shock of the collapse of communism in both eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The very legitimacy of Marxism as a political ideology was threatened. The Lao, like the Vietnamese,

had no option but to seek an alternative model. They found it in the People's Republic of China, where a single, authoritarian, still nominally Marxist, Party drew much of its legitimacy from the stimulus it had provided to modernisation of an increasingly capitalist economy. When Kaisôn Phomvihān died in November 1992, the direction of economic reform had been set, and the transition of power was smoothly handled (Ng 1994, 185–200).

The Lao economy has grown by around 6 per cent per annum, on average, over the past few years, enough to ease earlier criticism of the Party. But growth has been uneven, opening up a growing gap between lowland Lao areas closer to Thailand and mountainous areas inhabited mostly by ethnic minorities. Add to this attempts by the government to wean upland minorities away from their traditional, destructive slash-and-burn agriculture in order to preserve valuable forests (for official exploitation, or exploitation by officials) and international pressure to eliminate opium as a cash crop (often the only one available in remote areas), both through inadequately resourced resettlement at lower altitudes, and the growing sense of disillusionment among minority groups is understandable.

The Party's response has been twofold: to promote more minority cadres to positions of power within the Party; and to promote greater economic development in the mountain zone. The Lao People's Army, whose officer corps still reflects its recruitment base during the "thirty-year struggle" (1945–75), has been behind both moves. While the political face of the Pathēt Lao comprised almost entirely ethnic Lao, the Army recruited from the areas under its control; that is, from mountainous regions inhabited by minority peoples. The Army leadership of today is still the generation that fought for liberation—with the sole help of the Vietnamese, which explains the warm relationship between the Lao and Vietnamese armed forces.

The Army has thus become the embodiment of the revolution, and since the Sixth Party Congress (which appointed six generals in a Politburo of nine), the core of the Party. But it presides over a revolution that has changed little, and directs a Party that uses its monopoly of power more for the personal gain of its cadres than for the welfare of the masses. Despite the wartime promises, least has changed for the minorities, who have demanded least—health care, education, access to consumer goods. The Lao (and Phuan, and Phū-Tai) cadres who took over the Mekong river towns, and who have profited from the flow of international capital and aid, have gained most from the revolution. A new elite has emerged, combining the Party hierarchy with remnants of the former ruling bourgeoisie (linked by family and marriage), defined as before by wealth and the power of patronage. External enemies have now become friends: Thailand runs first in the foreign investment stakes; France and the United States provide both aid and substantial investment. It is therefore not surprising that revolutionary fervour no longer acts as the motivating force for nationalist sentiment.

Independent Laos has thus been torn between competing nationalisms: one drawing on the glorious history of the Lao kingdom of Lān Xāng, but marginalising non-Lao minorities; the other drawing on the glorious history of popular resistance against forces both internal and external that no longer need resisting, now that a socialist Party is in power. As the revolution fades in the face of systemic corruption and individual greed, there is a need to seek alternative sources of legitimation. Economic development provides some justification for Party policies, but the effect is patchy. Representative government provides minimal legitimacy, since elections are too closely controlled to represent the popular will. Only candidates carefully screened by the Party organisation (through the Lao Front for National Construction) are permitted to stand for office, as they were in the December 1997 elections for the National Assembly. Thus as revolutionary nationalism loses its appeal, the regime must look elsewhere for political legitimation, and where else but to a nationalism based on the history, religion and culture of the lowland Lao? (Lintner 11 January 1996).

The Party has resisted going down this path, however, and is still reluctant. The revolutionary anti-imperialist war is by no means forgotten. The deaths of Kaisôn, Suphānuvong and other Pathēt Lao leaders provide opportunities to recall the great years of revolutionary struggle. Identical memorials to Kaisôn have been erected in the capital of every province. In Viang Chan Kaisôn's home and office in the former American housing compound has become a revolutionary shrine, while a nearby building houses a temporary museum, until a much larger memorial museum can be constructed. In 1994 and 1995, the Party newspaper, *Paxāxon* (The People), published a series of memoires of wartime victories going back to the early 1960s. The courage of Party leaders and particular units was praised.[6] In 1997, a monument to the thousands of Vietnamese killed in fighting over the Plain of Jars was erected in Xiang Khuang, and other such memorials are planned.[7]

At the same time, however, the Party is cautiously moving not just to preserve and promote traditional Lao culture—Politburo members have attended major Buddhist festivals since the late 1970s—but to reinstate the great kings of Lān Xāng—Fā Ngum, Xētthāthirāt, Surinyavongsā, and most controversial of all, Ānuvong, the last king of Viang Chan. Fā Ngum was the founder of the kingdom of Lān Xāng; Xētthāthirāt refused to surrender to the Burmese, even after Siam had succumbed; Surinyavongsā was the longest reigning king in Lao history when Lān Xāng was at its apogee; but Ānuvong suffered defeat at the hands of Siam, and was brutally put to death in Bangkok. Viang Chan was laid waste, and the kingdom divided into dependent *meuang* (principalities). To rehabilitate Ānuvong, to make him a hero of Lao independence, would be to proclaim an independent Laos in the face of historic Thai pressure to subvert that independence. It would also challenge the Thai view of history that paints Ānuvong not as

a gallant fighter for Lao freedom, but as a rebel against Thai rule. The Lao have until now hesitated to resurrect Ānuvong because of reluctance to offend the Thai. However, Ānuvong can serve to combine and exemplify both nationalist traditions. It was therefore not altogether surprising that a three-day conference in January 1997 signalled an official change of heart. The conference at the National University of Laos was held under the joint auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Information and, interestingly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and brought together a remarkable cross-section of the Lao intellectual elite.

THE THAI CHALLENGE AND LAO NATIONALISM

The decision to hold such a politically loaded conference was taken in the face of new cultural pressures from Thailand that the Lao feel they must resist. Without naming Thailand, LPRP President Khamtai told the Sixth Party Congress: "In the present circumstance, with the national culture heavily influenced by outside cultures, the Party and the government of the Lao PDR considers cultural work to be the first and foremost task". There is good reason for this. Thai tourists flood into Laos in the wake of Thai princess Sirindhorn's several visits to Laos. Thai money restores Lao Buddhist temples. Thai businessmen seek Lao partners, for a suitable recompense. Thai banks are conspicuously located on major thoroughfares. Increasing numbers of Lao students attend technical and tertiary courses in Thailand. And, most insidious of all, Thai television beams into most Lao homes.

The effect of Thai television is not just to provide entertainment which invariably centres on the good life, the glamour and consumerism of Bangkok. It also conditions Lao viewers to regard all things Thai as desirable. The respect accorded to the Thai royal family finds a ready echo in Laos, where colour posters of King Bhumibol and Princess Sirindhorn are to be found in shops and homes. In a country deprived of its own royal family, royal merit is still widely recognised.[8]

But perhaps the greatest threat comes from language. Spoken Thai is much more widely understood in Laos than Lao is in Thailand, despite the fact that northeastern (Īsān) Thai speak Lao—at home: the official language of education and government in northeastern Thailand remains Central Thai. As more Lao watch Thai television, more Thai words replace their Lao equivalents. This is not just the case among the Lao elite who travel frequently to Thailand; Thai also peppers the exchanges of market women (Enfield, forthcoming).

While Thai increasingly influences spoken Lao, the written languages remain distinct, both in orthography and spelling. It is impossible to mistake the rounded letters of Lao for angular Thai script. Moreover, Thai has retained the full range of letters traditionally used to transcribe Pali loan words. Lao has lost these, in a

reform introduced under the French and endorsed by the independent Kingdom of Laos, which made written Lao conform much more closely to the spoken language. It was a move roundly condemned by Lao scholars who regretted the loss of Pali roots, but it had powerful political justification, for it rendered Lao far more easy to write than Thai, and therefore far more accessible for the many ethnic minorities in Laos for whom Lao is at best a second language.

The importance of writing Lao to reflect the way it is spoken (written Lao is still not strictly phonetic) was not lost on the Pathēt Lao. For the same reason that the Vietnamese Communist Party promoted romanised Quoc-nu to assist the spread of literacy, the LPRP has maintained its support for written Lao. In fact, cultural czar Phūmī Vongvichit eliminated another letter (the "r", which is pronounced as an "l" by all but some educated Lao). The "r" is already making a comeback, since Phūmī's death. There is now a strong push from Lao scholars and intellectuals to bring back other letters from old Lao, ostensibly to make it easier for students to read old manuscripts, and to enable them to appreciate the Pali etymologies of words.

The danger in this is that every letter re-introduced brings Lao closer to Thai. Already the overlap in vocabulary is extensive. If the languages are spelled the same, Lao runs the risk of being assimilated into Thai, of becoming no more than a regional dialect of Thai (an extension of "Īsān Thai" across the Mekong). And at the same time as native Lao speakers are drawn ever closer to Thai, a greater gap opens up for non-native speakers. Reform of written Lao thus threatens to increase the divide between ethnic groups inside Laos, and the political implications of this would be of far greater significance than would preservation of Pali roots. The Party has so far stood firm on this in the face of the political naïvete of the scholars.

The resuscitation of an ethnic Lao nationalism centred on the Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng would serve, by contrast, to increase the divide between Thai and Lao. Both China and Vietnam have gone some way down this path, and there are clear indications that the Lao Party intends to follow suit. Historians have been asked to advise on clothes, weapons, and other attributes so that statues of the great Lao kings, including Ānuvong, can be erected. An official single-volume history of the Lao kingdom(s) is hastily being compiled to replace two earlier volumes which were written but never published. Only the third volume which covered the period from French annexation in 1893 to the present gained Party approval and finance—but that told the story of resistance and revolution that legitimised the Party's political triumph.

It is not necessary to look far for other straws in the wind. World Heritage listing for Luang Phrabāng has been a source of pride, and a committee has been established to oversee its future development. Tourist income alone would dictate preservation of this ancient capital, but tourism could well destroy it, if

not controlled. There is every indication that the government is determined to preserve the character of the town, not least for its historical nationalist (as opposed to historical cultural) significance. Why else should a new sanctuary be built in the grounds of the former royal palace (now the Luang Phrabāng museum) to house the *Phra Bāng* Buddha image, the former palladium of the ruling dynasty?

Interest in early Lao history is also being encouraged by the official publicity given to the discovery and preservation of historical ruins. Committees have been appointed for the preservation of not only Luang Phrabāng, but also Vat Phū, near Champāsak, and to study the recently discovered long lost site of Viang Kham, the twin city of Viang Chan frequently mentioned in the Lao chronicles (*Vientiane Times*, 8–11 March 1997). Another location of historical importance is Suvannakhunkham in Bôkaeo province (Bounheuang 25–27 June 1997). Archaeology, culture and classical literature have all also received much recent publicity.

This does not mean that the revolutionary tradition is being forgotten—the six metre high bronze statue that will grace the new Kaisôn Museum is witness to that. It will, though, be on the outskirts of town. In the city centre of Viang Chan, the Revolutionary Museum is to become the National Museum, a monument to Lao history and culture, rather than to the revolutionary movement. Symbols are significant, so it will be interesting to see how materials are chosen and displayed.

The danger in encouraging historical as opposed to revolutionary nationalism is that it will inevitably reinforce the ethnic Lao component. The minorities will not be entirely forgotten, though. What they risk rather is marginalisation, as inhabitants of some separate ethnographic space (and museum?). In October 1996, an International Meeting of Experts was held under the auspices of UNESCO to "safeguard and promote the immaterial cultural patrimony" of the 130 or so ethnic groups and sub-groups in Laos (Chazée 1995).[9] What the conveners set out to do was highlight the need to study and preserve the languages, traditions, customs, beliefs, way of life, arts and music of all minority cultures. There is some doubt, however, whether Party support for the conference will translate into support for the survival of these cultures, in the full existential sense of the word, as living cultures, or their "survival" through preservation (in texts, on video) before they are irretrievably lost through the assimilation that remains official policy.

In the final report, tension is evident between the official policy of "unity and equality between different minority ethnic groups" and the need to preserve minority cultures (Rapport Final, October 1996). It is clear that the government conceives the former as equal participation in a process of modernisation, which in Marxist terms is both homogenising and centralising, while many participants preferred a policy of active multiculturalism. The danger such a policy poses to national unity, however, is all too evident to the ruling elite. It remains to be seen,

therefore, whether the recommendation of the language and literature section that children be taught in their maternal language in primary school, and not, as now, in Lao, will be adopted. Preservation of language will be a key indicator to watch. So will history.

As yet there is very little evidence of any official support for the writing of alternative histories. Attempts to do so by, for example, Khamu scholars, have met with official obstruction. Alternative histories are still seen as divisive. There will be one history for Laos, at least for the present, and that will be the official one. In the meantime, every effort will be made to make that history as rich and full as possible, although mainly through recovering the history of the dominant ethnic Lao.

Laos is by no means alone among the countries of Southeast Asia in confronting the problematic relationship between past and present. Cambodians have hardly begun to confront their own racist/revolutionary past; Burma faces the dilemma of how to reconcile and write Burman/minority relations. For Laos the problem is more acute because the nationalism around which it revolves is incomplete and under threat—incomplete because the Lao were late in opposing French colonialism; and under threat from an alternative Lao identity as a mere trans-Mekong extension of the Īsān Thai. This is why history, even more than religion or culture, has always stood, and will continue to stand, as the mainstay of Lao identity.

To return to the two questions asked above: Laos wants to see itself as an equal partner in ASEAN;[10] what it lacks is the national self-confidence to do so. This confidence can only be built up over time, through economic development, education,[11] and more inclusive debate about what it is to be not just ethnic Lao, but a citizen of Laos—and that will need to accommodate both ethnic minority participation, and the Lao diaspora. Lao reservations about the future, reservations that take in but go beyond ASEAN, concern whether the Party is capable of guiding the nation-state through these challenges. For on its success will depend not just the legitimacy of the Party, but its very survival. Or will the challenges be too great, the forces sweeping the country along too overwhelming, the leadership too venial and inadequate? Such are some of the questions that underlie the nagging sense of worry and doubt evident in Laos today as the Lao contemplate their future in ASEAN.

NOTES

[1]The views expressed in this article should in no way be taken to represent any particular strand of official thinking in the Lao PDR. I take this opportunity to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments.

[2]Some former neutralist officials without a record of political involvement have been individually invited to return to advise the government, but most have refused until the question of the status of all overseas Lao is resolved.

[3]Cf my discussion in Laos: Towards Subregional Integration in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1995* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: 177–95.

[4]The rates for 1996–97 are given in *Vientiane Times*, 29 November–3 December 1996.

[5]The massive dam has run into severe criticism from environmentalists (Lintner 13 February 1997).

[6]These appeared mainly between August 1994 and March 1995, both in *Paxāxon* and over Radio Viang Chan. See, for example, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, EAS-94-199, 203, 204, 243; EAS-95-003, 011, 025, 081, 085, etc.

[7]A substantial memorial at Xiang Khuang was dedicated on 15 July 1997. One might note that while Kaisôn was Party Secretary-General, no such military memorials were built—only when General Khamtai took over as Party President.

[8]A fascinating feeler went out in 1997 when while on a visit to France former neutralist general Khammuan Bubpha invited Prince Sauryavong Savang, brother of the former king, to return to Laos. The official heir to the Lao throne, Prince Soulivong Savang, grandson of the former king, is studying law in the United States. (The spelling each now prefers is used here, rather than the transcription used elsewhere for Lao names.)

[9]Other sources, including the government census, give a lower category count.

[10]Particularly of Thailand, as the Thais well recognise. "But while Vientiane wants to be on an equal footing with Bangkok, Laos knows too well that at the moment it does not have the economic clout to back its demands" (Pathan 27 November 1995). Trade runs at more than five to one in Thailand's favour, yet Thai trade to Laos amounts to no more than 0.3 per cent of total Thai trade. Radio Bangkok, 23 March 1997. *Foreign Broadcasts Information Service*, EAS-97-082.

[11]Hans Luther argues strongly for resources for education in his study of Interdependence between Economics and Education in the Development Process of Lao PDR. Unpublished paper.

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