Historians & Their Discipline

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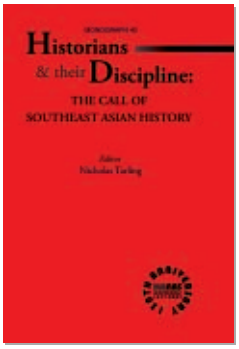

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Serendipity, or discovering Lao history

By James Stuart-Fox

I suspect that serendipity plays a much larger role in the focus of academic studies than most of like to recognise. We come across something by chance that intellectually excites us, and follow where it leads, swayed by personal inclination, the influence of others, or world events. Universities encourage this intellectual freedom. Classes may be obligatory, but research is for us to decide. For this I am eternally grateful.

Serendipity certainly describes my involvement with Laos. I never had any intention of writing about the country in a serious way, either when I first went there in 1963, or when I left two years later. My training was in evolutionary biology and mathematics, with a strong side interest in philosophy and religion – not in politics or history. What drew me to Asia was a youthful, romantic desire to engage with the mysterious 'other', to discover different ways of understanding the world through travel and contact. That, and to escape the constrictions of the conservative white-Australian society in which I had grown up in the 1950s.

My way into alternative worlds was through the dual carriageway of art and ideas. I sought entry into other worlds directly through aesthetics, and intellectually through ideas. A stint teaching in Hong Kong was something of a disappointment, however. Initial fascination turned to disillusionment as I discovered that what I had anticipated as a cauldron of creativity sparked by the interaction of East and West was in fact devoted almost entirely to the pursuit of wealth.

But if Hong Kong disappointed, Japan was a revelation. For five months (and another in Korea) I immersed myself in Buddhism, Zen above all, and the art and architecture and the wonderful gardens of temples from Sapporo to Nagasaki. Here was an altogether different aesthetic, reflecting a radically different worldview. I was blown away.

Japan also drew me into history. My encounter with Hong Kong had been shaded by expectation, and influenced strongly by an existential belief in the immediacy of the moment. Japan revealed depths that had to be plumbed, and the only means was history. From the bright lights of Shinjuku I worked back to Nara; from Zen gardens I worked back to the Buddha.

Politics confronted me in Indochina. Two incidents in particular challenged my complacency. One was in Saigon, when the father of a boy

I had taught in Hong Kong agreed to talk to me about the morality laws then in place, thanks to the indomitable Madame Nhu, the sister-in-law of President Ngo Dinh Diem. It was an extraordinary time to be South Vietnam, just as the Diem regime was beginning to unravel. The parallels were palpable between the earlier political crisis and regime change that formed the background for Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and the building political crisis that was to bring about another change of regime in November 1963.

My host took me to a nightclub, which after Hong Kong was shockingly sedate. Dancing was both a sin and a crime. I wondered aloud about the influence of the Nhus. Immediately my host signalled silence. Later at my hotel he told me that as I was the teacher of his son, he would be happy to answer any questions I might have – but only while he was personally driving me around the city. Next day when he picked me up, he dismissed his driver and took the wheel. When we stopped at a red light, we stopped talking. Such was the level of fear in the last months of Ngo Dinh Diem's 'democracy'.

The second incident was in Nha Trang, where I stayed in a Buddhist temple. I was surprised to be woken at 2 am by young monks eager to tell me in stilted English about terrible things that were happening to them. Only when I was woken for the second night did I twig that they took me for an intelligence agent probing relations between Buddhists and the Saigon government, and that this was the only time they dared speak to me.

Vietnam awoke an interest in politics. So by the time I got to Laos (on hearing in Bangkok that work was available), I was aware as never before of the significance of both history and politics. The US Agency for International Development rashly agreed to hire me as an agricultural field officer for a project to improve vegetable production within transport distance of Viang Chan. And so I stayed.

I owed my move to journalism, rather ironically, to the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem. The resident UPI correspondent was instructed to get himself immediately to Saigon. Before he left he spent an hour telling me how to cover for him in his absence. He never returned, and I became the UPI stringer in Viang Chan. Politics, if not history, was now my principal concern. I joined UPI full time after USAID discovered I was moonlighting as a journalist, and gave me an ultimatum: USAID or UPI. UPI offered me a fulltime job, so my decision was made.

It was an interesting time to be in Laos. The Second Coalition Government had pretty well unravelled, and Laos was being increasingly drawn into the Second Indochina War. There were lots of suspect Americans wandering around, nominally attached to the bloated US

embassy, or USAID, or working for Air America. There was also a fair smattering of French teachers and old *colons*, plus assorted 'third country nationals', like myself. The resident press corps numbered half a dozen. The common meeting place for minor diplomats, journalists and spies was the Constellation Hotel, run by that most suave and genial of hosts, Maurice Cavalerie, my father-in-law.

Despite the proliferation of Americans, Viang Chan still preserved something of its French colonial heritage, at least in the mentality of its leaders. French was the language of government publications and press conferences. I abandoned my market Lao for French conversation. It was Maurice who suggested his daughter, Elisabeth, then filling in time before going off to university in Paris, as my teacher. We were married after she had finished her studies, in London, in 1968.

In Laos I learned journalism on the job. It was not an onerous task. I talked to a lot of people, building up a picture of how the 1962 Geneva Agreements were being systematically subverted by both the US and North Vietnam. My sympathy came to lie with the Lao, as it still does. They had been neglected by the French, who had dragged them into the First Indochina War through the obdurate refusal of successive French governments to grant independence to their Indochinese colonies. And they were being patronised and manipulated by the Americans into acting as pawns in the Cold War. Lao neutrality, as most Lao well understood, was the only viable course for the survival of such a weak state, but neutrality was never an acceptable option for either the North Vietnamese or the Americans.

When the US and Australia committed grounds troops to the war in Vietnam in 1965, UPI transferred me to Saigon. I thought then I would be unlikely to return to Laos, except perhaps for a short holiday. Years passed. Elisabeth and I returned to Australia at the end of 1972, and decided to stay. I gave up both science and journalism to return to university to study Asian history and philosophy. I joined the History Department at the University of Queensland as a tutor in 1976.

It was a fateful year, and a fateful conjunction. After the April 1975 victories of communist forces in Cambodia and Vietnam, the Pathet Lao brought political pressure to bear in Laos. The Third Coalition Government collapsed, and on 2 December a hastily called Assembly of People's Representatives abolished the monarchy, and installed in its place the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

We watched these events from afar. Elisabeth urged her parents to leave, but Maurice wanted to 'liquidate his stock' (mainly Heineken beer) and obtain some compensation for his property. He stayed on; Elisabeth's alarm grew; and I took time out from my MA thesis on theory of history

to find out what I could about the new Lao leadership and their intentions for their country.

No one then seemed to be interested in Laos. I wrote up my findings and showed them to a couple of colleagues, who urged publication. While that happened, I did more research. My parents-in-law were still in Viang Chan. Though as French citizens they could leave at any time, we were still worried, and followed events closely. Eventually they joined us in Brisbane, by which time I had discovered more to write about the new Lao regime. I decided to seek contributions for a book to assess its first five years.[1] One thing followed another, and before long I had accepted an invitation to write the volume on Laos for a series on Marxist Regimes,[2] of which there were then thirty odd. Now there are just five – and Laos is still one of them.

I had returned briefly to Viang Chan (a much more accurate transcription than the French Vientiane) for the fifth anniversary celebrations in 1980, but the new book required a longer stay. Laos in 1985 was still a closed society. Meetings between Lao citizens and foreigners had to be held in secret, usually after dark, never in public. It was essential to develop sources, and that meant building trust. Here my journalistic training came in handy. Even so, information was hard to come by. Questions provoked immediate suspicion. For all Lao officials, it seemed, academic equalled journalist equalled spy. And yet we never felt under threat. Elisabeth supervised our two girls, who studied Lao classical dancing. In fact some in the small Western diplomatic community wondered how I had been allowed entry at all, given some of the articles in the first book I had edited. When I asked a trusted source about this, he smiled. Oh, he said, that's easy: no one has read it – which was sort of reassuring.

Even after the Marxist Regimes book, Laos remained a side line. I had published a book on the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia,[3] and another with my old friend Rod Bucknell on Buddhist symbolism and meditation.[4] But my real intellectual interest was, as it still is, the philosophy and theory of history, which I researched for my PhD and

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1 Martin Stuart-Fox, ed. *Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic,* St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1982.

2 Martin Stuart-Fox, *Laos: Politics, Economics and Society*, London: Frances Pinter, 1986.

3 Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Murderous Revolution: Life and Death in Pol Pot's Kampuchea*. Chippendale, N.S.W.: Alternative Publishing Cooperative, 1985, a text to go with Bunheang Ung's wonderful drawings.

4 Roderick S. Bucknell and Martin Stuart-Fox*, The Twilight Language: Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism, L*ondon: Curzon Press, 1986.

taught as an Honours seminar course, and on which I published occasionally and read widely.

By this time, Elisabeth and I had become quite involved with the Lao community in Brisbane, through sponsoring refugee resettlement. I was struck by the lack of any comprehensive history of Laos in English. All that was available for the next generation of Lao growing up in English-speaking countries were a couple of translations from Lao and Thai,[5] and histories covering the First and Second Indochina wars.[6] What was needed was a narrative history of Laos that was comprehensive and balanced.

This is what I set out to write. I do not know if I succeeded, but if the distrust of both sides in Lao politics was anything to go by at the time, at least I was somewhere in the middle. While the Lao government declared me *persona non grata*, and refused me a visa for three years, the Lao community, especially in the United States, branded me pro-communist because I had been allowed into the country.

It took me several years to write the history of Laos. The children were growing up, and I had other research interests. When eventually I submitted the manuscript to Cambridge University Press, they declared it was too long. It would have to be compressed to not much over half, which I was reluctant to do. In the end I agreed to compress the whole period from the founding of the Kingdom of Lān Xāng in 1353 to the establishment of the French protectorate in 1893 into an introductory chapter, and leave the rest as the modern history of Laos – which is what I suggested it be called. CUP wanted it titled 'History of Laos'. I insisted on the 'A'.[7] At least this left me free to publish the first part separately,[8] though I regret that the two parts have never appeared together, as a single 'History of Laos'.

All this would never have happened but for that serendipitous conjunction of events in early 1976 that brought together the Pathet Lao seizure of power in Laos, Elisabeth's concern for the safety of her parents, and my tutorship at the University of Queensland, which allowed me time to research the history and politics of the new Lao regime. The rest, as they say, is history – with a little politics thrown in!

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5 Sila Viravong, *History of Laos,* New York: Paragon Books, 1964; Manich Jumsai, *History of Laos*. 2nd rev. ed. Bangkok: Chalermnit Press, 1971.

6 Notably Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground?* London: Oxford University Press, 1968; and Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, New York: Praeger, 1964.

7 Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

8 Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng: Rise and Decline*., Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998.

Lao Historiography

What drew me to Lao history originally was Lao politics, the politics of a band of revolutionaries entirely dependent on neighbouring Vietnam, whose goal was to create a socialist economy in an impoverished Third World state, by "by-passing capitalism". Years of reading Marx (and tutoring Modern Political Ideologies) was enough to make me doubt that this was remotely possible. Over the years I documented the failure of socialism in Laos. By doing so, I also wrote the contemporary political history of the regime.

Since I was at the same time writing a thesis on the theory of history, it was only natural that what began to interest me were theoretical issues associated with Lao historiography. And these still interest me. It did not require post-modernism to make the connection between politics and history. Marx had done that a century earlier. And after all, it was Khrushchev who famously said that history was too important (and he meant politically important) to be left to historians. It is precisely this connection, located specifically in the mind of the historian, which throws the theoretical onus on methodology. But that is another story. Here I want to stick more closely to theory, in broaching two issues in Lao historiography: continuity and periodisation.

(i) Continuity

Writing any national history requires a lot of thought about how to organise it and what to include: in other words, about periodisation and content. These are theoretical matters, to which I will return in a moment. For Laos, however, there is an allied problem that can't be ignored, and that is whether it is legitimate to write the history of Laos at all. For to write the history of a country presupposes that there is a continuing entity about which to write, and for almost two hundred years, from 1707 to 1893 (or to 1907, for the present borders) no single, inclusive Lao kingdom or state existed.

There are two related arguments that deny the legitimacy of writing a 'history of Laos'. One is that given such a long break, no connection exists between the Kingdom of Lān Xāng, with or without its three successor principalities, and the modern French colony, then independent state, that was reconstituted in 1893 to include only a fraction of the earlier area and population. The second argument is more radical. It is that one cannot write the history of any Southeast Asian state as a continuous *national* history, because nationalism is an invention of the 19th century,

which should not be projected anachronistically back into the past.[9] Behind this argument lies an objection to nationalism *per se*, as an ideology of ruling elites that eradicates difference and marginalises the powerless, and which historians should not reinforce by providing 'charter myths' that reach back in time. To take such a stance is, of course, just as political as the decision to write a national history in terms of historical continuity.

The first argument that Lao history is discontinuous can only be refuted by defining and demonstrating some concrete historical connection between the Lao kingdom of Lān Xāng and the French colony of 1893. Such continuity could lie in some form of descent, by analogy with the way that a biological species defines a continuously evolving historical entity; or it could lie in the occupation of territory; or in some kind of cultural continuity. Thus even though Poland disappeared between 1772/95 and 1918, and was divided again between Germany and the Soviet Union during the Second World War, Poles continued to occupy a core territory where they maintained their cultural identity.

In the case of Laos, some ethnic Lao communities did coincide with some core territory throughout this historical hiatus. So some human and territorial continuity was maintained. And there was cultural continuity. It is a common mistake to identify culture with ethnicity, for cultures have their own evolutionary trajectories into which migrant individuals and groups can blend. This has certainly happened in Laos, as when ethnic minorities such as the Sek and So adopt Lao cultural forms.[10]

All kingdoms and states are political organisations, no matter what their specific institutions of governance. So it was to political culture in particular that I turned to make the case for the continuity of Lao history. In a paper I published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*,[11] I focused particularly on the *meuang*, that quintessential Tai political institution, so flexible and so persistent through to the end of the 19th century

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9 Grant Evans, "Introduction: What is Lao Culture and Society?" in Grant Evans, ed. *Laos: Culture and Society*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999, p. 16. What is anachronistic is use of the term 'nationalism' to refer to events prior to any notion of the concept, as Peter and Sanda Simms do in *The Kingdoms of Laos: Six Hundred Years of History* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), chapter 9.

10 James R. Chamberlain, "The Origin of the Sek: Implications for Tai and Vietnamese History", *Journal of the Siam Society,* 86 (1998): 27-48.

11 Martin Stuart-Fox, "On the Writing of Lao History: Continuities and Discontinuities", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24 (1993): 106-121; reprinted in Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Kennon Breazeale, eds, *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on the Seventh to Twentieth Centuries*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002, pp. 1-24.

when traditional forms of governance in Southeast Asia were transmogrified under the dual impact of Western imperialism and capitalism.

To note that the *meuang* was a Tai institution is to recognise that it was not uniquely Lao. So as the Lao principalities formed part of the Tai Kingdom of Siam, is it possible to place the weight of *Lao* continuity on the *meuang*? I would argue that it is, so long as the political culture that prevailed across all Lao *meuang* preserved as its historical dimension – that is, in its historical consciousness – belief in the reality of *Meuang Lao*; that is, of a past and future greater Lao polity. Whether this was so is an historical question. Evidence can be found in the names of the three Lao successor kingdoms to Lān Xāng, each of which saw itself as a continuation of the earlier unified kingdom (in order to retain the legitimation of hereditary descent), and in the literature of the Isan Lao after the destruction of Viang Chan.[12]

Let us turn now to the argument against continuity based on nationalism. The weakness of this position, revealing its own ideological underpinning, is twofold. One, it artificially truncates indigenous histories of Southeast Asia by relegating modern Southeast Asia states to epiphenomena of European colonialism: nationalism is a European ideology, so nationalist states must be European creations. This is an insulting position to adopt, for it disregards indigenous agency. In the case of Laos it passes over all those Lao who harboured hopes of freeing *Meuang Lao* from dependency on Bangkok. They were powerless to do so themselves, but in the arrival of the French they saw an opportunity. Of course they were duped, but this does not deprive them of agency.

The second weakness has to do with how Lao people in the present conceive of their history. If all Lao include the Kingdom of Lān Xāng as part of the history of Laos, as they certainly do in everything from school text to Party histories, do we have the right to condemn them on the grounds that this is but a 'charter myth' for the nationalism of a repressive or exploitative elite? Historical consciousness is an historical study in its own right, as the temporal dimension of identity. If Lao identity includes in its historical dimension the kingdom of Lān Xāng, then it is incumbent on a non-Lao historian also to include that in his or her history, not just of Lao nationalism, but also of the modern state. One cannot claim a version of Marxist false consciousness on the part of all Lao. Perhaps Lao historians should know better than to pretend to an extended past, and it is

12 Peter Koret, "*Luep Phasun* (Extinguishing the Light of the Sun): Romance, Religion and Politics in the Interpretation of a Traditional Lao Poem" in *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads* ed. By Christopher E. Goscha and Søren Ivarsson. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003. pp.181-208.

up to foreign historians to teach them the truth. But this is a patronising position to adopt, even if it does serve to de-legitimise the power of a selfish political elite.

We should at least recognise, as I argued in my introduction to *A History of Laos*, that *any* Lao political elite, of whatever ideological persuasion, would be faced with the same political necessity of creating an identity appropriate for a modern nation-state, because that is what Laos now has to function as in the prevailing world order. It is a responsibility that confronts many post-colonial elites, who must not just govern the countries they have been bequeathed (no matter how illogical their boundaries) in accordance with international expectations and the rules of interstate relations, but in addition construct them as polities in some inclusive sense, as representing their entire population. Part of that process is to convince everyone that they have a common identity *as citizens*, no matter what other multiple identities they may possess. Moreover every identity must have an historical dimension, whether provided by individual memory or shared communication, in the form of texts taught in school or stories circulated by various media. That a vital component of the historical dimension of Lao identity, for Lao of all persuasions, is continuity with the Kingdom of Lān Xāng, is reason enough for non-Lao historians not to dismiss it.

(ii) Periodisation

So if we accept that writing a 'history of Laos' is after all a legitimate undertaking, how should that history be presented? Periodisation is never an easy matter, and too rarely do historians spell out the theoretical bases for the way they divide up the past. Most histories are left to speak for themselves.

The history of Lān Xāng presents peculiar historiographical problems because of the paucity of sources – but then similar problems confront the histories of other early mainland Southeast Asian kingdoms. Written sources are either epigraphical or textual. For Laos the epigraphical evidence is very limited (by contrast, for example, to Cambodia), and almost entirely religious (dedications of Buddha images, records of donations to the Sangha, etc.) As for textual sources, these are limited to court chronicles, recopied religious texts, some technical writing (on law, medicine, astrology), and a body of literature (folk and cautionary tales, stories, epic poems), whose dates are uncertain and whose authors are, for the most part, unknown.

Historical chronicles, whether of Lān Xāng or of neighbouring kingdoms or tributary principalities, were highly selective in what they

recorded. As accoutrements of kingship, they were written to legitimise ruling dynasties. They record dynastic inheritance, royal marriages, wars, and acts of religious merit. The accounts they give of succession disputes are those of the victors, with the politics hidden. There is little or nothing on matters economic, and few records of any achievement that might dim the merit of kings. So much has been lost, through the ravages of war, weather, and tropical insects. What we miss are the political pamphlets and tracts, the personal diaries and journalism, the cartoons and drawings, even the administrative reports, which contribute so immeasurably to European or Chinese history.

As the chronicles of Lān Xāng are constructed as a chronology of the reigns of kings, and they are the only significant historical textual sources we have, it is difficult to avoid presenting the history of the kingdom in this way.[13] In *The Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng*, I tried to avoid this by providing a narrative account that set events in Laos in a regional context, but even so the history of Lān Xāng is inevitably signposted by the reigns of successful and powerful kings. Of these there are four in particular whose reigns also mark significant historical shifts by other criteria. Any history of Lān Xāng has to show how these significant reigns intersect with broader regional developments. Let me illustrate briefly.

The founding of the kingdom marked a shift in the balance of power in mainland Southeast Asia between new Tai kingdoms and the retracting Khmer empire. The process took over a century, from the rise of Sukhothai to the founding of Lān Xāng by King Fa Ngum and his son Unheuan, known as Samsaenthai. This can be construed as the successful outcome of a Khmer strategy to divide the Tai world and prevent the rise of a unified Tai empire.

What continuously plagued the Lao polity was the problem of succession. Time and again rival claimants fought for power, politically through court intrigue or in open warfare pitting powerful leaders of constituent *meuang* against each other. These were times of weakness for the *mandala* of Lān Xāng, when its regional influence contracted. The first such extended period coincided with the manipulations of the 'Great Queen" Mahathevi,[14] and was brought to an end by the accession of King Chakkaphat Phaen Phaeo. But more periods of division and weakness followed until the final break-up in 1707, reflecting a failure on the part

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13 This is how Peter and Sanda Simms' *The Kingdoms of Laos* is organised, closely following the reign-by-reign Chronicles account.

14 See Martin Stuart-Fox, "Who was Mahathevi?" *Journal of the Siam Society* 81, part 1 (1993), pp. 103-08.

of the Lao to develop stronger political and bureaucratic institutions. Why this was so requires further analysis.

The most interesting work being done on the history of Lān Xāng is by the French scholar Michel Lorrillard, director of the École française d'Extrême-orient in Viang Chan, who argues for far more extensive cultural borrowing by Lān Xāng from Lan Na (Chiangmai) than has previously been recognised. In his view it was King Vixun in the early 16th century, rather than Fa Ngum in the mid-14th, who did most to establish Lān Xāng as a powerful *mandala*.[15] Vixun ordered the earliest compilation of the *Nithan Khun Borom*, which tells the story of Fa Ngum at length, as a literary device (myth of the great founder), rather than as history. The implication is that Vixun exaggerated the role of Fa Ngum in order to provide legitimation for his own rule. Fa Ngum is mentioned in a Sukhothai inscription, so we are sure of his historical existence. What is not so evident is that there was a continuous line of kings thereafter, or that Lān Xāng over the next century was an extensive kingdom.

Now there are two forms of legitimation of royal power in Laos, as elsewhere in mainland Buddhist Southeast Asia. These are royal descent from some powerful ancestral ruler, and the Buddhist notion of the just king (*dhammaraja*) who rules by virtue of the merit he has accumulated in previous existences. Lorrillard argues that the first evidence that Lao kings were Buddhists comes a century after Fa Ngum, and that this came to Lān Xāng from Lan Na, not Cambodia.[16] Vixun brought these two forms of legitimation together, borrowing heavily from Lan Na, a connection strengthened still further by his son (Photisarat) and grandson (Xetthathirat). We must await Lorrillard's history of Lān Xāng to see evidence and argument for this revisionist interpretation fully set out.

For a brief moment in the mid 16th century, under kings Phothisarat and Xetthathirat, it seemed that a greater northern Tai/Lao kingdom might be created, but local allegiances were too strong. Though they had close contacts with Lan Na, these kings were responsible for moving the capital of Lān Xāng from Luang Phrabang to Viang Chan, for reasons that included the shift in demographic weight due to the southern movement of Lao migration, better trade access, and improved security from the rising threat of Burmese invasion. Not until the 17th century, when Lān Xāng was at its apogee during the long reign of Suninyavongsa, another signpost monarch, did the Burmese threat diminish – only to return a

15 Personal communication.

16 Michel Lorrillard, "Quelques données relatives à l'historiographie lao" Bu*lletin de l'École française d'Extrême-orient,* 86 (1999), pp. 219-32; Michel Lorrillard, "D'Angkor au Lān Xāng: une revision des jugements: *Aséanie* 7 (2001), pp. 19-34.

century later. From here on European accounts begin to flesh out skeletal Lao sources.

After the division of Lān Xāng (1707-13), the problem is how to present the histories of successor principalities, all of which within half a century became tributary to Siam. Do they rightly fall within the history of the Siamese empire, finally established four centuries after the Khmer had divided the Tai world? Or do they fall within the history of Laos? It is at this point that national histories of both Thailand and Laos become problematic. The Simms in their *Kingdoms of Laos* chose to recount the histories of each Lao principality as separate sub-narratives.[17] I preferred to weave them into a single narrative account that culminated in the unsuccessful attempt of King Anouvong of Viang Chan to throw off Siamese suzerainty.

No figure has received such differing interpretations in Thai and Lao historiography as Anouvong. For the Lao he is an heroic, but tragic, figure who gambled all for Lao freedom and lost his kingdom.[18] For the Thai he is an ungrateful rebel.[19] His failure led to the destruction of Viang Chan, the ruins of which conjured strong feelings in members of the

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17 The Simms devote separate chapters to Luang Phrabang, Champasak and Xiang Khuang. Of the three, Champasak receives the most extended treatment. This would seem to reflect the influence of certain of the authors' informants as much as their considered historical judgement. To suggest that Lao from Khong Island "have a passionate sense of their heritage that separates them from all other Lao" is problematical; while the claim that the intellectual elite of Champasak has "preserved the finest customs and traditions of the Lao people" is contentious, to say the least. Similar claims could be made, with greater justification, for the people and culture of Luang Phrabang. Such regionalism, however, is hardly something to extol, for it has contributed greatly to Lao weakness over the last three centuries. The regional elites may be proud of their heritage and their traditions, but their regionalism has prevented them from contributing as they might have done to a strong Lao kingdom, or to the construction of that "imagined community" that must constitute the basis of the Lao nation. The elites of southern Laos have attempted to use history for their own ends, to bolster their own separatist claims. The Simms unfortunately give historical sustenance to this regionalism.

18 The best treatment from the Lao perspective is Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to Conflagration: Fifty Years of Diplomacy and Warfare in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, 1778-1828,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). The Ngaosyvathns' purpose in this book is both historical and political: "to restore to the Lao people...a part of their roots and a piece of their lost history", and to promote "a healthier, revitalized kith and kin intercourse" between Lao and Thai in the context of the "ASEAN-ization" of Southeast Asia. In other words, they want to right the balance of an historiography that has been written by the victims in the Thai-Lao conflict that led to the destruction of the Lao kingdom of Viang Chan. And to right the balance, the pendulum (to mix a metaphor) must swing past the mid-point before it can oscillate less wildly. The strength of this study lies both in its scholarly commitment and the contribution it makes to historiographical discourse. No subsequent work on the period will be able to disregard it.

French Mekong expedition who arrived some forty years later. When the French re-established Viang Chan as the capital of their colony of Laos in 1900, they built the residence of the résident-général on the exact site of Chao Anu's palace.

Colonial histories have their own dynamics, though the term is hardly appropriate for the half century the French ruled Laos. The manner of their leaving poses historiographical questions, however, for the problem is when to date Lao independence – from the declaration by the Lao Issara in 1945; from the partial independence that gained some international recognition in 1949; or from when full independence was granted in 1953?

For Hugh Toye and Arthur Dommen writing in the 1960s it was not Lao independence that was important, but Lao involvement in the First and Second Indochina Wars, so their books were periodised accordingly.[20] Grant Evans in his *Short History of Laos* takes 1949 to be the significant date.[21] For all three the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and 1962 were the crucial external events that defined modern Lao history, and so the chapter divisions of their histories.

I took a different position, which I justified in the introduction to *A History of Laos*. There I argued that for Lao history the important dates were not those when agreements were signed in Geneva, or when war in Vietnam spilled over into Laos (notably in 1953 when Viet Minh forces first invaded Laos; and in 1964 when the North Vietnamese began using the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos in a big way). Rather the important dates were when the Lao themselves, either assisted by international agreement, or in the face of foreign opposition, managed to re-establish national unity and neutrality (that is, notably, in 1957 and 1962, and then finally in 1973-74 when, for brief periods, coalition governments were formed and functioned, only to be subverted by circumstances well beyond the control of those who constructed them.)

Proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975 marked a transition that no historian of Laos can disregard, for it brought to an end six and half centuries of the Lao monarchy. The period since has been too brief to pose serious problems of

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19 Though I note that in Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit's *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) Bangkok is blamed, not Chao Anu.

20 Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* New York: Praeger, 1964; Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battlegound?* London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

21 Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002.

periodisation, but the most significant evert must be the decision of the Fourth Party Congress in November 1986, delayed because of the intensity of the political struggle preceding it, to endorse the New Economic Mechanism that ditched socialist planning in favour of a free-market economy.

The paucity of Lao historiography

The importance of history lies in the contribution it makes both to identity and to the legitimation of power. Constructing a national history provides a powerful and essential tool for a post-colonial state struggling to inculcate a sense of national identity. And the form that history takes legitimises the political order and its leaders. This is why elites promote particular views of history. But it was ever thus. 'History wars' are fought so bitterly because in the end they are political.

That history legitimises power was certainly the case in Laos, no matter what regime ruled. The Lao Chronicles (*phongsavadan*) legitimised the rule of kings by demonstrating their royal descent and recording their meritorious deeds. The French wrote Lao history to demonstrate how they had 'saved' the Lao from Thai domination, which thereby justified French rule. The Royal Lao regime stressed its continuity with Lān Xāng, while Lao communists have constructed Lao history as revolutionary struggle, culminating in the triumph of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.[22]

Since 1975, history has been under the tight control of the LPRP, which took Khrushchev's dictum to heart, and refused to leave history to historians. In Laos what is permissible as history is determined by politicians. This perhaps explains why for its first two decades no history was published in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The politicians had other, more urgent, matters to attend to.

Since the mid-1990s a trickle of history has appeared, including a history of the Party, another of the Army, and a large, officially-sanctioned, history of Laos, from prehistory to the present. There have also been a couple of adulatory biographies and self-serving memoirs. None have been published in English or French.

Only two histories written by Lao authors have been published in English. The first to appear was Somphavan Inthavong's *Notes on Lao*

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22 Martin Stuart-Fox, "Historiography, Power and Identity: History and Political Legitimization in Laos" in *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads* ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003, pp. 73-95.

history,[23] followed by *The Evolution of the Lao State* by Phongsavath Boupha.[24] Neither author is an historian. Somphavan has been both businessman and politician before he was appointed chair of the Lao Mining Association. Phongsavath is a career diplomat and deputy minister of foreign affairs. Both have excellent political connections.

While Somphavan's book presents a selective and idiosyncratic set of views on Lao history, *The Evolution of the Lao State* provides a history of modern Laos from the colonial period to the present, heavily weighted, as the title suggests, towards the establishment and workings of political institutions. It sheds no light on political differences, such as the intense debate within the Party over the decision to move towards a free-market economy, which delayed the Fourth Party Congress by several months.

The Evolution of the Lao State is more political science than it is narrative history. It presents the official Lao Marxist-Leninist view that the 'thirty-year struggle' for power from 1945 to 1975 was a triumph of clear-sighted strategy and clever tactics on the part of the LPRP. Almost half the book outlines the structure of government, the provisions of the constitution, and the Lao PDR's foreign relations.

Finally mention must be made of a history written by expatriate Lao – the rather pretentiously entitled *Histoire du pays lao, de la préhistoire à la république*, by Savèng Phinith, Phou Ngeun Souk-Aloun and Vannida Thongchanh.[25] This curious and disappointing volume devotes twice as much space to prehistory and legendary Lao origins as to the history of Lān Xāng, which is presented reign by reign precisely according to the Lao Chronicles. The colonial period is briefly passed over before the two decades of the independent Kingdom of Laos is given fuller treatment (periodised according to war – World War II, First and Second Indochina Wars). Scant reference is made to the Lao PDR, which the authors do not much like. Documents, chronology, bibliography etc. comprise half the book.

Such is apparently the parlous state of Lao historiography. Three encouraging developments suggest a more positive view, however. One is that Laos does have a small number of excellent historians. Foremost among them are Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, who while resident in Laos mostly publish outside the country, and Souneth Phothisane, the principal author of the bulky Lao history published by the

23 Vientiane: Pakpasack Press, 1994.

24 Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2002. This is the translation of a Lao publication that appeared in 1996.

25 Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998.

Ministry of Information and Culture.[26] The second is that a new generation of young Lao scholars in France and the United States are beginning to undertake serious research into Lao history.[27] And the third development is that foreign scholars are beginning to fill some of the important gaps in Lao history. I have already mentioned the work of Michel Lorrillard, who is producing an analytical study of all Lao epigraphy.[28] Others are working on regional histories and the colonial period,[29] and revealing new aspects of the Second Indochina War.[30]

The sad thing is that just as the Lao communist regime is struggling to find a new source of legitimacy in the face of dwindling support for Marxism-Leninism,[31] there is renewed interest in Lao historiography[32] – and yet these two developments find no common ground. This is because the regime is terrified of losing its iron grip on history. So the state of Lao historiography comes down to a political issue, and until there is freedom in Laos for political debate, Lao historiography will remain impoverished.[33]

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26 Souneth Phothisane and Nousai Phoummachan, Pavatsat Lao (Deukdamban – Pachuban) [Lao History (Ancient times to the Present)] Viang Chan: Ministry of Information and Culture, 2000. This volume presents Lao history in the officially endorsed interpretation, as a series of struggles (against Thai feudalists, French colonialists and American imperialists) for Lao freedom and independence, a goal finally achieved by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

27 Foremost among these, though she is also an anthropologist, is Vatthana Pholsena, who recently published *Post-war Laos: The Politics of Culture, History, and Identity*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006.

28 See, for example, Michel Lorrillard, "Les inscriptions du Tha Luang de Vientiane: données nouvelles sur l'historire d'un *stūpa* lao" *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-orient* 90-91 (2003-2004), pp. 289-348.

29 Volker Grabowsky, "Introduction to the History of Müang Sing (Laos) prior to French Rule: The Fate of a Lü Principality*", Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-orient,* 86 (1999), pp. 233-91.

30 For example, Xiaoming Zhang, "China's Involvement in Laos During the Vietnam War, 1963-1975" *The Journal of Military History* 66 (2002): 1141-1166; and Christopher E. Goscha, "Vietnam and the World Outside: The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisers in Laos (1948-1962*)", South East Asia Research* ,12, 2 (2004), pp. 141-85. Contributions are coming from a wide range of scholars: Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese, American, French, Australian, German.

31 And rising corruption. See Martin Stuart-Fox, "The Political Culture of Corruption in the Lao PDR", *Asian Studies Review* 30 (2006), pp. 1-17; and Patrick Keuleers, "Corruption in the Lao PDR: Underlying causes and key issues for consideration" Bangkok: UNDP, March 2004.

32 See the excellent collection edited by Christopher E. Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads,* Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003.

33 Martin Stuart-Fox, "The Challenge for Lao Historiography", *South East Asia Research,* 14, 3 (2006), pp. 51-71.