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Announcements:

Call for Article Submissions for the JLS:

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

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

Language: Lao and English are the main languages, other languages are welcomed. Please check with the editors first before submitting articles in other languages not listed here.

CALL FOR PAPERS**Sixth International Conference on Lao Studies**

When: Thursday, 13 June 2019 to Saturday, 15 June 2019

Where: Cornell University,
Ithaca, NY, USA

The Southeast Asia Program (SEAP), Cornell University and the Center for Lao Studies (CLS) are pleased to announce that the Sixth International Conference on Lao Studies (ICLS6) will be held on June 13-15, 2019 in Ithaca, New York, USA. The main objective of the conference is to promote Lao studies, broadly defined, by providing an international forum for scholars to present and discuss various aspects of Lao Studies.

Theme

The Sixth International Conference on Lao Studies has no specific theme. As in past ICLS conferences, this conference intends to accommodate all academic scholarship in the social sciences and humanities related to Laos, and peoples linked either to identifying as Lao or to the country of Laos more generally, including people from all ethnic groups in Laos, and diaspora communities all over the world.

Description

The conference will bring together Lao Studies scholars and researchers from all disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, and all intellectual and political perspectives, to share paper presentations, panel presentations, exhibits, performances, and cultural activities.

The following are included within the target groups of the conference:

- 1) All self-identified ethnic groups of Laos (e.g. Lao, Khmu, Hmong, Ieu-Mien, Akha, Phouan, Phou Tai, Nyuan, etc.);
- 2) Lao/Thai Isan and other ethnic Lao groups in Thailand (e.g. Lao Song, Phouan, Phou Tai, etc.)
- 3) Ethnic Lao living in Cambodia
- 4) Cross-border ethnic groups living in Vietnam, China, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia (e.g. Akha, Hmong, Phouan, Ieu-Mien, Khmu, Tai Lue, Tai Dam, Lahu, Brao, etc.)
- 5) Overseas diaspora originally from Laos or descendants of people from Laos (including Lao Americans, Hmong Americans, Khmu Americans, French Lao, Australian Lao, Canadian Lao, etc.)

The following are some, but certainly not all, possible topics of interest to the conference organizers:

- Architectural Transformations

- Art and Music
- Border Trade and Interactions
- Buddhism and Other Religions
- Community
- Cultures of Ethnic Groups in Laos
- Education
- Environment and Health
- Ethnic Groups and Economic and Social Change
- Ethnomusicology
- Extractive Industries
- Families and Children
- Gender Relations
- History
- Identity Politics
- Internet-Based Communications and Networking
- Language, Linguistics and Literature
- Lao American Issues
- Lao Heritage
- Lao People in the Regional/Global Economy
- Lao Relations with People from Other Ethnic Groups
- Large-Scale Economic Land Concessions
- Livelihood Changes
- Nature Conservation (including Wildlife and Protected Area Management)
- Nature-Society Interactions
- Politics
- Research Methodologies in Lao Studies
- Rural Development
- Transnational Networks and Relations
- Urbanization and Development

PROCEDURES and TIMELINES

- 1) Please submit abstracts in English before December 31, 2018
- 2) Submit abstracts electronically, sending preferably a Microsoft word file (document) in an e-mail attachment to ICLS.Six@gmail.com (see below for specific instructions regarding preparing abstracts)

General Contact information:

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www.laostudies.org/conferences

3) The conference abstract committee will review abstracts and send an acceptance letter with scheduling information and other instructions for submitting final abstract statements and full versions of papers.

4) Abstracts of panels, and individual papers and full versions of conference papers will be collected for distribution on-line.

ORGANIZED PANELS

Organized panels, composed of 3-4 scholars presenting formal papers and 1 or 2 discussants that can be scheduled into one-and-a-half-hour time slots are also invited. Panel organizers are requested to supply the following information:

- Title of the panel
- Conference theme(s) related to the panel
- Name, institution, address and email of the panel organizer
- Name, institution, address and email of each paper presenter
- Names, institutions, addresses and email of the panel discussants
- Abstract (250 words or less) describing the panel as a whole
- Title of each paper and abstract (250 words or less) for each paper

INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

Individual papers will be grouped into coherent panels. The papers must include the following:

- Title of the paper
- Name, institution, address and email address of paper presenter
- Abstracts (250 words or less) with identified keywords.
- Related conference topic(s)

REGISTRATION

All participants are requested to register online. The registration fee includes the conference program, and morning and afternoon snacks and two lunches for the three-day conference. Early registration deadline is January 15, 2019. Please note that there will be no refund for cancellation or absence.

Conference and Conference Banquet Registration

Rate Type	Early Registration On or before February 15, 2019	Late Registration After February 15, 2019
Regular Registration	US\$150	US\$175
Student Registration	US\$75	US\$100

Note: 90% refunds are possible up to March 1, 2019. After this time refunds are not possible.

Princes without a Principality: Champassak Non-State Royals and the Politics of Performativity in France

Ian G. Baird

Abstract

Few people who have not visited Laos know where “Champassak” is located. Even fewer are aware of the Champassak Royal House. This is not surprising, as Champassak is not included as one of Southeast Asia’s nation states, and thus is not prominently identified on any world maps. Nor is the Champassak Royal House legally recognized anywhere in the world. One could characterize Champassak as a loser of European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia, and the subsequent period when the region was divided into countries, as it was never elevated to modern statehood. Yet the Champassak Royal House persists amongst politically exiled members of the family who fled Laos when it was taken over by communists in 1975. Indeed, in 2013 family members celebrated the 300th year anniversary of the Champassak Royal House—not in Champassak itself, the space that originally constituted it—but in Paris, France, where much of the Na Champassak royal family now reside. Here we examine how Champassak royalty is positioned in France, both socially and spatially, as ‘non-state royals’—royalty in foreign exile. That includes considering the politics of rank and recognition, and varying forms of performativity amongst Champassak royals of different generations and positionalities.

Keywords: Laos, Royalty, Exile, Sovereignty, Positionality, Performativity, Non-State

Introduction

On August 1, 2013, I arrived in the suburbs of Paris, after having flown from Bangkok. It was hot, and there was plenty of activity at the modest home of *Chao*¹ Keuakoun Na Champassak and his wife *Chao Nang* Patthouma Soratchaphak, as they were the main organizers of the event that I had timed my trip to attend: the 300th anniversary of the Champassak Royal House. Few who have not visited Laos know ‘Champassak’. Even fewer are aware of the Champassak Royal House. This is not surprising, as Champassak is not one of Southeast Asia’s nation states,² and thus is not prominently situated on any world maps, which privilege nation states. Nor is the Champassak Royal House legally recognized anywhere in the world. The Kingdom of Champassak could be considered as a loser to European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia and the subsequent carving up of the region into countries, as it could have been a

¹ *Chao* refers to male royals, and *Chao Nang* and *Chao Heuane* refer to female royals. Chao Heuane Nying refers to a daughter of the head of the Champassak Royal House.

² In this paper, I follow Robinson’s (2013: 556) useful distinction between governments and states: “states are juridical entities of the international legal system; governments are the exclusive legally coercive organizations for making and enforcing certain group decisions.”

candidate for statehood had the political circumstances been different (see Baird, 2009; 2010). Champassak is much like ‘Indochina’, as it is “endur[ing] today only in the realm of memory, or more often nostalgia” (Goscha, 2012: ix). Indeed, as a political entity, Champassak is only imagined, and is not enshrined with any state power. Thus, the Champassak royal family can be characterized as ‘non-state royals’, royals without political sovereignty and territory to constitute their royal status; indeed, they are princes and princesses without principalities. This being the case, the ability of royals-in-exile to perform royalty, in Judith Butler’s (1993) embodied sense, has become particularly important for Champassak royals living in France. It is the only way for them to keep the Champassak Royal House alive. Even though all explicit forms of monarchy were disbanded in 1975 when the Lao People’s Democratic Republic was formed, Patrice Ladwig (2015: 1877) has effectively argued that, the “modern Lao state socialism is still imbued (and increasingly so) with patterns of Buddhist statecraft.”³ In contrast, however, this paper is focused on the way Champassak royalty in exile has variously positioned itself socially and spatially, as ‘non-state royals’. How is the Champassak royalty imagined and performed among members of the Champassak Royal House in France?

Champassak is located in present-day Champassak Province, southern Laos (Figure 1), and in 1713 Chao Soisysamouth became the first king of Champassak, at the bequest of an important Theravada Buddhist monk, Phra Khrou Phonsamek,⁴ and a local female leader, Nang Phao. The 300th anniversary reunion event was scheduled in just three days, on August 4th. I was excited to be in Paris.

It has been a long time since Champassak was arguably a kingdom, depending on one’s perspective. After its first 65 years of apparent independence, when they apparently did not pay tribute to other kingdoms, in 1778 the Siamese invaded Champassak and forcibly subsumed it. From that time the Champassak Royal House continued to follow the Mandala system (Tambiah 1984) and collect taxes from other surrounding principalities, some of which was sent as tribute to Siam. Then in 1893, European colonial expansion led to the establishment of French Laos, which further eroded Champassak’s influence as all territories east of the Mekong River were taken by France, whereas Champassak remained under Siam’s tutelage on the west side of the river (Baird, 2013; Evans, 2002; Breazeale, 2002; Simms and Simms, 1999; Archaimbault, 1961). In 1905, Champassak town itself, and a sizable piece of territory west of the Mekong, were incorporated into French Laos (Breazeale, 2002). Champassak, however, was not recognized as a kingdom by the French. While Luang Phrabang, in northern Laos, was made a royal protectorate—albeit under de facto control of the French—the head of Champassak was relegated to the position of ‘governor’; but one without much power.

One could argue that Champassak ceased to be a kingdom in 1778. It could, however, also be argued that Champassak’s rule ended in 1893, the year that the French incorporated the territory east of the Mekong as part of French Laos, or maybe even 1905, the year that Champassak town, which is on the west side of the Mekong River, was incorporated into French Laos (Breazeale, 2002). Yet Champassak remained influential with the people who inhabited the territory that was once governed by Champassak

³ Buddhist statecraft refers to the intermingling of state governance with state legitimation that comes from Buddhist belief and practice.

⁴ He is also known as ‘*Phra khou khi home*’ (good smelling excrement monk). He was a very famous monk.

royals, and also in relation to the larger state of Laos, particularly from Khammouane Province south (Figure 1), up until the time of the communist take-over of Laos in 1975, at which time most of the family fled to Thailand and later to France, the United States and elsewhere. However one situates the Champassak Royal House in history and in relation to state sovereignty, the Na Champassak family can hardly be dismissed as insignificant. Even today, they remain well known, albeit mainly amongst the aging first generation of ethnic Lao immigrant community of France, and the United States.

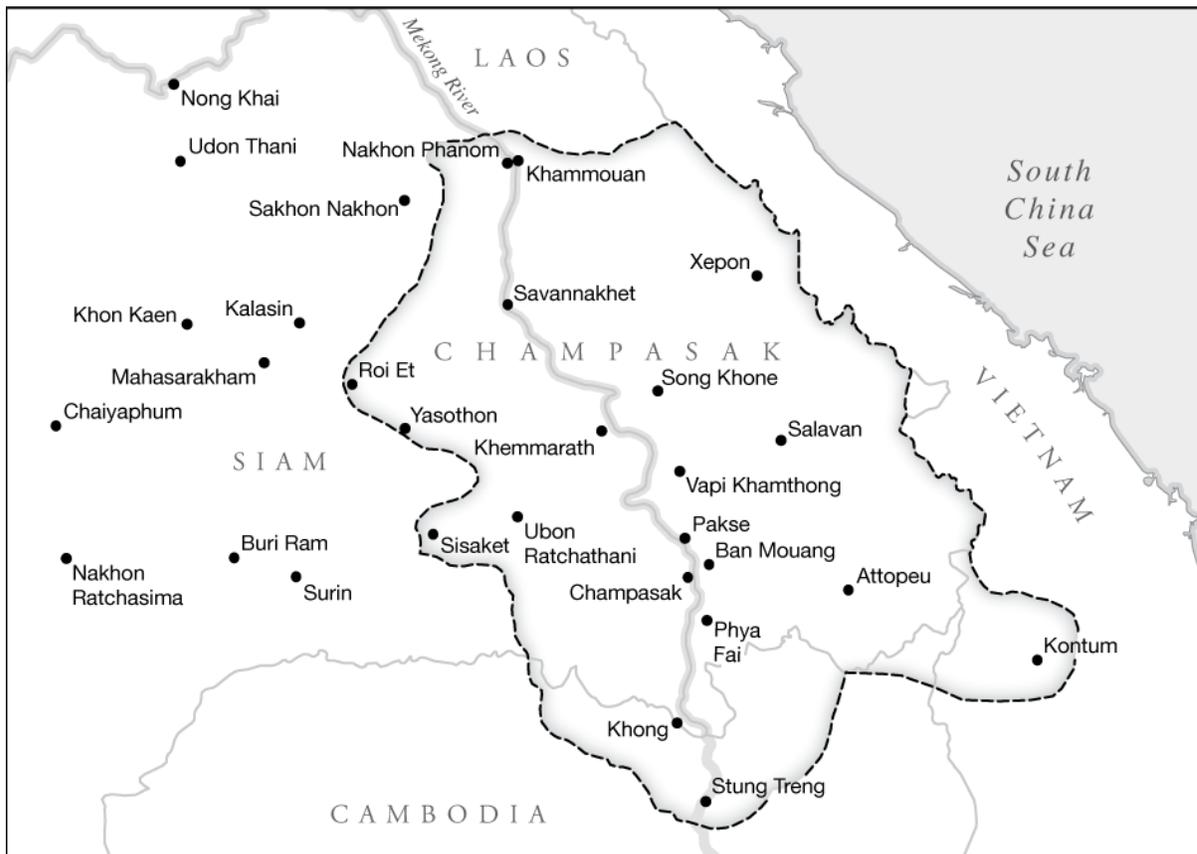


Figure 1: The approximate territory controlled by the Champassak Royal House in the late nineteenth century.

Many royals live in exile, and there are dozens of exiled royal families globally (Davis 2012; Mansel and Riotte 2011). In Washington DC, for example, one can find members of the former royal family of Ethiopia, an Ashanti King of Ghana, the former King of Rwanda, members of the Afghan royal family, and the Iranian Crown Prince (Wax, 2011), just to name a few. There are also many royals living in Europe (Mansel and Riotte 2011). Until just over a decade ago senior members of the Italian royal family were in exile in Portugal and later Switzerland (Willan, 2002), and the Greek king was in London, a popular abode for exiled royals, until 2013 when he returned home after being away for 46 years (Smith, 2013). The Prince of Libya also long resided in London, as did the

son of the last king of Yugoslavia, before both returned to their respective countries. The crown princes of Burma and Albania still live in London, as do other royals.⁵

The rise of Republicanism and Communism globally in the twentieth century forced many royals to flee their countries of origin. Although Grant Evans (2009) has contributed an important work on Lao royals, his focus on Luang Phrabang royals differentiates his project from mine, as the Luang Phrabang royals are the official Lao royal family in exile. I am, however, interested in the Na Champassak family, which Evans (2009) wrote much less about, and can be considered to be Laos' second royal family. I wish to examine the politics of positionality, that is the politics of positioning in relation to society—including the associated spatialities—of this non-state royal family in exile, something that has so far evaded the gaze of scholars. The particular type of royalty found in Southeast Asia, which frequently gains legitimacy through Buddhism (Tambiah 1984; Winachakul, 1994; Swearer 2003; Holt 2009; Baird 2017b), is fundamentally associated with state territorialization, and particularly with spaces that those in exile have been severed from. Indeed, the spatiality of royalty, or the relationship of royalty to space, at least in the modern era, is fundamentally different from the spatiality of common people, as royals are not just citizens of states, but their positions as royalty are unique and special, and they are legitimized as royals through their particular ancestral attachment to territory, and also Buddhism (Baird, 2017b). The identities of royals are not only associated with ethnicity and their ancestors, they are also closely linked to particular spaces that are crucial for legitimizing their royal status. So, how have the Champassak royals-in-exile in France positioned themselves, and been positioned by others? In addition, how can a spatial approach help us to understand the politics of royals-in-exile, and political refugee space-making processes more generally?

Next, I present a brief history of Champassak, in order to provide some necessary background. I then outline how most of those in the Na Champassak family were forced to flee Laos as political refugees. I then consider the spatiality associated with ideas about sovereign power and the bringing of Buddhist images together in space. I follow by providing some context about my investigations of the Na Champassak family, before presenting some of my ethnographic findings regarding the variety of ways in which members of the family are interpreting and positioning themselves in France with regard to their royal status. I am particularly interested in how they are making sense of their royal identities within spaces that have not been produced to constitute them, and how they are attempting to produce royal spaces in France, but with only limited scope and success. Finally, I provide some preliminary conclusions about the positionality, including spatiality, of these non-state royals.

A Brief History of Champassak

The Na Champassak Royal House is descended from Luang Phrabang and Vientiane royals. In 1694, the great Lao king Chao Soulignavongsa of Vientiane passed away. There was internal conflict over who would succeed him, and one potential successor, Chao Somphon, was murdered by another, Phaya Muang Chanh (Phaya Amat),

⁵ Kings without a country, <http://royalcello.websitetoolbox.com/post?id=5177070&goto=nextoldest>, accessed February 2, 2014.

who took control of the throne. The new ruler wanted to make the wife of his former rival, Chao Nang Soumangkhalā, his own wife, but she refused, so Phra Khrou Phonsamek, a senior monk for the royal family, known as *Chao Ratsakhou Louang* in Lao, fled with Chao Nang Soumangkhalā, who was pregnant from her deceased husband, to the south along with a large entourage of followers. A boy, Nokasat, was subsequently born. Phra Khrou Phonsamek gradually moved south, and after many years, including some time in Phnom Penh and Stung Treng, in Cambodia, ended up in what is now Champassak, on the west side of the Mekong River in present-day southern Laos. In 1713 Chao Nokasat, by then a teenager, was given the royal title Chao Soisysamouth, and was elevated to be the first king of *Nakhonekalachambak Nakhabouri Sisattanakhanahout* (known in short as *Nakhone Champassak*) (Na Champassak, 1995a; Lintingre, 1972). Champassak apparently did not pay tribute to other kingdoms for all of Chao Soisysamouth's reign, which ended with his passing in 1737 (Na Champassak, 1995b). He was succeeded by his son, Chao Sayakoumane, whose reign was long, lasting until his death in 1791. In 1778, however, the Siamese sent an army and successfully took control of Champassak, taking an important Buddhist image back to Bangkok, and making Champassak its vassal (Archaimbault, 1961; Na Champassak, 1995a & b; Baird 2017b). This Buddhist image had been crucial for legitimating the Kingdom of Champassak, and constituting the sovereign territorial power of the Champassak Royal House (Baird, 2017b).

Champassak royals continued, however, to be influential, as following the Mandala system, they were allowed considerable autonomy provided that they pay tribute and remain loyal to the King of Siam. To demonstrate their loyalty, the King of Champassak periodically pledged allegiance, often with a water oath in Bangkok (*saban nam* in Lao) (Baird, 2013). This changed, however, after the French arrived in the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period, arguably the last king of Champassak, Chao Khamsouk or Chao Nyouthithamathone, the 11th king of Champassak, was the first Champassak sovereign to encounter French explorers (Garnier, 1996; Harmand, 1997). He was still king when the French took control of his territories east of the Mekong River to establish colonial Laos in 1893. He died, however, in 1899 (Na Champassak, 1995a; Baird, 2013), a few years before Champassak proper, on the west bank of the Mekong, was ceded to the French in 1905 (Breazeale, 2002; Baird, 2013). He was eventually succeeded by his son, Chao Nyouy or Chao Raxadanai. As mentioned earlier, however, the French did not recognize the status of Champassak like they did Luang Phrabang, and when Chao Raxadanai died in 1945, he was succeeded by his son Chao Boun Oum Na Champassak, who became a powerful right-wing politician—including Prime Minister for a short period—in Laos. Chao Sone Bouttarobol, another important member of the Champassak Royal House, also became a royal advisor to the Lao King in Luang Phrabang (Baird 2017a), indicating how the Champassak Royal House had become at least somewhat subservient to the Luang Phrabang Royal House. Finally, however, Chao Boun Oum and much of the Champassak Royal House were forced to flee to Thailand in 1975 and then to France in 1976. In 1981 Chao Boun Oum finally passed away in Paris (Na Champassak, 1995a & b).

Fleeing Laos

In May 1975, communist-incited student protests against right-wing Ministers aligned with the Royal Government of Laos created considerable political turmoil, providing an opportunity for the Pathet Lao communists to gradually take full control of the state (Evans, 2002). Thus, members of the Champassak royal family, who were mainly politically right-wing, and thus enemies of the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese backers, largely fled to Thailand. Chao Sisouk Na Champassak, the Minister of both Defense and Finance in Vientiane, was one of the first to leave on May 10, 1975, after he was sentenced to death by a Pathet Lao tribunal (Evans, 2002). Others, including the patriarch of the family, Chao Boun Oum, fled to Thailand soon after. Chao Boun Oum had a house in the city of Ubon Ratchathani, in northeastern Thailand, and stayed there for a short period before continuing onto Bangkok and then France as a high-profile political refugee. Some Na Champassak family members stayed along the border to fight against communist forces in Laos (Baird, 2012). A smaller number remained in Laos, albeit without any status as Champassak royals. Some were imprisoned in so-called ‘re-education’ (*seminar* or *samana* in Lao) camps in remote parts of the country (Na Champassak, 2010; Thammakhanty, 2004); others avoided detention and took low profiles. Many with ‘reactionary’ last names such as ‘Na Champassak’ changed them.

In 1981 Chao Sanhprasith (Chao Sith) Na Champassak, a graduate of the prestigious military school in Paris, Saint Cyr (see Figure 2), and a former full colonel in the Royal Lao Army, was able to escape from Laos. He snuck across the Mekong River to Thailand and became leader of the Lao armed resistance to communism in southern Laos, based in Ubon Ratchathani Province. At the time, the Government of Thailand was supportive of right-wing and neutralist military resistance groups, which were opposed to the communist government in Laos (Baird, 2012). Later Chao Sith cooperated closely with the United Front for the Liberation of Laos (UFLL), popularly known as the *Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat*, or simply *Neo Hom*, a 1981-established resistance organization under the leadership the former Hmong General of the Royal Lao Army, Vang Pao, and Thonglith Chokbengboun, an ethnic Lao former general from Laos. Chao Sith continued in that position until the Thai government forced him to leave Thailand for France in 1989 as a result of Thailand’s change in position regarding Laos, including the adoption of , Chatchai Choonhavan’s (the Thai Prime Minister), “battlefields to marketplace” policy⁶ (Baird, 2012). As resistance activities against communist Laos rapidly declined along with Thai government support, a few members of the Na Champassak family went underground in Thailand. At least one of those reportedly believed that his spirit was linked to Laos and Thailand and that he should therefore not flee to Europe. Most, however, ended up in France, where many continued to support efforts to overthrow the communist regime in Laos, including through using auspicious Buddha images to support such efforts (Baird, 2017b). Indeed, Buddhism has also long been linked to political power elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1984; Swearer 2004; Holt 2009).

⁶ After August 1988, when Chatchai Choonhavan was elected as Prime Minister of Thailand, he adopted a policy of reconciliation with former communist foes in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.



Figure 2: Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak as Saint Cyr cadet in Paris France, circa 1962. Photo Courtesy of Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champassak.

Bringing the Buddhist Images Together

Buddhist belief and practice have been crucial for the Champassak Royal House since its inception, and this remains the case for many first generation exiled Champassak royals, including Chao Keuakoun, Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong, Chao Singto and many others. It is thus not surprising that Buddhist images sometimes hold important places in ritual practices and associated imaginaries. Indeed, images often go beyond simply religion, and in particular, they represent potent material legitimating symbols of royal power, including magical power and territorial sovereignty (Baird, 2017b).

According to some, Chao Nyouthithamathone had either three or possibly seven small crystal Buddhist images in his house at the time he was King. However, upon his death these images were dispersed to various close relatives. Later, when Laos became communist, these Buddhist images were dispersed around the world. Legend has it, however, that if all these sacred Buddhist images could be brought together in a single space, the Champassak Royal House would regain its former power and glory in Champassak. The prophesy is not known by a large number of people, but many of those within the inner circle of the family are well aware of it. Nobody, however, has been able to unify the family enough to bring all the Buddhist images together. Nobody even knows where all these powerful Buddhist images are located (Baird, 2017b).

Although the crystal Buddhist images in question are relatively small in size, they are considered priceless. I know where some are, but they are so valuable and important to those who control them that I cannot reveal who has them or where they are located. Those who possess them fear that if this information were to become widely known, they could become vulnerable to robbers. The images themselves are believed to be powerful, in a magical sort of a way. The possessors also believe that the Lao communist government is searching for them because they want to tap the power of these Buddhist images (Baird, 2017b). As one man put it, “The Lao government has been looking hard for them [the Buddhist image]. They really want to get them.”

The belief in the spatial convergence of these Buddhist images as a way of returning power to Champassak royals is both symbolically and materially important. On the one hand, if the conditions existed that could bring them materially together, that would indicate that members of the royal house have been able to cooperate sufficiently to do so, an important achievement indeed. Secondly, however, it is deemed important to have the Buddhist images physically together in order to magically restore spatial power to the Champassak Royal House (see Baird, 2017b). The politics and spatiality of exile politics and religion intersect, in ways that somewhat parallels what McConnell (2013) writes about in relation to the politics of reincarnation amongst exiled Tibetans in India. In particular, Buddhist temples in France and the United States have become key spaces for asserting particular political views, including those linked to royalty, and Buddhism has also played a crucial role in justifying and legitimating political and even military conflict with communists in Laos (Baird, 2012).

Investigating Champassak Royal Space Outside Laos

I—as a just 51-year old White male Canadian who lived in Laos and Thailand for more than 20 years, and speaks Lao and Thai fluently—have been investigating the historical and present-day circumstances of the Champassak Royal House since first visiting France in 2005 (See Baird, 2007; 2009; 2010; 2013; 2017a; 2017b), including conducting archival research, examining historical documentation, and pursuing ethnographic research, including participating in family activities, and conducting interviews with people in Laos, Thailand, the United States, Canada and France. I stayed a month with Chao Keuakoun and Chao Nang Patthouma in 2009,⁷ so I already knew them well. I had planned to return for more interviews in May 2013, but when I phoned Chao Keuakoun a few months beforehand, he suggested that I instead visit in August for a month in order to attend the 300th anniversary celebration, and also to meet and conduct interviews with various family members in the Paris area.

There were initially two events planned. One was a Buddhist religious ceremony, and the other was a family reunion. However, upon my arrival in Paris, I learned that the religious ceremony had been postponed. However, the family reunion was still scheduled. Members of the family had decided that the family reunion should come first, and that the religious event could follow later. The circumstances, however, soon indicated that bringing the family together was no simple matter. Moreover, 300 custom-made Buddhist images were ordered from Thailand to sell at cost to family members so as to materially and spiritually represent the 300th anniversary. Thus, the religious event had been delayed until the end of the year, since it would take more time before the Buddhist images could be produced and delivered.

The Reunion

The reunion was held as planned on Sunday, August 4th, at the Missions Étrangères de Paris on Rue du Bac, in the heart of Paris. It might seem odd to organize such a gathering of devout Buddhists at one of the oldest Catholic foreign missions in Paris, which was established in 1659, and has sent 4,200 mission priests to Asia and North America over the last 350 years. But Patthouma—herself a Buddhist—has a senior management position at the Mission. Thus, she was able to gain use of the facilities for free. The gathering brought together over 100 family members, mainly from France but also a few from Belgium and Switzerland. Many relatives from the United States and Thailand sent their best wishes, but none attended.

Many of those who participated use the last name of Na Champassak, but other family names, such as Phothisan, Phothirath, Phouangphet, Sinhbandith, Vongsavath, Ngonphetsy, Vouti, Bouttarobol, and Singratchaphak were also represented. The idea was to bring the family together, regardless of surname, so as to reconnect the older generation, and help the newer generation know who their relatives are. It was hoped

⁷ Chao Keuakoun is one of the sons of Chao Silome Na Champassak, a child of the head of the Champassak Royal House, Chao Nyouthithamathone; and Chao Nang Patthouma was the daughter of Lt. Gen. Phasouk Soratchaphak, whose father was Anya Louang Sing and another daughter of Chao Nyouthithamathone, and Chao Heuane Nying Bounlonh, one of the daughters of Chao Raxadanai, the head of the Na Champassak Royal House until 1946, and the oldest son of Chao Nyouthithamathone.

that the event would strengthen existing family relations, so that the Na Champassak family—broadly defined—would continue to be relevant. The fact that “regardless of last name” was mentioned by Chao Keuakoun became significant for me when he explained the circumstances. Indeed, there has been some sensitivity regarding the place of relatives who do not hold the last name ‘Na Champassak’, the most prestigious sir name in the family. As Chao Keuakoun put it, in Lao, “We need to determine who should be using the term “*chao*” (royal), as some do, and who should not. There should be a committee of members of different lines of the family to verify and decide what titles they should use.” Indeed, over the years I have heard of a number of cases where ethnic Lao people living in France and the United States have fraudulently used the ‘Na Champassak’ name.

Chao Keuakoun opened the workshop on the morning of August 4th, after some debate a few days earlier regarding how he should position himself and his accomplishments during the reunion. He eventually took the advice of his wife and children and played down his role. He represented the event as a chance for representatives of different family lines to make short presentations about their connections, and for members of the younger generation to consider what it meant to them, as primarily French speakers, to be members of the Champassak royal family in France. He also explained that he hoped that family members would connect with their relatives, not so much in Laos, but particularly in Europe and the United States. That is, the space that he was trying to constitute largely excludes Laos, his land of birth and ancestry. He stated, however, that, “We are doing this event in France. It is not our land, but we are doing it to remember our ancestors.” Yet the center of Champassak royalty has indeed shifted to France.

I was there because of my long-term interest in southern Laos and the Na Champassak family. Apart from wanting to make connections with family members in order to conduct interviews, and hoping to expand my knowledge of history and family connections, I was specifically interested in learning more about the dynamics of a royal family without any standing in its country of origin, Laos. I was interested in how they would come together to celebrate their 300th anniversary in a place such as Paris, somewhere that many would consider ‘out of place’ for Champassak Royal House members. I wanted to investigate more about what it was like to be royals without land or territory, or non-state royals.

James Scott’s scholarship regarding ‘non-state spaces’ (Scott, 2009; 1998) is worth briefly discussing here even if it relates to fundamentally different circumstances than those that I address here. Scott (2009) was interested in upland peoples in Southeast Asia who were fundamentally hostile to lowland states and tried to variously evade them, thus being defined as “non-state” peoples. Firstly, I reject the binary of absolute state and non-state implicit in this terminology, and like other scholars (Jonsson, 2010; 2012; Baird, 2013; Lee, 2015), I recognize that upland peoples in Southeast Asia, while certainly sometimes having tried to evade states, also have a long history of frequently attempting to gain legitimacy and power via creating connections with lowland states, something that Scott does not sufficiently acknowledge. Crucially, when I write of non-state royals, I am not implying that these royals are non-state due to their attempts to evade states. Indeed, their positions as royals were initially constituted through their relationships with states. However, they are non-state in a different way,

as they are royals who have been politically and physically severed from the states that originally constituted their royal positions, particularly in their case, Laos. Therefore, I am interested in cases where royals do not have official status, and I am interested in how the Champassak Royal House, a non-state royal family in exile, conceptualizes and produces space. How do they attempt to produce and reproduce it? And what challenges do they face?

Taking history seriously, and positioning myself to be able to conduct ethnographic research with the Na Champassak family, I was grateful for the opportunity to stay with Keuakoun, Patthouma, and members of their family, as their modest suburban house can be regarded as the center of Na Champassak organizing efforts in France. Although my French is quite limited, this did not impede me much, as Keuakoun and Patthouma prefer to speak Lao. In fact, over the course of my month in France, I did not speak more than a few words of French or English. I became immersed in the social world of the Champassak Royal House, spending hours each day talking with Chao Keuakoun in his back yard and traveling around greater Paris to meet various family members and associates.

Although I had little sense of the particular politics associated with the 300th anniversary upon my arrival in Paris, I already had some understanding of the family, although family politics were more contentious than I realized. There are questions about who has the right to represent the Na Champassak Royal House, rank and recognition, and about how Champassak royals should ‘perform royalty’ or otherwise represent themselves in particular spaces, especially public ones in France. Indeed, it became clear that their performances shift depending on audience, with members of the Champassak Royal House, commoners in the Lao diaspora, and regular French society requiring different types of performances. I learned much more about controversies within the family regarding positionality and associated spatiality, some of which are discussed here.

During the morning session of the reunion workshop, elderly members of different branches of the family stood up in front of the group one after another and gave five-minute presentations about how their particular family lines were connected. There was an emphasis on genealogy. Virtually all these short presentations were made in Lao, the language of choice for the older generation. Notably, however, when we reconvened after a buffet Lao lunch in the courtyard of the mission, the participants were divided into two groups. One, consisting of mainly older people, continued discussing family connections and history in Lao. The other, however, was convened in French. All of those in the second group were young people who had spent most or all of their lives in France. The organizers hoped that a discussion geared toward them, and conducted in a language that they could easily express themselves in, would reinforce the royal identities of the younger generation. In other words, it was hoped that this work could help strengthen Champassak royal identities in France.

I stayed with the older people, but in the late afternoon both groups were brought together so that each could provide a summary (in both Lao and French) of the main points discussed in their respective groups. The older generation emphasized the need to strengthen family ties, but interestingly, one member of the family with another last name apart from Na Champassak suggested that the name of the “Champassak Association” in France be changed to the “Chao Soisysamouth Association”, so as to name

the association after the first king of Champassak. The idea was to be more inclusive of those family members who do not have the Na Champassak family name. However, others in the family, especially those with Na Champassak as their last name, rejected the idea. This is despite the fact that the name Na Champassak was only given as a title by the King of Siam, Rama VI, at the request of Chao Sakpraseuth, in 1907, when he was living and working as a government official in Siam. Na Champassak was only transformed into a last name in Laos in 1943, when everyone in Laos had to adopt surnames.⁸

There was also discussion about deepening the family's understanding of history, including learning from past mistakes, and one elderly woman suggested that more effort should be made to relearn the royal language (*raxasap* in Lao), which was once used in Champassak by commoners when speaking with Champassak royals. The organizers also asked whether there should be regular family meetings like this one in the future. There seemed to be consensus amongst the older generation that there should be.

The summary presented by a member of the younger generation group who could speak both French and Lao well indicated, however, that younger members have much more ambiguous feelings about what being a member of the Champassak royal family means. Although the most ambivalent of the younger generation did not attend the event, some younger people who did participate expressed skepticism about the relevance of



Figure 3: 300th year anniversary of Champassak Royal House, Missions Étrangères de Paris on Rue du Bac, Paris, France, August 4, 2013. Photo by Ian G. Baird.

⁸ Grant Evans, *pers. comm.*, Vientiane, May 12, 2014.

identifying as members of a royal family when their everyday lives were no longer connected to Laos. Some stated that they only attended the event due to pressure from their parents. However, the younger generation did agree to establish a 'comité de liaison' to investigate ways to strengthen family ties. Indeed, the summaries of the two groups clearly indicated the generation gap that has fast developed, and its significance in relation to the future prospects for the Champassak Royal House in France. While some members of the younger generation, especially those who still speak some Lao, such as Chao Champanakhone, a successful dentist in Lyon, expressed interest in strengthening family connections, it was clear from their summaries that many felt somewhat confused regarding the significance of their royal ancestry.

At the very end of the event, just before a photo was taken of all the participants in the courtyard (See Figure 3), older members of the family stood in front of the group and sang a Lao nationalist song that was apparently a favorite of Chao Boun Oum, titled *Teuan chai Lao* (Lao, be Prepared!). The intention was to instill a sense of family solidarity, and Lao nationalism, but it was unclear to me to what extent this strategy was successful, at least with the younger generation. Or was it simply symbolic of the generation gap? Still, overall, the older generation seemed to generally feel that the event had gone well.

August 4th, 2013 was a productive day for me, but it was just the beginning of my month in France.

Positioning Royalty

Positioning oneself in relation to rank, recognition and ritual is important for members of the Na Champassak family, as it is for most royals. Chao Boun Oum was the last leader of the Champassak Royal House in Laos. A Frenchman, Commissaire Parisot, convinced him (Chao Boun Oum later claimed that he was coerced to sign⁹), on the verge of undergoing a serious appendicitis operation in Laos, to sign away the rights of the Royal House of Champassak on August 27, 1946 so that Luang Phrabang could be recognized as the only true royal house in Laos. The French, in turn, agreed that Chao Boun Oum would become Inspector-General of the Kingdom (Evans, 2002; Archaimbault, 1961). It was also agreed that his child would succeed him as the head of the Champassak Royal House. This informal agreement, known as a *modus vivendi*, left Chao Boun Oum's wife and nine children (three girls, six boys)¹⁰ with the understandable claim that they are the only legitimate representatives of the Champassak Royal House. These were also in line with succession rules adopted in Luang Phrabang and Bangkok. Such a principle is, however, much more in line with the way European royals operate than how royals in Southeast Asia did, but considering that Chao Boun Oum's children all grew up outside of Laos, where they were sent to study as young children, this gravitation to European norms should come as little surprise.

It seems certain that most or all family members would be happy to abide by this principle, but in reality Chao Boun Oum's children have largely chosen to not take on the

⁹ Chao Heuane Nying Ninhdasak Na Champassak, *pers. comm.*, May 25, 2014.

¹⁰ The children are Champhonesak, Saysanasak, Halusak, Simoungkhounsak, Vannahtsak, Vongdasak, Ninhdasak, Keosondarasak and Keomanisak.

type of leadership roles that others in the family who want to keep the Champassak Royal House active and vibrant within the Lao diaspora community in France desire. It is not that Chao Boun Oum's children never attend community, family or religious gatherings, but they tend to stay outside of the center of community events. This may be because the children all went to school overseas, mainly in France, where they became accustomed to foreign languages and ways. They only visited Laos during school holidays. Thus, most have become quite Westernized and are less comfortable in Lao social situations compared to others who grew up in Laos. For example, when I spent time with Chao Halusak, one of Chao Boun Oum's sons, in Paris in 2009, he preferred to speak English with me, even though I am quite fluent in Lao. He can speak Lao, but not as well as he speaks either English or French. These circumstances have resulted in some tensions. One woman from a different line of the Champassak Royal House expressed deep frustration with Chao Boun Oum's children at a meeting a few days following the reunion event. As she emotionally put it, "The children of Chao Boun Oum have not done nearly as much for the community as Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong!"¹¹

In addition, the Champassak Royal House, as with other royals from Southeast Asia, has never been simply linear in terms of succession. Instead, historically succession shifted between different branches of the family (Na Champassak 1995a & b). Thus, after Chao Boun Oum died, and Chao Sith escaped from Laos, Chao Sith, as a half-brother of Chao Boun Oum, and a son of Chao Raxadanai, Chao Boun Oum's father, became the de facto head of the family in France until his death from cancer in 1999. Later, his wife, Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong, the half-sister of her husband,¹² was elected at a family meeting in Paris to publicly represent the family. Fifty-five of the 58 people present voted for her, with three abstaining, apparently because they thought that Chao Champhonesak, Chao Boun Oum's eldest son, who lives in Switzerland, should take the position. Although the children of Chao Boun Oum were invited to the meeting, they chose not to or were unable to attend, thus leaving the rest of the family little option but to elect someone else.

Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong continues to represent the family, with Chao Keuakoun serving as her de facto secretary, and while living in Lyon, she spends considerable amounts of time in Paris. When there, she stays with Keuakoun and Patthouma. Chao Keuakoun has also taken a leading role (he is presently the treasurer) in managing a Theravada Buddhist temple in Paris, Vat Phouttaphilom. This temple is well known for its close ties to the Champassak Royal House (Baird, 2012), and has also been important for increasing his position within the Lao Buddhist community in Paris, and for producing Champassak Lao royal space, albeit in limited ways. But it is certainly the most explicit public Na Champassak space in France, and Buddhist rituals conducted there are often led by Chao Keuakoun (See Figure 4). Moreover, many of the everyday duties of the Champassak Royal House, such as attending funerals, weddings, and religious ceremonies are done by Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong and Chao Keuakoun, thus putting them at the center of the Champassak Royal House, in terms of publicly performing Champassak royalty. Indeed, these performances involve a wide array of practices, from controlling the temple, to leading Buddhist chants and rituals, to

¹¹ Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong is one of the daughters of Chao Raxadanai and one of his many wives.

¹² It is common for Lao royals to marry close relatives within their own royal families (Evans, 2010).

organizing elite high-class events, to preparing invitations and letters of condolence using specially designed letterhead. In addition, at funerals and weddings, they are always seated at special tables in the front of the event, and at religious ceremonies the top members of the Royal House are situated at the front. Champassak royals, especially the women, also frequently wear traditional Champassak clothes when attending public events. All of these practices are important for performing Champassak royalty as non-state royals without sovereign territory.



Figure 4: Khou Ba Ea Sinbandith, performing a Theravada Buddhist ritual at Vat Phouttaphilom (Champassak Royal House temple) in Paris, France. Photo taken by Ian G. Baird, August 2013.

There is also contestation surrounding who has the right to perform different aspects of Champassak royalty. For example, some members of the family believe that only Chao Boun Oum's children should represent the Champassak Royal House. Indeed, upon my arrival in Paris I soon found myself sending e-mails to and talking on the phone with one of those skeptical of the motivations behind organizing the 300th year anniversary reunion. He was not particularly direct in criticizing the event, but it soon became evident that he was concerned that the reunion was being organized to increase the legitimacy of Chao Keuakoun and his close relatives. In the end, however, this person did attend. There is little evidence, however, that Chao Keuakoun was trying to increase his own stature, and those of his close relatives.

In any case, I learned that protocol was still a touchy topic. In particular, Chao Boun Oum's oldest son, Chao Champhonesak (referred to by family as Chao Noi), was sent an invitation letter by Chao Keuakoun for the event, just like other family members. He was not, however, happy when he received the invitation, as he apparently expected a special personalized invitation, as some consider him to be 15th in the Champassak royal line,¹³ and he was insulted when he only received a standard invitation like everyone else.¹⁴ Chao Keuakoun felt that all the people were family so that it should not have been problematic for everyone to receive the same type of invitation. Later Chao Champhonesak complained that he needed more lead-up notice because he is a medical doctor in Switzerland and cannot take time off without three to six-months advance notice. However, most family members believe that this was just an excuse not to attend, since Chao Champhonesak was informed well in advance. In the end, he did not show up to the reunion, and he even urged his siblings to not attend.

Another contentious point that apparently put Chao Keuakoun in the bad books of Chao Champhonesak and his siblings related to Chao Boun Oum's wife, Bouaphanh, who was a commoner from Kengkoke District, Savannakhet Province. According to standard Champassak royal protocol, she should be known as *Sonh*, the title for a commoner woman who is the first wife of the head of the Champassak royal family (Na Champassak 1995b). However, when Chao Keuakoun wrote *Mome*, the title for a commoner woman who marries a Champassak royal, on invitations that he helped prepare for her funeral earlier in 2013, her children objected, stating that the invitations should refer to her as *Chao Nying* (something like princess), the highest royal title possible for a woman in the Champassak Royal House, even though doing so is technically incorrect following Champassak royal protocol. In the end, the invitations that Chao Keuakoun prepared were discarded and new ones were prepared by Bouaphanh's children, with the corrections included that they desired.

Another issue that emerged during the month I was in France related to how members of the family should position themselves in French society. On the one hand, Vongsavann Sinbandhit, the son of Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em, the first but an illegitimate child of Chao Boun Oum,¹⁵ has tried to recreate certain aspects of

¹³ See, for example, <http://members.iinet.net.au/~royalty/states/asia/champassak.html>, accessed March 7, 2014.

¹⁴ I too unintentionally insulted Chao Champhonesak a few years earlier when I e-mailed him and referred to him as 'Chao Noi'.

¹⁵ According to some, Chao Boun Oum's wife, Bouaphanh, did not fully accept Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em as her husband's child, even though Chao Boun Oum apparently did. Thus, she was not included in the funeral

Champassak royal practice in public situations in France, at least partially in order to play up his royal Champassak heritage in France, since he has right-wing political aspirations there. In 2005 when his daughter married a Frenchman, the bride and groom rode special horses (Figures 5 and 6), ones designed to replace the elephants that were used in Laos for important royal weddings in the past, such as the wedding of Chao Sith and Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong in 1960 (Na Champassak 1995a; Evans 2009) (See Figures 7 and 8). The bride—who was referred to as a ‘princess’ in French, even though some contest that title—also wore a small specially produced crown (See Figure 6), and other ceremonial aspects of royal Champassak marriages were performed, thus publicly producing royal Champassak space. Some members of the family were unhappy with what they saw as an excessive attempt to perform Champassak royalty in public. The parents of the bride, however, felt that they had a legitimate right to follow these royal customs, since they were in the direct line of Chao Boun Oum. They wanted to produce royal spaces. Others felt that since Vongsavann is relatively wealthy, it was not inappropriate for him to spend his money on such a wedding ceremony for his daughter. To them, wealth and the appropriateness to perform royalty in public are strongly linked. Still, part of the tension relates to the fact that Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em has only been partially accepted by Chao Boun Oum’s children from his wife, Bouaphanh, since Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em was born out of wedlock. There were a lot of bad feelings, which led Vongsavann to give up the position he held for many years as a sort of secretary for the Champassak Royal House. In 2013, Vongsavann still felt insulted by the criticisms, and was bitter about the refusal of Chao Boun Oum’s other children to attend his daughter’s wedding at the time.



Figures 5 and 6: Blaise Berdah (left), in marriage ceremony of Mariny (right), daughter of Vongsavann Sinhbandhit, Paris, France, July 17, 2005. Photo courtesy of Vongsavann Sinhbandhit.

book prepared for Chao Boun Oum’s funeral. However, when Bouaphanh died in 2013, her children allowed Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em to sit with them at the funeral.



Figure 7: Elephants taking Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak and Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champasaak for wedding in Champassak, 1960. Photo courtesy of Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champassak.



Figure 8: Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak and Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong, Champassak, Laos, 1960. Chao Boun Oum Na Champassak is on far right. Photo courtesy of Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champassak.

Some have also complained that Vongsavann has referred to himself as ‘*Chao Vongsavann*’. Some believe that because his father was a commoner and his mother was a royal, he should only be known as *Anya*, a lesser royal title. Others argue that it is appropriate for him to refer himself as *Chao*, since his mother is *Chao Heuane Nying*. I did not observe him referring to himself as *Chao*, but others claimed he did so in the past. The politics surrounding the use of titles to constitute rank is one point of frequent contestation. But I also heard many people in the family lament the fact that there is no way to legally prevent people from using whatever titles they want, since doing so is not against the law in France, since the Champassak Royal House is not officially recognized in France. Indeed, there is no sovereign power, at least in relation to this family, to prevent people from using the titles they prefer.

The Champassak Royal House has negotiated its positionality in relation to the Luang Phrabang Royal House, which is also centered in Paris, and thus shares many of the same spaces, although the two royal houses have separate Buddhist temples, which emphasizes the importance of Buddhism in legitimating royalty from Laos. Still, at events where both royal houses are present, those from Champassak always agree to play a secondary role to Luang Phrabang royals. Indicative of this positionality, in Laos both considered their families to have been part of *Ratsavong Hom Khao* (Royal House of the White Parasol), but today in France only the Luang Phrabang royals use that term. The Na Champassaks just use *Ratsavong*, a somewhat lesser but still prestigious title. While some competition between the two royal houses remains, each also needs the other to gain legitimacy within the Lao diaspora, and they tend to do that by nostalgically referring to the past, as well as appealing to those who desire to maintain their high class status from Laos, and also to commoners through links to Lao cultural and Lao national identity.

Still, one source of disagreement within the Na Champassak family relates to the use of the term *Ratsavong*. Some in Champassak’s first family feel that only *Chao Boun Oum*’s children should use the title, but others have as well, such as *Chao Ophat Na Champassak*, a prominent member of the family who lived in Virginia, in the United States. He used *Ratsavong Champassak* to refer to himself until he passed away a few years ago. As *Chao Keuakoun* put it, “Now that we are in foreign countries, we cannot stop people from using different royal titles.” *Chao Keuakoun* also feels that if the term *Ratsavong* stops being used, “the family will die out”. For him, it is important to continue using it.

One noteworthy example of how the question of rank within the family has been dealt with relates to *Phonxay Sinhbandith*, who came some years ago to ask *Chao Keuakoun* for official recognition that he is part of *Ratsavong Champassak*, but *Chao Keuakoun* said he could not oblige, since he does not have an official stamp for creating formal documents.¹⁶ In other words, in his view, he cannot fully perform royalty. He also explained that an official committee within the Champassak Royal House has not been established to determine who should be allowed to represent the family. These circumstances suggest that the Champassak Royal House, or at least elements within it, are somewhat uncertain about their own legitimacy and authority, as one would expect

¹⁶ It is rumored that another member of the Champassak royal family in Paris has it.

that they would have made the stamp and created the appropriate committee had they felt confident in their own positionality.

During my time in France another member of the family told me that despite being very proud of his Champassak heritage, he felt that family members should not flaunt their royal status. For example, even though he is a *Chao*, or designate royal,¹⁷ he chooses not to refer to himself using that title. According to him, “It depends on other people if they want to recognize my royal status or not.” He feels that because the Champassak royals have no official positions or guaranteed sources of wealth, as they would if they controlled sovereign power, they have ended up having to work in all kinds of occupations, including ones that he feels are not sufficiently prestigious, such as working as waiters. Therefore, he thinks that it would demean the Na Champassak name if people in such positions were to advertise their royal heritage. As he put it, “What will people think if commoners make snide comments when speaking to a royal who is a waiter? What if someone says, prince, please bring me another glass of water?” Here we see how class relations in France, and social status and prestige in general, are causing some to feel like ‘performing Champassak royalty’ in public spaces should only be done when the appropriate prerequisites are in place. Some are concerned about being shamed by not having the social status or wealth deemed appropriate for representing the family in French society, where, for example, expensive clothing is deemed necessary for those with high status.

The Influence of Host Governments

Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) has usefully argued that transnational politics, in which I include the politics of exiled royalty, is highly dependent on the political institutions in both the sending and recipient countries of political refugees, and that global norms as well as the institutions and networks involved. Indeed, the performance of Champassak royalty are important legitimating exercises linked to transnational politics. In a related way, Fiona McConnell (2011; 2012) has examined the three-way intersection between the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, the government of India, and the population of Tibetan ‘citizens’ living in India. Indeed, legitimating ideas about Tibetan Buddhism and governance create important links between righteous sovereignty and the legitimacy of homeland territorial claims (McConnell, 2009a; 2009b). I also wish to make a similar point, but in a quite different context, since my goal is to consider the links of royals-in-exile rather than governments-in-exile. While royals are always linked to particular spaces, at least in memory, they are not linked as explicitly to governance as governments-in-exile typically are. These issues are arguably related but actually represent quite different types of sovereign power over and in relation to states. What I have noticed in relation to Champassak royals is that people see the transferability of Champassak royalty across space and borders differently, something that parallels how governments-in-exile are often variously viewed and understood.

The positionality of refugees is greatly affected by the politics of the actual sovereign powers of the spaces where they reside. Thus, it is crucial to consider the

¹⁷ Royal Lao houses are supposed to have royal rules (*kot monthian ban* in Lao), but the Champassak royals do not, although Chao Keuakoun would like to develop a set of rules.

positionality of the government of France. For one, France is a Republic, without a King, and many French are deeply proud of their historic achievement of getting rid of the monarchy during the French revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. This certainly contributes to some members of the Champassak Royal House feeling trepidation about identifying themselves with royalty, even if they are not French royalty. This is especially true for younger family members, and I heard that even Chao Keuakoun's children have admonished French friends for referring to them using royal titles. Within French society, many feel that there is little to be gained from identifying with a marginal royal family from Laos. However, it is also true that some elite groups in France have shown respect to the Lao Royal Houses.

Certainly the situation would be different if the Champassak royals lived in Great Britain, where royalty generally receives more respect.¹⁸ Furthermore, different governments variously approve of, condone and support governments-in-exile. In France, for example, Lao refugees who arrived after 1975 soon learned that certain forms of political activism were unacceptable to the French government. For example, in 1976 a former right-wing Prime Minister of Laos, Phouy Sananikone, attempted to establish a government-in-exile. However, the French national government, socialists at the time, told him that this was not acceptable in France, and that those who persisted with promoting such politics would find their processes for gaining French citizenship halted or greatly delayed. They were told that it was appropriate in France to instead establish 'associations'. Thus, the government-in-exile was disbanded, and associations were created, including some that were quite political. The Champassak Association was one of those, and it raised funds in the 1980s and 1990s to send to resistance groups fighting against the communist government in Laos. In contrast, the United States government has not attempted to shut down the various Lao governments-in-exile that have been established there since 1975. Thus, they have remained an important staging ground for transnational political activism directed against the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic. More recently, however, it has been notable that some Champassak royals have discouraged family members from joining the various governments-in-exile in the United States. For example, there was criticism when Chao Sisanga Na Champassak, the younger brother of the late Chao Sisouk Na Champassak, became deputy Prime Minister in the Royal Lao Government in Exile (RLGE) in the mid-2000s. Chao Keuakoun confirmed to me that many feel that family members should instead position themselves "above everyday politics". Still, many family members have been variously involved in transnational homeland politics, which represent particular space-making projects on their own right, and also sometimes serve to increase the legitimacy of Lao royals. For example, for many years Chao Keuakoun was deputy head of the European branch of the UFLL. The objective of the UFLL was to overthrow the communist government in Laos and return the country to its circumstances prior to 1975, when the country was a democratic constitutional monarchy. Thus, its goal was to return the monarchy to Laos; thus political activities related to governments-in-exile sometimes allow for opportunities to perform royalty. However, at least more recently, there seems to be a general understanding that keeping low profiles is important because of royal status and the political context associated with being in France. Thus, particular types of

¹⁸ There are apparently no Champassak royals living on British soil.

political/royal space are being created while others are not. There is also an attempt to follow the trend of other constitutional monarchies that are not allowed to directly participate in politics. They consider themselves to be “above politics”, and so keeping out of politics can also be considered to be a way of indirectly performing royalty. This resembles the type of mimicking that McConnell, Moreau and Dittmer (2012) write about in relation to the politics of diaspora attempts to gain political legitimacy.

Conclusions

The ways in which different members of the Champassak Royal House are negotiating their ‘non-state royalness’, including rank and recognition, both in private and public in France, differ markedly, and standards for what is considered appropriate in particular spaces and contexts vary between individuals, factions and generations within the family. But there are presently not any official royal rules (*bot monthien ban* in Lao) for governing such practices in France, making it difficult to resolve these differences. The royals of Champassak previously had—to varying degrees during different periods of time—the power to determine the ‘state of exception’, which is the sovereign’s ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good, following Agamben (2008). Now that they are outside of the territories that constituted them with this privilege, however, they are unable to make much use of their heritage apart from in relation to social hierarchy within the Lao diaspora. Therefore, they can only perform Champassak royalty to a limited extent, depending on both the norms and rules of France, but also in relation to Lao diaspora understandings of Lao royalty and how it should be positioned. Therefore, Champassak royals have had to perform without actually having the power of the sovereign. This should come as little surprise considering the status of so many royals-in-exile, and that the Champassak Royal House is not even the main exiled Lao royal house. Moreover, the royals from Luang Phrabang also face similar challenges. Still, some in the first generation members of the Champassak royal family in France clearly wish that they could again control the territory that would allow them to assert sovereign power as Champassak royals. Moreover, many Champassak royals in France are certainly frustrated with their inability to produce the type of Champassak royal space in France, outside of through a limited number of practices, especially as compared to what was once possible for them in Laos.

In this article I have tried to outline some of the main challenges presently facing members of the Na Champassak Royal House in France, including the micro-politics related to recognition and rank, protocol and positionality within the new spaces that Champassak royals find themselves at present. I see the positionality of Champassak royals in France as a performative struggle that few care about outside the Champassak Royal House and Lao diaspora. In fact, even amongst the Lao diaspora the importance of Champassak royalty is clearly fading, including amongst younger members of the family themselves, who now speak mainly or only French and feel few connections with their royal heritage. While some older members of the Champassak Royal House continue to dream that they will be able to remain significant for hundreds of more years into the future, it would appear that the biggest challenge is to remain relevant out of sovereign space. Although it is noteworthy that the royal family continues to occupy the royal palace (*hong* in Lao) in Champassak Town in Laos, and that the Lao People’s Democratic

Republic government has allowed the family to return the ashes of many important deceased members so that they can be interned in stupas (*that* in Lao) near the old royal temple, Vat Thong, in Champassak, many in France continue to refuse to return to Laos even to visit, and instead pursue the Cold War dream that the Champassak Royal House will one day be able to politically return to the partially-sovereign space (not an independent country, but a place where the Champassak Royal House had partially state-like power) it came from, and constituted by, Champassak. However, political barriers are unlikely to allow any politically meaningful return to Champassak in the foreseeable future. This being the case, the family will undoubtedly continue to negotiate these issues into the future, sometimes in public spaces, but mainly in relatively narrow private Lao spaces in France, such as people's houses and at the Buddhist temple in France that is considered to be especially linked to Champassak royalty.

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Nan Zhao Invasions and Buddha idols of Northern Thailand and Laos in the 7th to 9th Centuries

David Lempert¹

Abstract

One of the mysteries of the history of the early Tai migrations into Thailand and Laos as well as of the arrival of Buddhism in both countries centers on the links of the Tai peoples to the Yunnan (China) based empire of Nan Zhao in the late 7th to the end of the 9th century and its invasions of northern Thailand and Laos. This article focuses on the available evidence of this historical legacy and seeks to identify which aspects of the history might now be corroborated and where to search for further evidence. While it may be possible to confirm the path of some of the invasions, the links of ancient Tai legends to Nan Zhao may simply be markers of invasions and alliances of that era rather than evidence of movement of Tai peoples into those countries at that time.

Keywords: Nan Zhao, Laos, Thailand, Buddhism, Khun Bulom

Introduction

In 2013, the author visited the ancient earthen walled town of Wiang Lo, north of Phayao City (Phayao Province), in northern Thailand, where an exhibit of ancient Buddha idols and other artifacts found in the town, dating back to the bronze age, was being placed in a small museum around the Wat Si Phon Muang (Sri Pon Muang). Although the town is mostly known as a Tai “mueang” or principality from the 13th century, the Buddha idols in the museum were a mystery. They were unlike other Buddha statues of the north and the faces of the Buddha idols seemed somehow “Western” rather than Asian, with longer, prominent noses and longer faces. It was as if some ethnic group, unknown in the region but following Buddhism, had left them and then disappeared. The statues were not described or dated.

In 2015, the author was in the region again, this time visiting Phrae, some 180 km away, further south. Phrae is also an ancient earthen walled city. Its museum, at the Wat Luang, is also filled with unusual Buddha idols. Here, however, the origin of the city is not described as a 13th century Tai *mueang* but is dated much earlier, as the result of an inscription (not displayed) and chronicles of the *wat* (temple or monastery) in the town that describe its founding in the early 9th century, by Nan Zhao, coming on a route from the north. The inscription was found at the Wat Phra Non (“sleeping Buddha”) where the stone Buddha, dated to 874 C.E., is said to be of the Nan Zhao². Unfortunately, there is no way to see the

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² The author of this article uses anthropological methods as the first step in approaching the history on site and how it is viewed today. There are apparently no published sources on this inscription to even confirm the language or script, and none of the scholars in the region whom this author consulted (including the Chiang Mai Ecole Francaise d’Extreme Orient (EFEO)) and two translators of ancient texts in the region are aware of them.

original features of that Buddha for comparison since stucco now encases the original and has transformed it and doubled its size from 3 to 6 meters.

Though the author has only visited a handful of these ancient walled towns in the region coming down the Mekong from Yunnan, China (including Dali in Yunnan, Xieng Khaeng and Suvanna Khom Kham on the left (east) bank of the Mekong in Laos, Chiang Khong³, Chiang Saen, Nan (Chae Haeng), Phayao, and others in Thailand on various rivers branching off of the Mekong, as well as Luang Prabang in Laos), the history of the ancient Nan Zhao empire, from the mid-7th to the early 10th century) and its influence on the area, is largely absent from these sites. At best, chronicles seem to include legends of local leaders from the period, but little seems to confirm or link them.

The history of Nan Zhao is confirmed both by its own chronicles and contemporaneous records of the Han Chinese who engaged in war and alliances with it, but the actual extent of the empire outside of Yunnan and its influences on peoples of the region has largely been speculative and a source of debate. Not even the ethnicity of the ruling group is clear (though it is now thought to be “Bai”, a Tibeto-Burman group, rather than Tai) (Mackerras, 1988; Yu Qing Yang, 2008). Nor are the roles and locations of minorities in the empire very clear, particularly in relation to Tai peoples (though there are some chronicles of movements of the Pyu from Myanmar and of Chinese Han from Chengdu) (Backus, 1981; Luce, 1959; Bin Yang, undated; De Lacouperie, 1970).

Most of the history of northern Thailand and Laos in this period has focused only on a single question: whether or not the Nan Zhao rulers belonged to a Tai group and whether their invasions into northern Laos and northern Thailand constitute an early arrival of the Tai people (and Theravada Buddhism) in competition with the native Mon peoples (then Indianized and Buddhist) and Khmer at the time (Dore, 1987; Jumsai, 1967). The question works backwards in history, starting from the fact that Tai peoples took control of the areas of modern Thailand and Laos in the 13th and 14th centuries and that they adopted Buddhism as their dominant religion. It is essentially a political and a spiritual question that seeks to establish a political claim to territory that is some 500 years earlier than what is currently confirmed and that seeks to provide some certainty to a history and identity that is essentially unknown from between the disappearance of the Red River bronze drum cultures of early peoples (“Dong Son”) in the first century C.E. and the arrival of invading Tai warlords of various Tai groups (Tai Lao, Sukhothai, Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, and others, dating here to about the 13th century and perhaps a century or two earlier for related groups such as the Tai Nung/Zhuang).

Essentially, what we have now is a deductive and nationalistic history of the period with arguments and rebuttals. The Thai and Lao seek to explain and justify their emergence in the areas of Mon peoples in Thailand and Laos. The Bai and other groups in Yunnan seek to explain their origins. The Han Chinese seek to explain their control over minority areas.

Little of this history actually reflects the standard approach to history, which is inductive: starting with the evidence, asking about evidence that is missing, and then drawing conclusions from an objective analysis of the evidence itself using theories and models of

Readers from other disciplines are invited to follow this article using other methods.

³ The author is not aware of any dating of the citadel here. Volker Grabowsky believes it dates only from the 19th century.

identity formation, cultural diffusion and migration. Some authors have started to identify cultural and technological characteristics and markers of the different peoples and have set a basis for beginning such analysis (Lufan, 1989; Lloyd, 2003; Walker, 2012).

This article continues an inductive historical approach starting with analysis of available evidence and context in Thailand and Laos using a variety of cultural geographic and cultural historic analytic methods. The article maps existing evidence of Nan Zhao and of neighboring empires and also weighs the various legends and oral histories in different regions, comparing the stories with each other in an attempt to fill gaps in the record.

The article begins with a summary of what is known from various chronicles about Nan Zhao as well as what is known about other empires in the region at the time and establishes the setting by putting the various peoples and interactions on a map of the region.

The piece then describes the different types of available evidence in Thailand and Laos for examining the history of Nan Zhao and describes the method used by the author for collecting and weighing existing evidence. The article then describes the different physical/archaeological evidence and the anthropological oral history and chronicle evidence that exists and seeks to analyze it.

This evidence is then placed on a map of Thailand and Laos as a basis for discussion and generation and comparison of theories as to the history of the period.

While it may be possible to confirm the path of some of the invasions, the links of ancient Tai legends to Nan Zhao may simply be markers of invasions and alliances of that era rather than evidence of movement of Tai peoples into those countries at that time.

The Setting: Nan Zhao According to Historians

While not much is known about Nan Zhao beyond the records of its kings and wars that can be placed on a map, given that the empire left little archaeological record, there is some record of the technological innovations that gave them an advantage. Less is known about and agreed upon regarding the ethnicity of the Nan Zhao and their relations with various ethnic groups.

Mapping of Nan Zhao

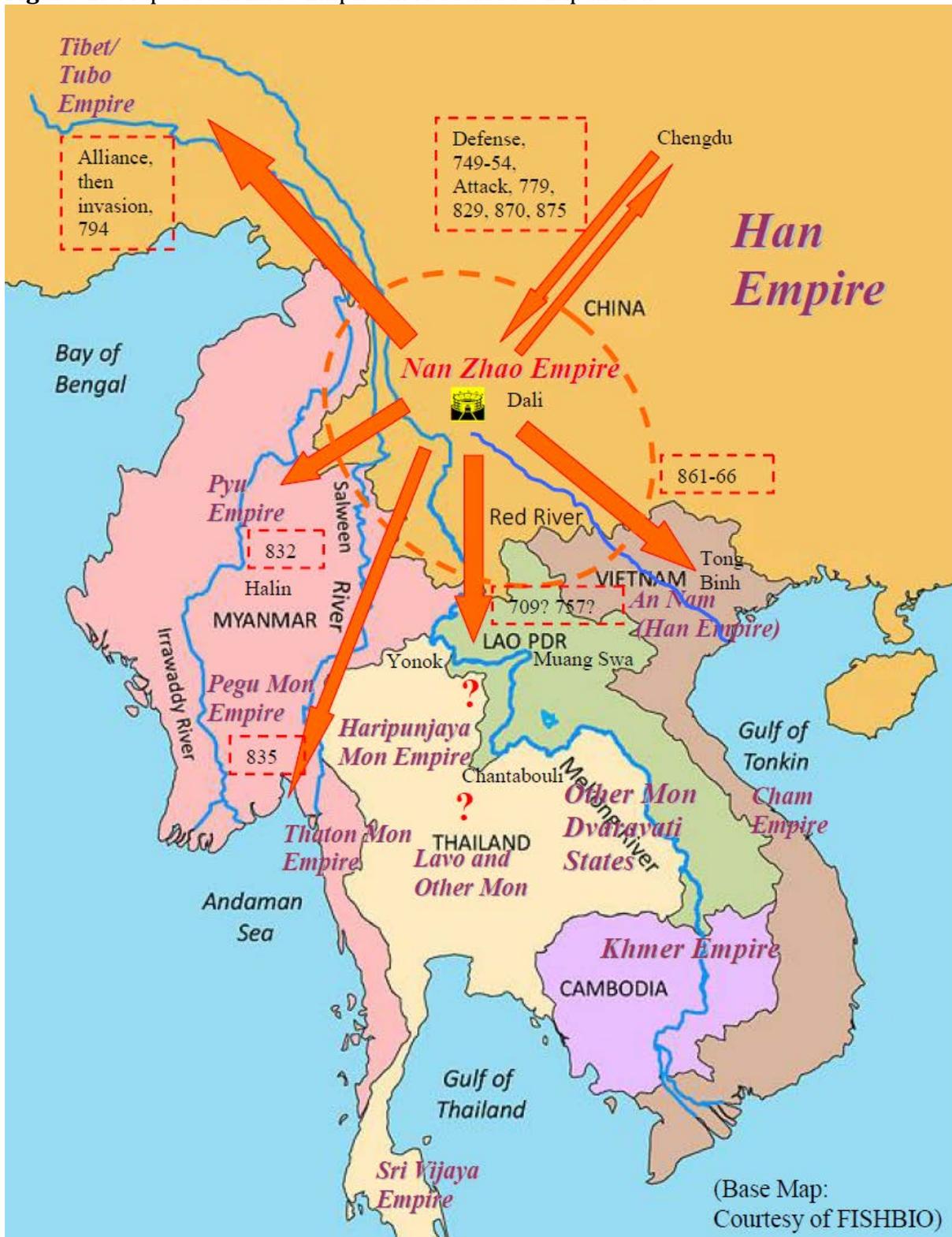
Given the Nan Zhao inscriptions and chronicles and confirmation in Chinese and Tibetan writings, there is general agreement on the military history of Nan Zhao, the names of its kings, and the chronology of leadership and war during the era of the kingdom from 649 to 902 B.C.E. (Backus, 1981; Bin Yang, undated; Luce, 1959).

Figure 1 places this information on a map, with Nan Zhao (Yunnan, today) in the center and with arrows depicting expansion and or wars with neighboring groups (and polities) as well as the various dates recorded. It is almost as if Nan Zhao expanded out in all directions like the spokes of a wheel, looking for areas of conquest. In almost all of the military adventures, the expansion was down rivers and, in the case of the attack on the Han Chinese in the area of contemporary Viet Nam that they controlled, it depended first on expanding against the Han into eastern Yunnan so as to have easy access down the Red River.

Note that this map projection is somewhat distorted in the areas to the west and north and the Bay of Bengal that is in fact much farther from Tibet and Nan Zhao than indicated by this map. The map is chosen for the focus on the Mekong region and a way to get a glimpse into Nan Zhao's actions and strategies in an overall context.

The military history makes it difficult to establish Nan Chao's borders. The reason that Nan Zhao's borders are usually recorded as centering in Yunnan, despite all of these military excursions outside of Yunnan, is that some of the military actions were only short lived or were not until the last third (the last three or four generations) of Nan Zhao. The relationship with Tibet was essentially that of an alliance for a long period, followed only later by invasion. Some histories of Tibet (Tubo) actually see the history in reverse, with Nan Zhao under Tibet from 750 – 794 C.E. The conquest of the Pyu and Thaton was deep into what is now Myanmar but was only 70 years before the collapse of Nan Zhao. The invasion of Viet Nam was quickly turned back by the Chinese and the battles into Han territory to the north were largely a seesaw of victories and losses.

The real mystery, however, is the area of present-day Thailand and Laos. While perhaps there are Chinese or Nan Zhao records of conquests that are unknown to this author, most sources only mention attacks in this area on the "Chen La" Khmer, without any clear listing or dates or territories. There are suggestions of two different dates of attack in various Lao chronicles, including two dates for Muang Swa (Muang Sua) (Luang Prabang) as 707 or 757 C.E. An inscription reported in Phrae and chronicles there, described later in this article, are for dates throughout the 9th century, but this is on the Thai side and not from the Nan Zhao or Chinese. The mention of Chen La territory (using the Chinese name for the pre-Angkorian Khmer) is also a bit of a mystery because almost all of the inscriptions from Chen La, itself, seem to end about the mid-7th century when the Bhava dynasty fell, with the Khmer replaced by Mon peoples throughout Issan (eastern Thailand today, bordered by the Mekong) and the areas north of the Gulf of Thailand, not expanding again until the 9th century, after Nan Zhao had fallen. The possible place the two empires could have met could only be guessed by the extent of Chen La, which is also highly disputed (and discussed further below) (Lempert, n.p.1 and 2).

Figure 1: Map of Nan Zhao Empire in Asia and its Expansion

Nan Zhao Technology

The evidence of Nan Zhao as a military power able to move so quickly and extensively suggests that it possessed some kind of technological advantage over its neighbors. Yet, given the example of other empires in Asia that simply copied the technologies of others to use to their own advantage (such as the Vietnamese copying the Chinese) or that essentially perfected military organization without a productive technological base (the Mongols in 13th century and the Huns and Avars, also conquering on horseback, a few generations before the Nan Zhao), the advantage could also have been largely military (Sun Laichen, 2003).

While the expansion of the Han Chinese, Mon and of the Khmer had come with technological innovations in agriculture and water management including dikes and canals, moats, and water reservoirs that began to increase populations and promote urbanization, there is not much evidence that the capital, Dali, was a major center with large constructions or that the strength of Nan Zhao was fueled by any technological innovation in agriculture or animal husbandry. What the Nan Chao may have perfected was terraced farming that was particularly suited to highlands and perhaps the choice of grains to go with it. Terraced farming is not unique to Nan Zhao. It is found in the Philippines and also in some places in Cambodia and even along the Mekong (in Khammouane province in southern Laos, possibly brought by Tai groups in an unknown era, probably not linked to Yunnan given its absence in connecting areas). But these terraces, still used in Yunnan, may have originated with Nan Zhao in the growth of barley, with the use of water from springs (Manshu Jiaozhu, v. 7, p. 171, cited in Lloyd, 2003, footnote 40).

Though some Buddhist towers and grottos survive around Dali, there is no surviving productive infrastructure on the landscape today or reported by archaeologists and no artifacts or records of innovations that would fuel production (Lufan, 1989). However, it is clear that Nan Zhao had a writing system, using Chinese Han characters, that they had a hierarchy of empire, and that they adopted Buddhism as an organized religion.

What the maps of the empire make clear is that the most rapid and successful expansion was on rivers and that Nan Zhao was vulnerable to attacks on land (where they faced the Han). That suggests they had an advantage in boats and particularly in navigation on mountain rivers.

If the Nan Zhao developed expertise in military and social organization, it is possible that Buddhism, itself, served as a means of solidifying social hierarchy and population control that promoted this empire as it had promoted several earlier Indian empires (the Maura, the Gupta, and the Pallava).

Though Nan Zhao had no direct sea access (and may have been seeking it in its attacks of Myanmar and Viet Nam, down major rivers towards the sea, in order to become a global empire), its borrowing from both China and India suggest that it was positioned between major empires on what would have been the land trade routes of that time, enabling it to use its central position to advantage.

Borders with and Influence on Other Peoples

To put Nan Zhao in context in Southeast Asia also requires some understanding of the strength of all of the different groups with which it might have had military contact. While Figure 1 includes all of the different empires around the borders of Nan Zhao, not all of these borders are historically agreed upon. Some are hotly debated, like the extent of the Khmer incursions into Thailand and Laos. Others are simply accepted on faith without much

examination at all, based on little more than some Chinese naming of regions or much later naming in chronicles, like the areas of Lavo/Lopburi in central Thailand or the Thaton Mon empire to its west. Some are not even clearly recognized as empires, such as the Mon Dvaravati of Isan, that seem to be several regional groups that have what seem to be military citadels, but have only been defined as regional polities in recent work by this author (Lempert, n.p.4).

Table 1 (see page 26) offers a summary of these empires or kingdoms based on a large selection of sources (Baptiste and Zephir, 2009; Brown, 1996; Bellina and Glover, 2008; Coedes, 1968; Chihara, 1996; Gagneux, 1977; Gagneux and Pfeifer, 1970; Gitau, 2001; Goudineau and Lorrillard, 2008; Guillon, 1999; Guy, 2014; Lempert, n.p.1, n.p.2, n.p.3, n.p.4, n.p.5, n.p.6; n.p.7; Lorrillard, 2013; O'Reilly, 2007; Parmentier, 1954; Piriya Krairikish, 2012; Stargardt, 1994; Wales, 1969; Viravong, 1964; Kunstadter, 1967; Le, 1955; Higham, 2002, 1996; Groslier, 1966; Sarassawadee, 2005; Stuart-Fox, 1997; Taylor, 1983; Wyatt, 2003).

The value of considering the history of different groups during different chronological periods before, during and after Nan Zhao rule is that it is a way to test the extent of the Nan Zhao expansion and influence. Rising and falling of a political empire or kingdom that matches the rise and fall of Nan Zhao could suggest that the area was actually under the sovereignty of Nan Zhao, perhaps as a tributary. Falling and then rising in a way opposite to the history of Nan Zhao would suggest that the area was a rival benefitting from Nan Zhao's fall to the Chinese.

What this table notes without clear explanations, is that:

- the expansion of the Haripunjaya Mon Empire from the Ping River in northern Thailand, was somehow contained or turned back in the east on branches of the Mekong during this period;
- the history of the area of Lavo/Lopburi, south of Haripunjaya and accessible on rivers from the east of it, is somehow silent during this era, with reports and construction of new structures ending during (or disappearing from) this period and with reports of the Chen La Khmer on its eastern areas like Sri Thep also ending by 650 C.E., with no return of the Khmer or rise of any other power here during this period. In places like U-Thong, then on the Gulf of Thailand's Coast due to sea levels, the most clearly datable archaeological find from this period is an Arabian coin from the era of Al Mahadi, dated 775 – 785 C.E.
- There are reports of attacks from Java on the Vietnamese coast of the Cham in 757, 774 and 797 C.E., perhaps sensing a weakening or distraction of powers along the coast.

What the comparison suggests, but without direct evidence, is that the Nan Zhao may have exerted control in Thailand to the east of Haripunjaya and possibly even further south to the Gulf, in parallel to the influence it seemed to exert on Myanmar, to the west, down the Salween River to the coast.

The Place of the Tai Peoples

Both the placement and the role of Tai peoples in the Nan Zhao empire remain a matter of speculation with little real evidence. There is a consensus that the bronze era Red River civilization of the Bronze Drum (Dong Son) culture from roughly the 5th century B.C.E. to the 2nd century B.C.E. was that of Tai groups and their influence spread up and down the Mekong River and into the Gulf of Thailand, as well. Whether or not this was an empire and included movement of Tai peoples as some believe, with bronze drums as a symbol of war and control (Lempert, n.p.7) or whether it was just "trade" is debated. By the 11th century,

there is already clear evidence of the movement and/or cultural identification of Tai peoples with specific territories that are reflected in Tai identities and languages that span all the way from northern Viet Nam to northern India and throughout Laos and Thailand (Chamberlain, 1972, 1998; Higham, 2002, 1996; Taylor, 1983). In between, there is speculation that Nan Zhao moved population groups in much the same way that Tai peoples forced relocated communities (as did various Burmese empires) between the 14th and 19th centuries and as they do today (what today is called “resettlement” for the purposes of “economic growth”) or that Tai groups voluntarily moved at that time as part of the leadership of Nan Zhao. There is an historical record of the Nan Zhao moving Chengdu (Han Chinese) artisans to Dali and of relocation of the Pyu to Dali, but this may simply have been part of the practice of conquest of elites and their intellectuals rather than of population relocations.

The Dong Son Tai peoples did originally have technological superiority in the region in navigation as well as advantages in weapons and military organization (archery, spears and bronze swords) but they were matched by China and India and there is no record of any Tai empires for the next 1,000 years. Tai social organization and advance seems to have been disrupted with the conquest of the Red River capital of Co Loa (near Hanoi) by the Han in the late 3rd century B.C.E. that may have led to some migration and dispersal of Tai peoples southwards, including to Indonesia and Malaysia, around that time (Baker, 2002; Evans, 2016).

The common legends of the Tai peoples today, including the Thai/Siamese and Lao (Tai Lao) are of a shared origin from either before or around the time of Nan Zhao (discussed below) in an area slightly south of the Red River but around three other major rivers, in the mountainous area of Dien Bien Phu, now in far northwestern Viet Nam and near to the Lao border in the north. There is access here to the Da and Ma Rivers, with the Ma River paralleling the Red River towards the sea to the east, and to the Ou River to the west, that heads to the area of the Mekong around Luang Prabang. There is an earthen citadel, called Xam Mun, just at the foot of the mountains in Dien Bien Phu, that is suggested as being a citadel of the Tai Lue around the 11th century, but perhaps much earlier since there are Dong Son type bronze drums in the area, and potentially also from the time of Nan Zhao. There has been no archaeological examination of the citadel, itself. The mountains and valleys in the area of Muong Tan⁴ and Oi Nu, near the Nam Rong River, around Dien Bien Phu heading slightly east towards Son La, are recognized as places of stone age habitation that Vietnamese archaeologists suggest as the area of origin of Tai peoples.

⁴ This is the Anglicization of the Vietnamese spelling of the place name for the local “Muang”.

Table 1. International Relations Timeline of Neighboring Empires of Nan Zhao in Thailand and Laos					
Neighboring Empire	Time Periods of the Nan Zhao Empire				
	<i>Preceding Nan Zhao</i>	<i>Early Nan Zhao, 649 – 712 C.E.</i>	<i>Era of Pi-luo-ge, father and son, 712 – 778 C.E.</i>	<i>Late era, 778 – 902 C.E., era of expansion and decline</i>	<i>Collapse in 902 C.E. and following</i>
<i>Haripunjaya Mon</i>	- No records or evidence until 658 C.E. in the north other than a possible “Lawa” kingdom and others known only in legend	Chammathewi (Cāmadevī) is said to found Haripunjaya, travelling north up Ping River, from Lavo/Lopburi, in 658 C.E. and establishing control of the Ping and areas east to the Mekong, with the capital in Lamphun.	Haripunjaya maintains its empire on the Ping River but there is no further evidence in areas east towards the Mekong, suggesting that it lost territory.	Same as preceding	Same as preceding. Different records note an attack on Haripunjaya from “Nakhon Sappan” in 896 – 898 followed by an attack from Lavo (<i>Muang Boran</i> , 1979) that some scholars think was a century later, but Haripunjaya continues. Records tell of a strong king, Athittayarat, who rebuilds the capital in Lamphun in 897 - 901.
<i>Lawa (possibly Mon Buddhist but other sources say Shan animist)</i>	Described as an indigenous people in the north, along all of the rivers, possibly with a citadel and worship area in Chiang Mai	They seem to ally with and merge (after defeat by) rival groups with no clear cultural evidence or control	Same as preceding	Same as preceding	Same as preceding
<i>Lavo Mon</i>	Gupta Empire falls in 550 C.E., though Pallava strengthens (after 575 C.E.) and Lavo may have emerged in the areas of the Thai Gulf at this time, perhaps facing Chen La expansion. Different founding dates are 538 C.E. and 648 C.E.	No clear records or identifying characteristics other than belief that an entity existed in central Thailand parallel to its spinoff, Haripunjaya	Same as preceding	Same as preceding	Same as preceding but with Srivijaya/ Nakhon Si Thammarat attacking from the south in 903 and expanding influence over the area. The Khmer also seem to have entered here in the 9 th century with major battles a century later in 1001 all the way north to Haripunjaya.

<i>Mon Dvaravati Issan</i>	Gupta Empire falls in 550 C.E., though Pallava strengthens (after 575 C.E.) and Mon begin to expand in Issan	Mon influence strengthens in Issan and Mekong to Vientiane	Same as preceding	Same as preceding but with incursions from Khmer, particularly in southern Issan	Same as preceding
<i>Khmer</i>	Chen La Bhava Dynasty, 598 – 628 expands throughout Issan (and up Mekong?) and into east-central Thailand	Chen La declines and falls by 680 C.E.	-	Angkorian Empire forms and expands again into Issan, 802 -	Angkor strengthens during 10 th – 12 th centuries, expanding up the Mekong to Luang Prabang. Yasovarman I, 889 – 901 expands into Khorat and possibly further east (Lopburi).
<i>Vietnamese</i>	Under Han rule with various revolts such as those of Ly Bi (circa 541 – 547); Ly Nam De (570 – 602)	Chinese establish rule under the Duong Dynasty, 7 th – 10 th centuries, fortifying Hanoi in 617. Le Ngoc establishes a small kingdom in Thanh Hoa in 628.	Same as preceding, with Hanoi fortified again in 767 – 801.	Local revolts include those of Phung Hung (786 – 791). Attacked by Nan Zhao, 862 – 866 but then the Chinese General Cao Bien asserts authority and also establishes a citadel on the Cham border in Nghe An (to 875).	The Duong dynasty attacks Hanoi and establishes local rule in 902 – 935. Chinese begin to fortify the mountainous areas in the north of Vietnam to exert control over the Tai minorities in the 10 th – 11 th centuries.
<i>Cham</i>	The Gangara Dynasty establishes itself from the 6 th – 8 th century as a distinct kingdom between Chen La and the Vietnamese, especially around Hue and Danang.	Same as preceding. Vietnamese begin to move south into Cham area creating a mixed culture between the Red River to Ha Tinh.	Mai Hac De from Ha Tinh unites Khmer, Cham and maybe Mon in Lao and creates a kingdom, including Hanoi, 722 – 735. Indonesia attacks, 757.	A kingdom, Hoan Vuong/ Virapura, is said to exist between the Cham and Khmer, 758 – 859, with other major Cham cities to the north of it in 8 th – 9 th centuries. Java attacks, 774 and 797.	Chiem Thanh Kingdom of the Cham adopts Buddhism and becomes a major sea power from 988 to 1471.

Methodology of the Cultural Mapping and Search for Cultural Markers on the Thai and Lao Landscapes

In the absence of additional written records of Nan Zhao as to their control over areas in northern Thailand and Laos, the determination of history requires an evidentiary search for cultural markers in the form of architecture/infrastructure, art, cultural practices, and oral histories and chronicles. In the case of Nan Zhao, that is difficult because the empire itself seems to be an amalgam of peoples with few clear markers of specific structures or art. However, there are some. Moreover, the various chronicles from each locality can be viewed in comparison as ways of corroborating events from different perspectives as well as looking for commonalities and omissions as clues, particularly where travel routes by river or land would have required crossing certain areas.

For the past two decades in several countries in Southeast Asia as well as a bit in Eastern Europe, the author has been cataloguing and visiting hundreds of historical and cultural sites as a guide to helping peoples to recover, interpret and apply their lost and forgotten history so as to take pride in their past, to build understanding and tolerance with different peoples, to preserve their heritage for tourism and beauty of their communities, and to understand the historical relationships of peoples to their natural and social environments in ways that can promote healthy and sustainable communities (Lempert, 2012; 2013; 2015). This study also follows that approach in the search for markers of and identification with the Nan Zhao in northern Thailand and Laos.

Identification of Sites

The literature review to identify sites in Thailand and Laos is too extensive to fully document here. Key background materials that include the recordings of the early French archaeologists, more recent archaeological studies, and recent compendiums and interpretations were offered above. Additional sources include surveys of sites and finds (Supajanya and Pongsri, 1983; Ngaosrivathanas, 2008; Woodward, 2003; Raquez, 1902; Himmakone, 2010).

Following the review, the author has made intense visits on the geography in both Thailand and Laos over a period from 2009 to 2015, as well as to areas along the rivers of northern Viet Nam (1996 to 2005) and to Yunnan (2005) and other provinces in China north of the Vietnamese border. These visits included provincial museums, religious sites, reported archaeological sites, and communities in between.

Evidentiary Traces of Nan Zhao in Thailand and Laos:

Both the direct and comparative evidence of the Nan Zhao in Thailand and Laos are slight but their placement on the Yom and Mekong Rivers suggests significant entrance of the Nan Zhao into the area.

Direct Evidence, through Inscriptions and Recordings

Direct evidence of which this author is aware places the Nan Zhao in only two sites – the city of Phrae in northwestern Thailand and the city of Muang Swa (Luang Prabang). Both

are significant, however, because of the potential control they exerted over territory and rivers.

The evidence in Phrae is the inscription stone and sleeping Buddha, mentioned above, from 874 C.E. that is reaffirmed in chronicles of the city's major wats, with names of a Nan Zhao leader (Phraya Pol) and various local leaders over a period from 828 to 900 C.E. Four wats (including two Buddha towers) are attributed to this period as well as the city wall. Phrae is located on a major river, the Yom, that branches from an area near to the Mekong well to the north of the city some 200 km. To the south, the river continues through the area that became Sukhothai, then to Nakhon Sawan, and it connects with the Chao Phraya River heading out to the Gulf of Thailand.

In Muang Swa, the records are only those of a chronicle, apparently with direct mention of Nan Zhao, but with much earlier dates than from Phrae (either 707 or 757 C.E.). Muang Swa is directly on the Mekong and at a point about equal distance from the branch point to Phrae (about 200 km).

Comparative Evidence through Architecture, Art and Cultural Influences

While there are some distinctive cultural markers of Nan Zhao that would be indicative of Nan Zhao influence if they were found elsewhere, none appear to be found in this region or anywhere outside of Nan Zhao. Among them are the terraced form of agriculture, particular Buddha towers, and specific types of carvings found in grottoes around Nan Zhao. Nor do there appear to be place names or linguistic influences or any other recognizable cultural practices. However, there are two cities in northern Thailand, including Phrae and Wiang Lo, on another nearby river, the Ing, branching off of the Mekong, that have a peculiar type of Buddha idols that the author speculates could be a sign of influence from Tibet during the Nan Zhao period. There is incidental evidence of one other in Xam Neua in northern Laos near to the Ma River.

Although Dali itself has some distinctive features, that are a mix of Chinese and local influences, this author has not spotted clear similarities anywhere in Thailand or Laos.

- The Dali citadel has probably been rebuilt several times and is square shaped, unlike the oval shaped citadel in Phrae and other rounded citadels in northern Thailand and Laos, including the one in Phrae, and unlike several square citadels in northern Laos, including one around Muang Sing that is described as "Chinese" and undated and the Luang Prabang citadel that is dated later. Other citadels, like that of Wiang Phukha (Vieng Phouka), along the Nam Tha River in northern Lao, is simply attributed to Mon peoples but during this era (and linked to it by the Luang Nam Tha chronicles as described below).

- The three pagoda towers just north of the city wall, including the octagonal Qianshun/Qiansun pagoda tower with its 16 multiple layers and two others of 10 layers, are dated to the mid-9th century and are said to be influenced by Xian, China. Neither of the two (rebuilt) Buddha towers in Phrae that are dated to the Nan Zhao era are similar to these, nor are they distinguishable from other pra thats in northern Thailand.

- The Shizhong grottos of Shibaoshan, some 110 km northwest of Dali, in Jianchuan, include some 139 Buddha idols as well as statues of Nan Zhao kings in decorative robes and warriors. Though the faces are founded and "Chinese", the features and clothing offer types for comparison but the author is unaware of any likenesses in Thailand or Laos.

- The "Iron Pillar" at Midu, that is also dated to the era of Nan Zhao but may be later, also has no equivalent in Laos or Thailand.

The unusual Buddha idols that the author notes at Phrae and also at Wiang Lo do not seem to have any similarities to those in and around Dali and cannot be said to represent images of Nan Zhao rulers. If they are not markers of Nan Zhao, then what are they? Alternately, if Nan Zhao was a collection of far flung peoples who did not have contact with areas like Phrae and Wiang Lo in other eras, could it be that they indicate movements of other peoples (not the ruling Bai peoples, but perhaps Tibetans or Burmese) in the empire?

The idea that these Buddha idols might represent Nan Zhao is highly speculative, but the hypothesis is at least offered here with some photographs in Figure 2. The Buddha idols in Phrae are shown in the upper and lower right hand corners while one from Wiang Lo is shown in the lower left hand corner. For comparison purposes, a rare Pyu bronze Buddha idol from the 8th to 9th century is presented in the upper left hand corner. In the center, for comparison of the statues to the facial characteristics of Tibetans, is a photo of the 14th Dalai Lama. Although Buddha idols are described as “Buddha images” in Thailand, most statues are, in fact, designed based on human models and reflect physical characters of the populations in which the artists live and work.

What is unusual about the Phrae and Wiang Lo Buddha idols is not only the elongated faces but that the noses and ears jut out from the head while the eyes are at an angle. No Nan Zhao images nor images like this appear in the main museums or guides to art in Thailand (Buribhand and Griswold, 2008; Thailand Office of National Museums, 2008). Moreover, Thai sources do not recognize any Buddha images in this region (later the area of the Tai Yuan) other than those of the Mon Haripunjaya and others further south, as well as the later Khmer Buddha idols that have no similarities. “As far as we know, the Thai Yuan ... produced no Buddha image at all before the end of the 13th century” (Buribhand and Griswold, 2008, at 15).

Buddha idols in the region have specific types. There are the round faces of Thai Buddha idols; straight noses of Lao; distinctive hair styles and body proportions of Mon, and Khmer; funnier faces of the Tai Lu; and round faces of Chinese. The other elongated faces on Buddha idols, but with flatter noses and long flat ears, are those described as “U-Thong style” Sukhothai era Buddha idols, that are in fact found not far from this area (down river from Phrae on the Yom River) but that are from the 13th century. Although they are described as “U-Thong” Sukhothai Buddha idols, not a single Buddha idol of this style is actually displayed in the museum at U-Thong, itself, far to the southwest of Sukhothai, nor in wats in U-Thong, nor in the provincial museum of Suphan Buri, the province in which U-Thong is found, nor in its *wat*.

Are the Buddha idols here from the Pyu or evidence of later Burmese influence from later battles in the 11th century (invasion from Pegu)? That is possible, but the invasions were quickly repelled with not enough time to transfer statues. Moreover, one would expect to then find a trail of them along the route of invasion, coming from the west. There are a few similarities to the Pyu Buddha, which is described as having a “large ovoid head”, a “long fleshy nose with a slight hook at the end, perhaps a vestige of Indian influence” (Walker, 2012).

Pheuipanh Ngaosrivathana reports a small Buddha statue with such unusual features that is also out of place, around the area of Xam Neua, in northern Laos.

Other kinds of evidence, such as toponyms (ancient place names that would reveal Tai or Bai or other influences) are inconclusive (Lloyd, 2003).

Mapping this Evidence

The different sites, with these various types of evidence, are presented on a map of northern Thailand and Laos, in Figure 3. Although speculative, Wiang Lo is placed on the map with a smiling face to represent its unusual Buddha idols. The place of Xam Neua is also noted.

Since the Nan Zhao seemed to favor river travel, various key rivers are also shown, though the river names are not included. The Mon Haripunjaya empire is clearly situated on the Ping River system. The four small rivers branching off of the Mekong into northern Thailand include the Kok River, the Ing (going to Phayao and including Wiang Lo), the Yom River (with Phrae and continuing southwards as described) and the Nan River. The ancient reputed center of the Tai peoples of Xam Mun is shown as well as the rivers around it, the Da to the northeast, the Ma, heading southeast, and to the west, connected to the Mekong is the Ou River. The Red River is shown further north, cutting through northern Viet Nam.

Given that the Nan Zhao occupation of Phrae and areas further to the north is described as having continued over several decades and given that Nan Zhao would have had to follow a route down the Mekong and then the Yom River to reach Phrae, it can safely be assumed that Nan Zhao would have controlled that part of the river system if not all four of the branch rivers. The lack of presence of Haripunjaya here after the era of Nan Zhao began seems to lead to the easy conclusion that the dotted oval area was under Nan Zhao control even though it has never been shown on maps this way.

Although the lack of evidence of the Nan Zhao in the region might lead to the conclusion that Nan Zhao simply entered this area for plunder without leaving anything, the evidence at Phrae suggests otherwise. To try to explain why additional evidence might have disappeared and what else was going on here requires looking to the chronicles of the region for answers.

The map also presents a circle around the historic area of Tai peoples as at least a starting point for hypotheses about Tai peoples in the region that also might be expanded by the chronicles.

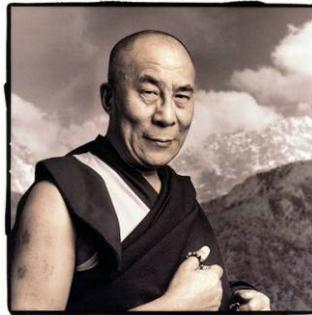
Red question marks remain on the map in areas where the earlier historical analysis raised questions about potential Nan Zhao expansion that have yet to be corroborated by any direct or comparative evidence.

Figure 2: The Unusual Buddha idols of Northern Thailand: Nan Zhao?

8th – early 9th Century Pyu (Myanmar) Buddha, Lindemann Fund (reprinted with permission from Walker, (2012), Authorhouse)



Statues in Wat Luang, Phra (Photo of Museum Photo, by Hue Nhu Nguyen)



Tibet's 14th Dalai Lama (Public domain image from https://charlestontibetansociety.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/dalai_lama.jpeg)

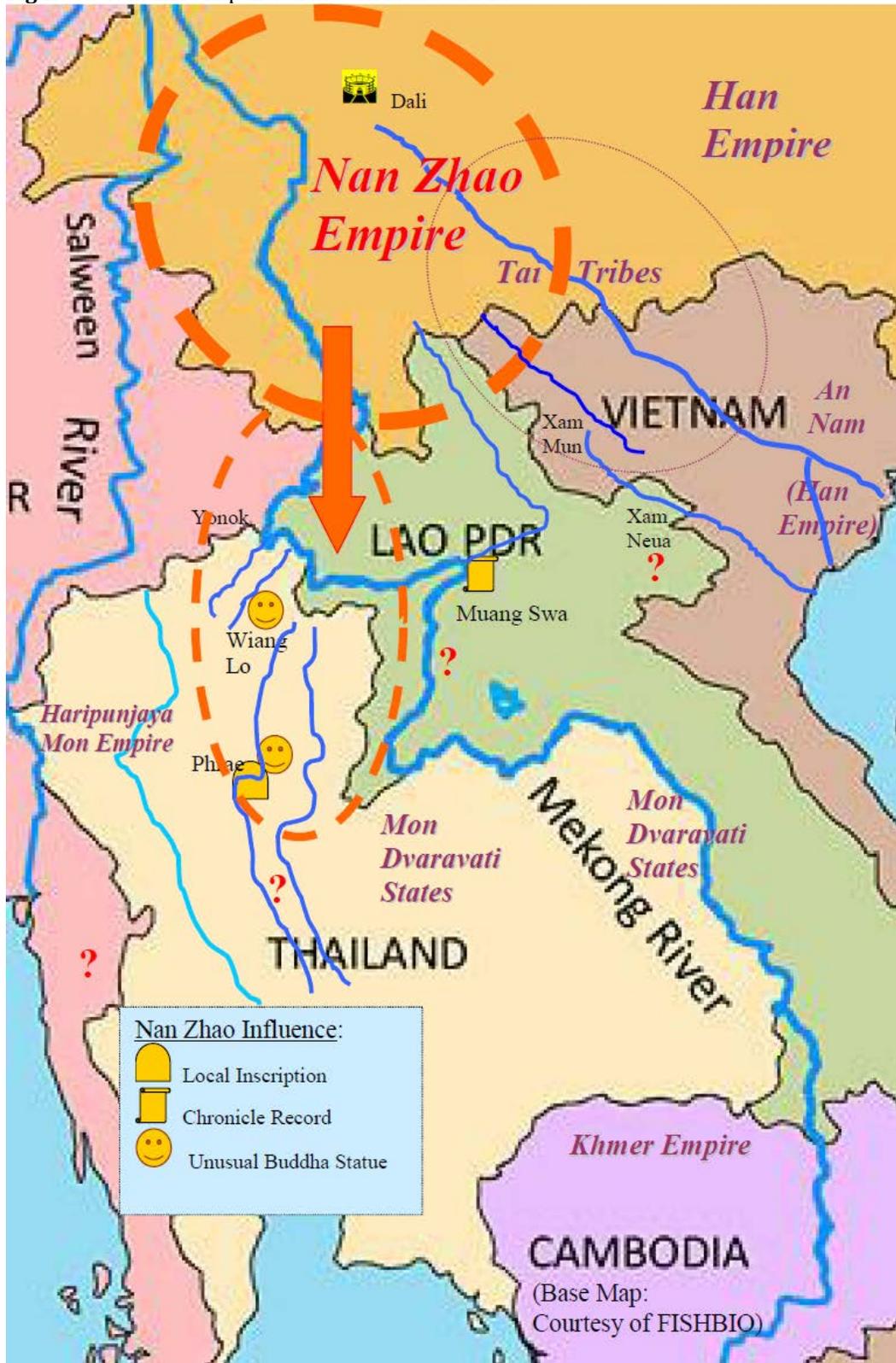


Statue in Wiang Lo Museum, Wat (Photo by Hue Nhu Nguyen)



Statue in Wat Luang, Phra (Photo of Museum Photo, by Hue Nhu Nguyen)

Figure 3: Nan Zhao Expansion into Thailand and Laos



Re-Examining the Legends (Oral Histories and Chronicles of the Lao and Tai) and Comparison to Nan Zhao Records

Though legends and chronicles do not appear to ever to use the name “Nan Zhao”, there seem to be enough corroborating details to link them with its leaders and to present a picture of an empire in northern Thailand and Laos that is much larger than the evidentiary record. Although this history seems to have been used to try to suggest that it was actually Tai peoples spreading, either independently of Nan Zhao or linked with it, it seems that later Tai migrations may simply have been confused with or sought to redefine this earlier history. There are explanations for why Tai peoples would remember or worship Nan Zhao kings and see them as relevant to their own history but there is no strong linkage of this history to any Tai groups of that period.

As with the Chinese and Nan Zhao texts that are accessible to most scholars today only through tertiary sources given the high degree of specialization needed to read ancient Chinese and Nan Zhao writing, interpreting chronicles of Lao and Thai history that are available in mostly 16th century palm leaf manuscripts in ancient Lao and Thai, also requires a reliance on secondary and tertiary sources, given the specialization required to read them. That introduces a number of opportunities for error and distortion that only a large team of scholars, working together, could reasonably claim to overcome. Interpretation here relies on a number of presentations by scholars in English translation as well as some more general presentations in history books and museum exhibits. Among the sources relied on for the different chronicles for Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai in northern Thailand, and Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, and Xieng Khouang in Laos, and areas of overlap, are those of a variety of archaeologists and historians, with their interpretations (Finot, 1917; Grabowski and Wichasin, 2008; Chiemsisouraj, 2011; Noy Insong Kalignavong, undated; Chao Noi, undated; Stuart-Fox, 1997; Sarassawadee, 2005; Ngaosrivathanas, 2008; Kaignavongsa and Fincher, 1993; Karlstrom, 2009).

Linking the Chronicles to Nan Zhao through Nan Zhao Kings: Although there is some dispute among scholars as to whether the various chronicles actually name Nan Zhao kings, the majority of scholars seem to recognize Khun Bulom (with various spellings, including “Borom”), considered the ancestral king of the Tai-Lao, as Pi-luo-ge (from the Chinese character spelling), the fourth Nan Zhao king in Nan Zhao and Chinese records, said to have ruled from 728 to 748 C.E. It is possible that at least two of the leaders who show up in various chronicles are also among the 13 Nan Zhao kings, including Khun Bulom’s son, Khun Lo (Ge-luo-feng), and Luo Cheng, the second Nan Zhao king, ruling from 674 – 712. Some of the reluctance to see the Tai “ancestors” as actually Nan Zhao kings, who were most likely not Tai, may reflect a desire to see a separate Tai kingdom rising independently, even though there is no historical record to confirm it. Table 2 presents the list of Nan Zhao kings and their dates of rule, in the first two columns (Backus, 1981) along with the potential linkages.

<i>Nan Zhao Ruler (Transliteration of Chinese)</i>	<i>Period of Rule</i>	<i>Correlative in Lao and Northern Tai Chronicles</i>
1. Xi-nu-luo	649 - 674	?
2. Luo-cheng (son of above)	674 - 712	Lao Cheng/ Lao Chok in Chronicles of Chiang Saen Chueang/ Chet Chueang/ Jet Huang in the Chronicles of Xieng Khouang in 698?
3. Sheng-luo-pi (son of above)	712 - 728	?
4. Pi-luo-ge (son of above)	728 - 748	Khun Bulom/ Khun Borom in Chronicles of Lao history
5. Ge-luo-feng (son of above)	748 - 778	Khun Lo/ Khun Lor, son of Khun Bulom in Chronicles of Luang Prabang
6. Yi-mou-xun (grandson of above)	778 - 808	?
7. Xun-ge-quan (son of above)	808 - 809	?
8. Quan-long-sheng (son of above)	809 - 816	?
9. Quan-li-sheng (younger brother of above)	816 - 823	?
10. Feng-you (younger brother of above)	823 - 859	?
11. Shi-long (son of above)	859 - 877	?
12. Long-shun (son of above)	877 - 897	?
13. Shun-hua-zhen (son of above)	897 - 902	?

(Note that the sons' names generally take on the name of the father as the first syllable of their names, with the exception of Feng-you and Shi-long.)

The first linkage presented on the table, that of Nan Zhao King Luo-cheng as the Lao Cheng (also called Lao Chok) in the Chiang Saen chronicles is the author's speculation based on the presentation of Lao Cheng/ Lao Chok as an area ruler, mentioned in both the Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai museums and in Chiang Khong, on the Mekong, as the king of the area of Yuan or Juan (shown on the maps as "Yonok" another name for the area) around the "Golden Triangle" where Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet and the Mekong River bends. The kingdom of Yuan is said to have extended from Yunnan (some sources have Lao Cheng coming down the small Mae Sai River that empties into the Mekong, rather than all the way down the Mekong itself) down through Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong and to have been founded in 701. This is perfectly consistent with the time of Luo Cheng's rule, 674 - 712. It is also consistent with the evidence of the Nan Zhao in Phrae, a century later, and with the history presented in Phrae that the Nan Zhao came through Yonok. It is also consistent with the dates given for further travel down the Mekong to Muang Swa/ Luang Prabang in 707 or later, 757 C.E. Yet, there is no mention in the museums that Lao Cheng might be a Nan Zhao king. In fact, he is described as the king of the Lawa people, the people believed to be indigenous to the area who may have been Mon and are not Tai.

The reason given as to why there is no corroborating evidence of this kingdom here (with the center said to have been called Nakhon Ngoen Yang), is that the center is said to have disappeared in an earthquake and fallen under water (possibly the Chiang Saen Lake/ Nong Bong Kaii, or perhaps an area around Souvanna Khoum Kham in the Mekong, itself).

Another chronicle that may be directly linked to this time period is that of Xieng Khouang, well to the east of here and probably best accessible on rivers from the Mekong going east, south of Muang Swa/ Luang Prabang. Although there are different versions of the

chronicle, one interpretation by an archaeologist is that two brothers from Chiang Rai (then called Suan Tan) attacked Xieng Khouang, the area of the Plain of Jars, then called Muang Pakan (Karlstrom, 2009). Thao Hung was the ruler of Suan Tan and his brother, Thao Chueang, became the ruler of Xieng Khouang after killing the local ruler, Thao Kua. Karlstrom dates this story as at 698 C.E. This would also be during the reign of Lao Cheng. Is Thao Chueang (or perhaps Thao Hung) actually Lao Cheng?⁵ Some linguists think that Hung and Cheung are equivalent in area languages (Chamberlain, 1972, 1998). The dating here is a bit early for the time of reported Nan Zhao control of Muang Sua (707 or 757 C.E.). Interestingly, on the Vietnamese side of the border, across from Xieng Khouang, the story is somewhat transformed and may occur two centuries later, at the fall of Nan Zhao, with a link to Khun Bulom and the Nan Zhao as militarizing the Tai peoples in their center in Son La, east of Dien Bien Phu (described below in the explanation of how Tai peoples see Khun Bulom and the Nan Zhao).

While the Luang Prabang chronicle and other Lao chronicles seem to mention Khun Bulom, he seems to just appear without any clear origin and apparently only a link to Nan Zhao in the stories of Luang Prabang, though this may only be an interpretation in tertiary sources. These chronicles usually describe his rule as 25 years, teaching the early Tai peoples to use unspecified new tools and arts, though the Chinese records have Pi-luo-ge ruling for only 20 years.

The real focus of the several chronicles that mention Khun Bulom is not on him in particular but on his supposed nine sons, including Khun Lo, who is said to have ruled over Muang Swa, and the geographic areas of rule of the other sons (below). Pi-luo-ge's first son, who became king of Nan Zhao, is Ge-luo-feng. Some say that Luo-Feng is Lo, but here is where there are disputes, starting with the fact that Ge-luo-Feng would have ruled in Dali, not as far south as Muang Swa. The only really consistent explanation here is that the "sons" may be grandsons or some other lineage than one directly including Ge-luo-Feng.

It is easy to see how "Pi-luo-ge" is heard as Bulom but not how "Ge-luo-feng" simply becomes Lo. The chronicle in Yonok that has Khun Bulom's second son, Chaiyapongse Singhonawat, ruling over the area in 773, at the age of 18, is a logical impossibility since he would have been born in 755 while Pi-luo-ge is believed to have died in 750 (and perhaps earlier since his rule ended in 748) (Schlesinger, 2001, likely citing the Phongsawadan Yonok of 1899, compiling various Northern Thai chronicles).

If Chaiya Pongse is actually the Phraya Pol described in Phrae as the founder of that town in 828 C.E., some 55 years later, this is really four generations after Pi-luo-ge and during the reign of either Quan-li-sheng or Feng-you, both brothers of the previous king Quan-long-sheng.

If Khun Bulom and Khun Lo were not really Nan Zhao leaders but were local Tai leaders, there would likely be more information about them than is found in the chronicles, but there is none. Even their names would likely be associated with meanings in Tai languages rather than just transliterations from a Nan Zhao (Tibeto-Burman) language. For

⁵ There are now various contradictory claims in oral history that have widely varying dates as is typical of oral history. Khun or Phaya Chueang is a cultural hero (in many Thai and Lao chronicles) referring to the 11th/12th century. According to Volker Grabowsky, he is considered by the Tai Lue as the founder of their kingdom (12th century). Terwiel (1978) and Chamberlain (1989) even suggest that the Nung ruler Nong Zhi-gao (11th century) was the prototype of the Khun Chueang myth.

example, one possible Tai/Lao interpretation of Bulom would be “Phu” (or “Phou”) (“mountain”) and “Lom” (“wind”) but there is no such ancestral place in the reputed ancestral area of the Tai at the time (the area of “Thaeng”, around Dien Bien Phu). Nor does there appear to be any significance of Khun Lo (“wheel”).

The Legendary Geography of Nan Zhao as Presented in Chronicles

Different chronicles provide a general geography of areas related to “Khun Bulom” but none have any consistent linkages to Tai peoples.

The founding of Nan Zhao itself is described as a unification of six different kingdoms by 729, including the central kingdom around Dali and five other “zhao” (distinctly not the Tai word, “mueang” for kingdom, and referring to the five “chao” or rulers of those kingdoms) of Mengxi, Yuexi, Langqiong, Dengdan and Shilang, probably all in Yunnan.

The key to the geography of the area of northern Thailand and Laos during this era is the naming of seven areas said to have been ruled by seven “sons” of Khun Bulom, including Khun Lo (ruling over Muang Swa) and Khun Phongse/ Saiphol/ Kham Phong ruling over an area on the south side of the Mekong around Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai. Since the chronicles were written much later, probably around the 14th to 16th centuries, it is very difficult to ascertain the boundaries or names of the areas during the 9th century. Three of the seven areas were probably outside the current Thai and Lao borders or crossed them: the “Shan” area around the Myanmar border just north of Thailand and “Yunnan” that could be northern Laos and the Chinese border, and the Sipsong Panna (Sip Song Panna) area that is probably the area of the Mekong around Laos, Myanmar and part of Yunnan. Another area crosses the Vietnamese border, including the northeastern Laos area of Hua Phan and Thanh Hoa. The two others are given as “Ayuthaya” which is probably the area of Lavo/Lopburi and maybe part of the Yom River, and Muang Phuan/Xieng Khouang

Note that not only is there no mention of any of these leaders or areas being “Tai” but the seven areas do not include the traditional/historical Red River Tai area. At best, the area of Dien Bien Phu, that is said to be the Tai center at the time, is either outside of the map or just barely a part of it. It is possible that the historical Red River area of the Tai (described in some sources as “Cuan”) may have been difficult for Nan Zhao to conquer since they contested it with China, also up until just before the attacks on the Han down the Red River starting in 861 C.E.

An attempt is made in Figure 4 to place all of these different areas on the same geographical map used earlier. On this map, the boundaries are only rough estimates but they serve to show a contiguous area south of the Nan Zhao center in Yunnan. Four of these seven areas (if “Yunnan” is included) are clearly within the areas for which there seems to be an evidentiary record, with three of them directly within the cluster of rivers south of the Mekong. The others seem to fill in the historical record where other sources raise speculation of the presence of Nan Zhao.

Although other chronicles do not continue the history of these geographic areas, they do provide some additional information. For example, the Luang Tha Chronicles explain that when Khun Lo attacked Muang Swa, the previous leader, Khun Kang Hang (again, of unknown ethnicity) fled to the town of Vieng Phouka (about 200 km south of Luang Nam Tha, and similarly north of the Mekong), where there is a small citadel.

The chronicles of Chiang Saen provide a perspective on the unity of this whole region but the information is hard to interpret. From the perspective of Chiang Saen, this

entire region of seven provinces may have been referred to as Singhanavati (“Lion Kingdom”), though the Lao chronicles seem to call it “Lam Thong”, a term that is not translated (perhaps a reference to “Water” and “Bronze”). According to this version, around 757 C.E., Khun Saiphong led a group from northern Myanmar across the Salween River to this region. In 773 they built or rebuilt the town of Nagabundhu-Singhanavatinagorn, which may be the rebuilt Nakhon Ngoen Yang, in or near the current site of Chiang Saen (perhaps the mountain area just to the south of Chiang Saen, known today as Vieng Prukha). There are no remains of Nan Zhao reported here.

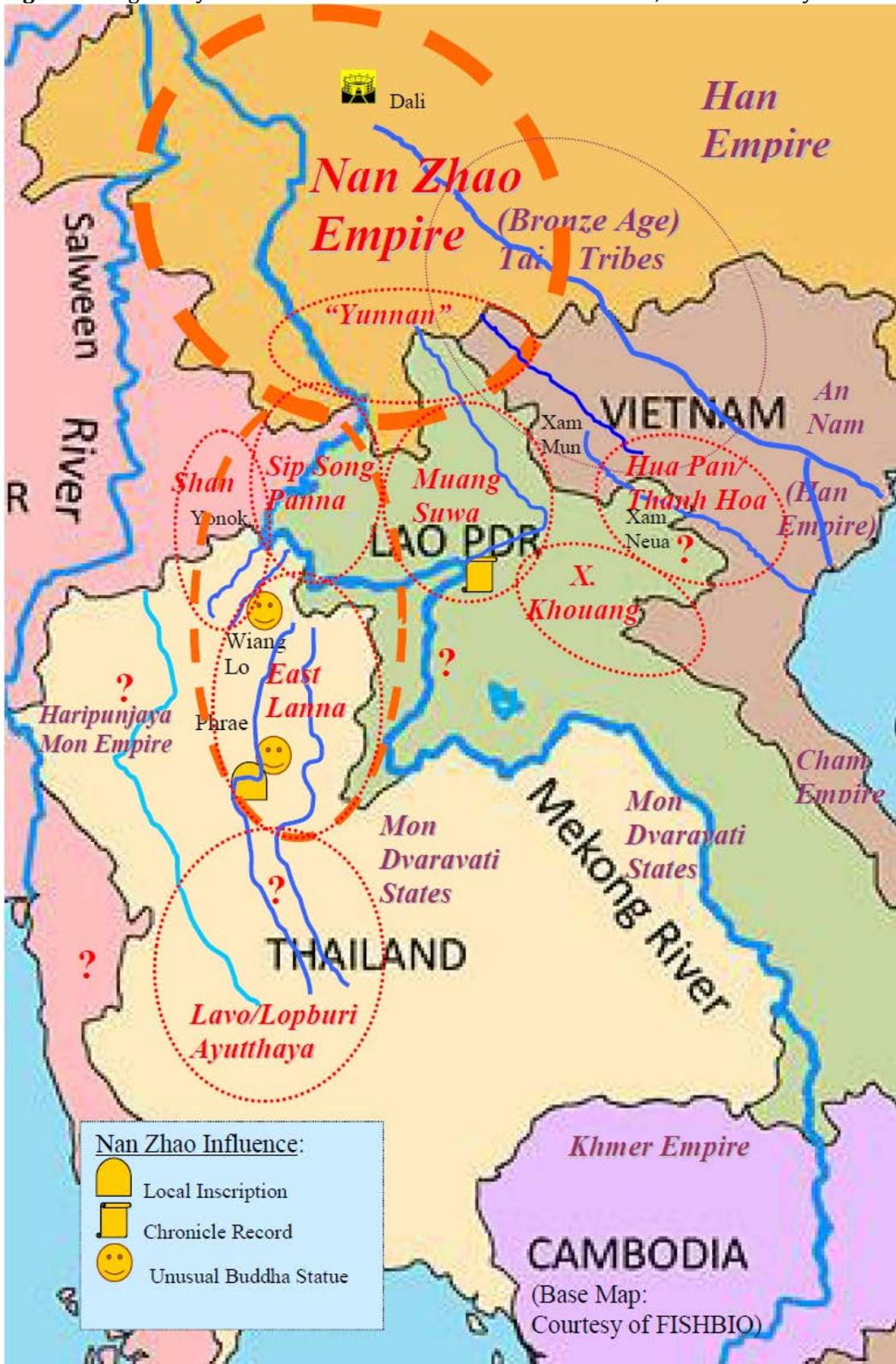
In the version of the Chiang Rai cultural center that is set a century earlier, the 7th century was an era of mass immigration and development here under a king, Chao Singhanawati Kuman, the son of Pra Chao Dheivatai (possibly Thewathai⁶), who brought 100,000 families to Naga Phanthu Singanawat Nakhon/ Yonok Naga Nakhon. It is not clear if this is the same story as the one of Khun Saiphong and it could potentially be an earlier story of the Mon Haripunjaya settlement of this area and then either abandoning it or losing it to Nan Zhao. If the movement occurred under Nan Zhao, no explanation is given for the source of the migration, the actual settlements, the reason for them, or the impact on the peoples who are already in the area (said to be “Khom” but possibly Mon, Lawa, and Khmu).

A version that is more consistent with the Nan Zhao timeline is that “Lao Kiang”, the ninth king of Hiran, founded the city of Ngoenyang (modern Chiang Saen) around 850 AD, moved the capital there, and thus became the first King of Ngoenyang. On the other hand, this “Lao Kiang” sounds very much like Lao Cheng (or perhaps the early Nan Zhao King Luo Cheng), which again introduces confusion.

The continuation of the Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai chronicles of Singhanavati mention a series of battles over an as yet unidentified city called “Umongasela” that is believed to be around the Thai and Myanmar border, north of Chiang Mai, around the start of the Ping River. The battles are described as with the “Khmer” but a look at maps for this period, like Figure 4, suggests that Nan Zhao would have been engaged in a series of battles with the Ping River empire of Haripunjaya, attacking it from the east (and taking territories like Phrae) and probably also trying to attack it from the north and maybe the south. Haripunjaya probably withstood these attacks with major battles at the source of the Ping River at this “Umongkhaasela” that may long ago have been destroyed.

⁶ This is the suggestion of Volker Grabowsky.

Figure 4: Legendary Provinces of Nan Zhao into Thailand and Laos, late 9th Century



Anthropological and Historical Explanations for Tai Worship of Nan Zhao Leaders and Distortion of Nan Zhao History as “Tai” History: There is a contemporary yearning among the Siamese and the Lao to find some linkage to the Buddhist Nan Zhao empire that would either place them on or near their current territories and/or show that animist Tai groups were already introduced to Buddhism in the 8th or 9th century, rather than only in the 13th and 14th centuries by the conquered Mon peoples (and adopted by Tai leaders as a way of controlling the Mon). Nevertheless, it is highly possible that the 8th and 9th century Tai peoples were only peripheral to Nan Zhao and that their descendants today link themselves with the Nan Zhao and its leaders like Khun Bulom because they inherited its lands where others remembered them, followed Nan Zhao’s practices, and benefitted from Nan Zhao’s opposition to common enemies.

In the chronicles west/south of the Mekong in Thailand, the key figure in this historic period is Lao Cheng, then Khun Bulom, while to the east, in Laos, it is Khun Bulom. Peoples on the land who survived into the 14th to 16th century to record chronicles remembered this strong empire and the kings whose armies controlled these areas. In the area of Chiang Saen, they were said to be Lawa peoples who ultimately intermarried with the Tai Yuan coming from the north and who came to establish the Lanna empire and write the history. A similar process seems to have occurred in Luang Prabang.

The memory of strong kings in a place, even without a direct ethnic or genetic connection is not unusual in the region since people associate themselves with power and symbols. The early 8th century King in Ha Noi, Mai Hac De (literally, the “Black Emperor”) who defeated the Han and established local rule for several years is considered a hero in Viet Nam even though the Nan Zhao king who also led an army to take Ha Noi from the Chinese, a century later, is not. Mai Hac De may have been Cham or perhaps Mon and he led local tribes against the Chinese, including many Vietnamese who allied with him. Similarly, whether or not they were under the Nan Zhao or allies, the Tai tribes would have seen an ally in the Nan Zhao kings who fought the Chinese. In Vientiane, today, the city name remains allied with a founder from around the 5th century, Buri-Chan, who is said to have built the city’s canals. This author believes he may have represented the Gupta Empire, building the That Luang as terraced temple for Hindu worship (Ngaosrivathanas, 2008; Lempert, n.p.6).

If the Tai peoples saw the Han as a threat to them, which they certainly did since the time of Dong Son, with the Red River attacks on Co Loa by the Han, they could have seen Nan Zhao as saving them from Han rule and assimilation. Nan Zhao attacks into China in the “Cuan” area of eastern Yunnan, around Kunming and north of the Red River, could have protected Tai autonomy for a century, and the attacks on Tong Binh/ Hanoi would have also subdued the influence of the Han empire coming at them from the southeast.

An alternative explanation for the recognition of Khun Bulom, that is suggested by either chronicles or reinterpretations in the Tai areas of Viet Nam, is that the Nan Zhao royal family in 902 may have fled into minority areas when the Nan Zhao empire was finally destroyed by the Chinese, and then established some kind of local rule and relations. That would not have been recorded.

In addition to Xam Mun in Dien Bien Phu and the areas of Muang Tam and Oi Nu nearby, there is another area in Viet Nam that Tai peoples also recognize as their ancestral center. It is Muong Lo, around Nghia Lo town in the province of Yen Bai, just south of Son La, about 120 km due east of Dien Bien Phu. It is midway between the Da and Red Rivers, about 200 km from Ha Noi.

In the story here, the Thao Hung and Thao Chueang who attacked Xieng Khouang (in the Lao version, described above and dated to 698 C.E.) are named Tao Ngan and Tao Suong. They are not identified as coming from the area of Chiang Rai but directly down the Da River from Yunnan, with the implication that it was when Nan Zhao was being defeated by the Chinese. The idea here is that they are migrating royalty rather than just a conquering army from Nan Zhao. Then the narrative abruptly shifts to an undefined date. In this version, it is one of Khun Bulom's grandsons who is one of Khun Lo's sons (here, Khun Lo is called Thao Lo), who goes to Dien Bien Phu to establish the Tai center there of Thaen (here called Muang Thanh). The implication is not that the Nan Zhao were Tai or that Muang Swa was a Tai area and that they were moving to a "Tai center" but that the Tai peoples were being "modernized" into the ways of the Nan Zhao empire. The role of Buddhism is not made clear.

Even if the story of Thao Chueang/ Tao Suong has just been garbled in the Vietnamese version, the version of the Khun Lo story makes it clear that the areas the Tai and Lao recognize as their ancestral centers were outside of the areas ruled by the seven "sons" of Khun Bulom, as depicted in Figure 4. In this story, the Tai area does come under Nan Zhao but it is established by Muang Suwa and it is at least two generations after Khun Bulom. That seems to coincide with the history of this area only coming under Nan Zhao in the 9th century, before the attacks on Tong Binh (Ha Noi) down the Red River.

According to the history here, it was not until the 11th century that Tai peoples began to move out of this center (Nghia Lo area) into the areas where they are now found in Southeast Asia. This story also seems to reinforce the idea that the Tai were a small group, concentrated in this area, and not moved to various locations during the Nan Zhao era.

It is certainly possible that the Nan Zhao elites married into Tai groups to establish blood relations but there is no mention of that in any chronicles or in legends of any princesses or local leaders. It is also possible that the armies the Nan Zhao raised would have drawn peoples from various minorities and included the Tai or that Tai peoples were identified for a particular caste or profession in the empire and moved to serve in a particular role, including that of slaves, but there does not seem to be any information on this in chronicles.

It is hard to find any logical reason why groups of Tai peoples would have been moved in the Nan Zhao empire, including in the areas of Lam Thong/Singhanavati. Reasons for population relocations within the empires of Southeast Asia have included:

- Bringing specialized labor of a rival empire and the palace harem to an imperial center (found almost universally and including in the Nan Zhao conquests over Chengdu and the Pyu);
- Moving manual labor for construction (e.g., moving Lao workers to construct Bangkok in the late 18th and early 19th century);
- Depopulation of an area to create a buffer zone (e.g., the Siamese depopulating the Mekong area to create a buffer with Viet Nam);
- Breaking up an existing empire to destroy identities (e.g., the Siamese and the Khmer); and
- Replacing people killed in war and genocide/scorched earth tactics (the repopulation of northern Thailand after Taksin).

None of these apply to the disorganized Tai tribes.

Peoples in the region also moved extensively to avoid invasion (from the Mongols in the 12th century and from the Haw armies from China heading through Laos in the 19th century) and in the face of famines, but this also did not characterize the Nan Zhao era.

Discussion

It is interesting that even with so little direct information about the Nan Zhao in Laos and Thailand and with barely even a mention of the empire in history that a picture can emerge simply by looking at what is not said and examining neighboring areas during the time period of the mid 7th to the beginning of the 10th century.

There are still major holes in trying to connect the actual evidence with the picture that emerges from chronicles and in areas on the edges of Nan Zhao, particularly with respect to the location and history of Tai peoples during this era. It is unclear exactly where Nan Zhao met Tai groups and what the relation was, other than from the stories of Nghia Lo, possibly in the mid-9th century. It is also not clear where Tai peoples were located between the bronze age and the era of Nan Zhao, including where they might have been along the Red River or Mekong.

In the 10th century, specific Tai identities began to form as Tai groups began moving throughout the region. Did they move as a result of the fall of Nan Zhao, copying its form as an empire? Were they filling the power vacuum left by Nan Zhao and by the weaknesses of the Chinese Han at the time, taking over areas the way the Mon did after the Gupta and weakening of the Khmer? Apparently, this is the real impact of Nan Zhao in paving the way for several small Tai empires to emerge in almost miniature versions. The 10th and 11th centuries were eras in which Viet Nam also broke away from China, so this was an era of opportunity for the emergence of small empires, with the centers weakened.

How far did Nan Zhao really move southwards in Thailand and in Laos? What explains the claim in Nan Zhao chronicles that they came up against Chen La, when it had already fallen? Since there does not seem to be any evidence that Nan Zhao moved further down the Mekong than Muang Swa, they either viewed Muang Swa as the extent of Khmer influence that perhaps they still found in some form or the Khmer had extended farther up the Mekong than anyone has been able to previously record. (The Ngaosrivathanas found evidence of an early Khmer temple in Luang Prabang (2008) but this author has discounted the rough lingas and their attributions of Khmer influence any further than that (Lempert, n.p.1). Perhaps Nan Zhao did move well down the Yom River all the way into the area of Lavo/Lopburi and considered that area as Khmer. But if they were in Phrae in 828, the Khmer should have been long gone from the Thai coast at that time. On the other hand, the return of the Khmer to Isan in the early Angkorian era did not start until Jayavarman III in 866, the time that the Han were repelling the Nan Zhao invasion of Tong Binh/ Ha Noi and the Khmer did not attack Lopburi until 1002.

In Xieng Khouang, there is some speculation that the brick towers in Muang Phuan may have dated all the way to the era of the Cham, though there is no evidence of this other than suggestion of trade routes between Xieng Khouang and the Sa Huynh (pre-Cham) early in the first millennium. The possibility of Nan Zhao presence in Xieng Khouang and Thanh Hoa, with river access towards the sea leads to speculation again on possible relations with the Cham during this era but also with zero evidence. In Nghe An, in Viet Nam, along the Lam River, is a strange ruined brick tower, the Nhan Thap, where some strange Buddha statues were found and reported a century ago (Le Breton, 2001). Its dating as 5th – 6th century is more than a century before Nan Zhao. Nevertheless, if Mai Hac De in the early 8th century

was drawing on local tribes for his attack on Tong Binh/ Ha Noi from the borders with Nghe An into what is now Laos, it is possible that the Nan Zhao did put pressure on the Cham in this area. The area was a border area of the Cham and Han Chinese at the time.

Conclusion

Despite the lack of physical evidence from and information about the Nan Zhao period in Thailand and Laos and the mistaken attempts to define it as Tai, the period plays a significant role in the history of Tai groups for several reasons and existing evidence needs to be considered in a new light.

Immediately following the Nan Zhao period and probably as a result both of the power vacuum left by the fall of Nan Zhao and by the advantages of learning from it, Tai military kingdoms immediately began to rise and spread throughout areas that had been under Nan Zhao control and beyond. Though they had been animist, many of these Tai kingdoms also followed the Nan Zhao example of adopting Buddhism as an apparent means of social control that was not at all inconsistent with imperialism and war. Moreover, these Tai populations began to grow, possibly as a result of borrowed agricultural or organizational practices, though what these are is still not clear. While the Tai peoples seemed to be only peripheral in Nan Zhao and not on major routes of conquest or migration (down the major rivers from Yunnan) and did not appear to be converted to Buddhism or to move much beyond areas that were probably around northwestern Viet Nam and not in the areas of Thailand or Laos, they still seem to have learned from the Nan Zhao and benefitted from Nan Zhao's legacy.

It seems clear why both the Siamese and the Lao have invested in the mythology of Nan Zhao that presents the early Tai as part of the Nan Zhao empire, either victims of its control or important allies (some suggestions are even that they formed a military class!), moving into territories of Laos and Thailand as early as the 8th century and even adopting Buddhism. These stories are important to the Siamese and Lao mythologies for a number of reasons. Not only do they create a claim to the lands of Thailand and Laos that is some five centuries earlier and establish ties to Buddhism that were also five centuries earlier than the reality.

- For the Sukhothai kingdom, they also help dispel the likely reality that Siamese culture developed directly from the Lao, travelling from the area of Dien Bien Phu on the Ou River to Muang Swa/ Luang Prabang in the 10th century and then down the Mekong into Thailand around the 12th century. The Siamese would much prefer to present a history that eliminates the role of the Lao and establishes their arrival in Sukhothai independent of the Lao migrations.

- For both the Lao and the Siamese, presenting themselves as both victims of empire and peace loving Buddhists is also preferable to what the actual history of Nan Zhao and its aftermath suggests: that Tai peoples were in fact militaristic opportunists, copying from the Nan Zhao and the Chinese and taking advantage of regional weaknesses of other peoples whom they exploited, while using Buddhism as part of a military strategy. Rather than being peace loving or developed, the picture that emerges is one of a people with no technological or moral superiority, adopting a religion (Buddhism) that actually promoted militarism, stratification and social control.

Although there is little evidence of Nan Zhao architecture, agriculture or other scientific advance, or art in the areas they controlled in Thailand and Laos, it seems likely that they left both a cultural and genetic legacy. Even if the ruling elite and/or the populace of Nan Zhao were not Tai and the areas they controlled were later taken over by Tai the fact that their legacy continues in chronicles in the names of leaders selects that in some ways their descendants may have remained on the land. Something in the chronicles also continues to resonate with local identity: Buddhism, militarism, control of rivers, distinctions of local peoples as different from the Han Chinese and Vietnamese, and possibly other practices and traditions, including possibly the adaptation of Nan Zhao laws (Ngaosyvathn, 2006).

Given the role that Nan Zhao plays in regional chronicles and mythology it is likely that there is in fact much more physical and cultural evidence of the period in Thailand and Laos that is simply misrepresented, overlooked, or suppressed. Perhaps with a shift in perspective brought by re-examination of this period, some of that evidence will be seen in a new light and will be “re-discovered”.

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European Explorers in Northeastern Laos, 1882-1893

Frederic C. Benson¹

Northeastern Laos

(See Appendix 1 Map)

In the late 1860s, mountainous northeastern Laos² comprised “a network of overlapping multi-ethnic³ principalities” (Jerndal 1998: 814)—Luang Prabang (formerly a powerful kingdom), Muang Phuan (now Xieng Khouang), Houa Phan Ha Tang Hok⁴ (now Houa Phan) and Sipsong Chau Tai (an integral part of Tonkin).⁵ Divided by a watershed that separates water flowing to the Mekong basin to the west and the Gulf of Tonkin to the east, the “frontier tributaries” (Thongchai 1994: 100) served as a crossroads for trade and communication, as well as a loosely-structured buffer zone over which Siam was, at the time, the dominant overlord although dominance had been historically shared with archrival Annam.⁶ (Tuck 2009: 5)

¹ Originally presented by Frederic C. Benson at the 5th International Lao Studies Conference at Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand, July 8-10, 2016.

² Laos was not a unified political entity at this time.

³ James Scott argues that “hill people are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvee labor, epidemics, and warfare. Most of the areas in which they reside may be aptly called shatter zones or zones of refuge.” (Scott 2009: ix-x)

⁴ These territories were, before 1828, gathered under the authority of a supreme chief residing in Muong Hua Muong (the head of the muongs), the suzerainty of which the kings of Luang Prabang and Vien Tian [Vientiane] disputed in turn until Annam intervened and made of this region a tributary province (Tran Nienh Phu). The country was divided up in two parts: the districts of Muong Hua Muong, Muong Son, and Muong Sam Tai came under the Tong Doc of Vinh; those of Muong Xieng Kho, Muong Sam Nua and Muong Soi under that of Thanh Hoa. (Cupet 2000: 141) The name of these territories became “Hua Pahn, Tang Ha Tang Hoc,” and comprised, in addition to the six great districts enumerated above, five small ones: Muong Lan , Muong Het, Muong Ven, Muong Hiem, and Muong Sakok. This would bring the number to eleven and justify the somewhat baroque translation of their denomination: “Heads one thousand, all five, all six.” (Cupet 2000: 146)

⁵ The loose federation of Sipsong Chau Tai was probably formalized around the Tai town of Muong Lai (Lai Chau) as early as the 17th century and paid tribute at various times to Luang Prabang, Burma, China and Annam. (Michaud 2016: 54)

⁶ Laos was administered by three Siamese commissioners based in Luang Prabang, Nongkhai, and Champassak. The commissioner in Luang Prabang had supervision of Luang Prabang, Sipsong Panna, Sipsong Chau Tai, and Houa Phan. The Nongkhai commissioner oversaw Muang Phuan (Xieng Khouang), Borikhane, Kham Keut and Khammouane. (Jumsai 1971: 129)

Arrival of the French

(See Appendix 2 Map)

As Stuart-Fox described it, the disruption of power in this buffer zone commenced with the arrival of the French, “a modern European state with altogether different notions of territorial possession and sovereignty,” who seized Saigon in Cochinchina in 1859 (Brocheux 2011: 25), and in 1867 a Franco-Siamese treaty confirmed the French protectorate over Cambodia. (Brocheux 2011: 27) The French viewed the Mekong River as a potential trade route to China and were concerned that Siamese influence in the basin would affect their strategic and economic expansionist interests in the Mekong’s left bank. At the same time, the French were concerned about possible British intrusion into the basin given their colonialization of Burma and diplomatic friendship with Siam.⁷

In the meantime, the French gradually defined the territories by mapping the region, a technical process unbeknownst to the Siamese and Vietnamese. Between 1860 and 1861, Henri Mouhot was charged by the London Geographical Society to study the Mekong valley (Thompson 1937: 265) and was the first French explorer to reach Luang Prabang, where he fell ill and died. Later in the decade, the French navy initiated the Mekong Exploration Commission led by Doudart de Lagree and Francis Garnier who launched the expedition of 1866-1868 that mapped the Mekong River which they hoped (in vain owing to the presence of waterfalls and rapids) would provide them access to the “supposed riches of the interior of China.” (Wyatt 1984: 195)

Upon arriving in Luang Prabang, Garnier observed that it “is the most important Laotian center in all Indochina,” and that “from now on [the king] should resort to French influence to resist the claims of neighboring countries and stop this tiring search for equilibrium which he tried to maintain among them.” (Garnier 1996 Vol. 1: 295)

Generally speaking, however, between 1867 and 1882 the French colonial initiatives in the Mekong’s left bank entered a period of remission due to their preoccupation with securing Vietnam. (Brocheux 2011: 15, 27) Nevertheless, Dr. Jules Harmand, a French navy physician, obtained permission to undertake a scientific mission that enabled him to venture into the heretofore unexplored left bank of the lower Mekong in 1877 to determine the possibility of establishing an east-west trade axis which would connect Siam (assuming it became a French protectorate) with Cochinchina. (Harmand 1997: ix)

⁷ Virginia Thompson indicated that “the history of [French Indochinese] Missions is inextricably bound up with conquest.” (Thompson 1937: 270)

Haw Invaders

Until the 1880s, little exploration work had been undertaken in Upper Laos outside the Mekong valley. This was due in part to the arrival during the mid-1860s of marauding Chinese renegades, known as Haw, who were banded together in groups with various allegiances differentiated by the color of their flags (Red, Black, Yellow, and Striped). (Culas 2016: 34; see Stuart-Fox 1998: 138-141; Forbes 1988: 134-144) For more than fifteen years the Haw roamed and ravaged lowland settlements in Upper Laos and destabilized the region as control over the chiefdoms by their overlords slipped away leaving the “managed” buffer zone a political void that rivals Siam and France subsequently sought to fill.⁸

Francois-Jules Harmand

Prior to Dr. Harmand’s appointment as France’s Consul-General in Bangkok in 1881, the French remained ignorant of the geography and history of the interior of Upper Laos. (Dommen 2001: 14) However, as an arch-colonialist Harmand renewed France’s interest in Siamese activity in the region. He was also concerned about the possible intentions of the British to move eastward after the establishment of a consulate in Chiang Mai.⁹ (see McCarthy 1994: 106; Tuck 2009: 63) As a countermeasure, Harmand planned to take action to place Luang Prabang—which he characterized as “the most significant strategic point in Eastern Indochina”—under French control. (Ivarsson 2008: 33)

Missionaries

(See Appendix 3 Map)

Accordingly, beginning in 1882 French expansion resumed with vigor as moves were underway to make Vietnam and the Lao states protectorates of France. (Brocheux 2011: 15) In 1882 several Alsatian missionaries travelled from Annam to Muang Ngan in southeastern Muang Phuan where they resided before being displaced by invading Haw in 1883. (Breazeale 1988: 89) During this journey missionary Father P. Blanck drew the first European map of Muang Phuan. (Breazeale 1988: 89; see Blanck 1884)

⁸ Mountain minorities, including the Hmong and Yao (Mien), took advantage of the opening provided by the Haw to migrate from inhospitable living conditions and opium trading markets in Yunnan via Tonkin to Laos and relocate to vacant highlands, mainly in Muang Phuan (Xieng Khouang). Most probably clashes took place between the Hmong and Haw which prompted groups of Hmong to evacuate Muang Phuan and move to Siam. (Culas 2016: 32-35; Michaud 2016: 58)

⁹ Britain annexed Lower Burma in 1852 and Upper Burma in 1885.

Paul-Marie Neis

(See Appendix 4 Map)

In early 1883, Harmand made contact with Luang Prabang, an important tributary of Siam, to receive French representative, Dr. Paul Neis, who was dispatched to explore Muang Phuan while en route to Luang Prabang before continuing on to Tonkin through Sipsong Chau Tai.¹⁰ (Breazeale 1988: 65) One of Neis's primary objectives was to secure from the king of Luang Prabang a promise to seek French help in resisting any future British movement eastward. (Tuck 2009: 64)

En route to Xieng Khouang, the capital of Muang Phuan, Neis met the chiefdom's leadership in Muang Ngan near the Annamese border where they sought refuge after escaping from their Haw-occupied capital. Neis told the ethnic Tai Phuan—tributaries of both Siam and Annam—that he came “on behalf of the French governor of Cochinchina to study your country and to establish friendly relations.” (Neis 1997: 51) However, shortly after his arrival, the threat of a Haw attack prompted Neis and the French missionaries he met in Muang Ngan to retreat back to the Mekong.

His cross-country trajectory from Xieng Khouang to Luang Prabang being thwarted, Neis proceeded up the Mekong to Luang Prabang by boat and, in the footsteps of Mouhot, by elephant (Neis 1997: 63) where he arrived in June 1883. In November, Neis ascended the Nam Ou River north toward Muang Theng (Dien Bien Phu) and onward to Tonkin, as originally planned, but reversed track when he learned that much of Sipsong Chau Tai and Houa Phan had yielded to the Haw. Neis retreated back down the Nam Ou to Luang Prabang in December 1883 before returning to Bangkok in January 1884. (Neis 1997: 117) Although Neis did not make any significant geographic discoveries, he did ascend important tributaries of the Mekong which had thus far been uncharted. (Osborne 2000: 123)

James Fitzroy McCarthy

Soren Ivarsson pointed out that “from the early 1880s Siamese claims to the territories east of the Mekong were framed with reference to a new perception of geography and geopolitical space in which overlapping margins were no longer permissible. In this bid to define exclusive rights to territory and create a bounded Siamese space, mapping became an indispensable technology...” (Ivarsson 2008: 35)

¹⁰ During this same period, 1883-1884, Etienne Aymonier explored the Khorat Plateau—which the French also coveted—and the accessibility overland and by water of remote areas on the left bank of the lower Mekong and local trading patterns. (Aymonier 2000; Stuart-Fox 1996: 21) The Khorat Plateau was inhabited mainly by ethnic Lao, many of whom were forcibly relocated by the Siamese following the 1828 revolt of Chou Anou, King of the Vientiane principality. (Evans 202: 30-31; see Breazeale 1988: 3) More Lao—especially Tai Phuan—were forcibly removed to Siam from Muang Phuan during subsequent “foreign interference” through 1893. (Breazeale 1988: 1).

Accordingly, the King of Siam decided to send along a survey party escorted by Siamese soldiers under the leadership of a British surveyor, James McCarthy, to search out boundaries (which were not readily definable)¹¹ and prepare a map of Luang Prabang, Sipsong Chau Tai, Houa Phan and Muang Phuan for the purpose of reinforcing Siamese claims to the territory. (Breazeale 1988, 73-74; Tuck 2009: 82) Between 1884 and 1887 McCarthy led three mapping expeditions to Upper Laos. (see Pavie 1999 Vol. 3: 664-666; see McCarthy: 1994)

Various important events took place in northern Indochina in 1885. The Sino-French treaty of June 1885 gave France sole rights in Tonkin, and the Siamese were concerned that this might clear the way for the French army to pay more attention to the Haw problem and move into areas that the Siamese coveted. (Stuart-Fox 1996: 10) Indeed, in an effort to solidify their territorial claims during 1885-1886, the King of Siam (Chulalongkorn) was determined to annex all regions formerly tributary to Luang Prabang. (Stuart-Fox 1998: 140) To this end, action was taken to clear out the Haw from Muang Phuan and Houaphan, and early in 1886 the Siamese army seized and occupied Muang Theng.¹² (Stuart-Fox 1998: 141; Dommen 2001: 15)

McCarthy did not return to Luang Prabang until April 1892 (McCarthy 1994: 172), and in the meantime he created a map 1888 (Ivarsson 2008: 35-36) that was perceived as Siam's contemporary geopolitical layout. It was later to be countered with French historical maps showing the extent of a Vietnamese space encompassing not only the left bank of the Mekong, but also most of the Khorat Plateau.¹³ (Ivarsson 2008: 38-39)

Auguste Pavie

Appointed in June 1885 as vice-consul in Luang Prabang by Consul-General Harmand, Auguste Pavie, an official of the Cambodian posts and telegraph service, finally arrived at his new post in February 1887 after a Siamese-instigated delay. (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 230) Pavie's arrival marked the beginning of a serious effort by the French to gather commercial, political, and geographical information about the upper Mekong region. (Breazeale 1988: 94) Indeed, Pavie confided to his colleague: "Let us gently

¹¹ It has been said that historic Lan Xang kingdom's King Fa Ngum declared that villages with houses built on stilts would be in Lao territory; if they were built on the ground they would be Vietnamese. Supposedly this system was used by the French to determine the frontiers between Laos and Vietnam. (Simms 1999: 31) This procedure would have been difficult in the nineteenth century following the migration of hilltribes who settled throughout the mountainous frontier "trans-tributary" territory and who built their houses on the ground.

¹² "The Siamese conducted campaigns into northern Laos for five consecutive years beginning in 1882. The first three campaigns were half-hearted affairs... The campaigns of 1885 and 1886...were more serious. (Dommen 2001: 15) Note, however, that Siamese troops ventured into Luang Prabang and Muang Phuan in an effort to settle a Khmu revolt and evict the Haw as early as 1875 and 1876, respectively. (Stuart-Fox 1998: 138-139)

¹³ During the Lan Xang era founded by Fa Ngum, the kingdom—with its capital in Xieng Thong, or Luang Prabang—comprised northeastern Laos, including Sipsong Chau Tai, as well as southern Laos, including the Khorat Plateau. (Simms 1999: 26-37; see Sila Viravong 1964: 25-35)

extend our influence in Laos by placing agents there, by letting explorers and merchants travel throughout it, and its limits will become large.” (Stuart-Fox 1996: 21)

Pavie’s objective was to “reconnoiter the country between the Mekong and our first posts in Tonkin by researching the communication lines linking this river with our territories of North Indochina.” (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 223) Like Neis before him, Pavie attempted to travel to Hanoi, but on the eve of his arrival in Muang Theng he received word that Sipsong Chau Tai leadership and their Haw allies were preparing to launch an attack against Luang Prabang.¹⁴ (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 235; Stuart-Fox 1996: 11)

In June 1887, the Chau Tai contingents sacked Luang Prabang, and Pavie escaped down the Mekong to Paklay together King Oun Kham, who he rescued. (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 236) The king gratefully told Pavie: “Our country is not a conquest of Siam. Luang Prabang, seeking protection against all attacks, voluntarily offered tribute to Siam. Now, thanks to [Siam’s] intervention, our ruin is complete. If my son agrees, we will offer ourselves as a gift to France, certain that she will save us from future misfortunes.” (Dommen 2001: 17; Le Boulanger 1931: 269) Indeed, it was noted that “‘Siamese help’ in North Laos turned into a virtual colonial exploitation of the area under Siamese control.” (Culas 2016: 38)

On November 25, 1887, Pavie returned to Luang Prabang (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 246), and in January 1888 travelled to the Muang Theng area to meet Tonkin-based French soldiers on a pacification mission who were moving toward Lai Chau (Chau Tai’s capital). Although a Siamese garrison was already posted in Muang Theng, Pavie was “so happy of finally having followed a route from the Mekong to Tonkin and found Frenchmen.” (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 253-256)

Pierre-Paul Cupet

Captain Pierre-Paul Cupet of the expeditionary corps of Tonkin was selected to be part of the Franco-Siamese Commission¹⁵ and joined Pavie in Luang Prabang in March 1888. (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 263-264; Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 14-15) Cupet was destined to furnish the mission a considerable amount of topographical and geographical work (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 263), and was to be the primary French explorer to map Luang Prabang, Houa Phan and Muang Phuan while Pavie focused on securing the French position in Sipsong Chau Tai.

¹⁴ The invasion by Chau Tai and their Haw allies was prompted by the kidnapping by the Siamese of four sons of the Lai Chau-based Sipsong Chau Tai ethnic White Tai leader when they occupied Muang Theng in 1886. (Stuart-Fox 1998: 141) Later, Pavie was instrumental in securing their release by the Siamese which facilitated his ability to pacify Chau Tai and negotiate an alliance with its Lai Chau leadership by 1889. (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 338-339)

¹⁵ “In 1888 a joint Franco-Siamese Commission, of which M. Pavie...was the French member, visited Luang Prabang, and defined its boundaries toward [Tonkin].” (Boulger: 1893: 192; Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 339-340)

Cupet's First Mission (March 1888-April 1889)

(See Appendix 5 Map)

Cupet readily recognized that three navigable water courses converged on the Mekong in the vicinity of Luang Prabang— Nam Ou, Nam Suong and Nam Khan—which historically favored the political centralization of the kingdom as well as commercial relations with China, Tonkin and Annam. (Cupet 2000: 29)

In April 1888, Cupet accompanied Pavie in reconnoitering a new road toward Tonkin by passing east across through Luang Prabang and Houa Phan, and upon arriving at the Black River in Tonkin returned to Luang Prabang by a different route while Pavie traveled to Hanoi and Sipsong Chau Tai. (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 269-270)

Following his return to Luang Prabang in July 1888, and through April 1889, Cupet made four separate trips from Luang Prabang during the course of his first mission and in so doing crisscrossed Luang Prabang, Houa Phan and Muang Phuan by foot and by boat in the company of Siamese “minders”.¹⁶

Cupet's fourth trip came to an end on April 7, 1889 when he arrived in Vinh in Annam. (Cupet 2000: 176) During the course of this twelve-month mission, which took Cupet about 5,600 kilometers, of which 3,200 were by road, (Cupet 2000: 177) the regions of the Sipsong Chau Tai, the Hua Phan, Muang Phuan and Khammouane had been visited and explored. Important watercourses had been surveyed and studied, and previously considered obstacles between Upper Laos, Tonkin, and Annam had become communication lines that were quicker and safer.¹⁷ (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 338)

Furthermore, the resources and demographics of the main parts of Laos had been studied. Overland routes had been opened and traveled between Luang Prabang and Tonkin as well as Luang Prabang and Annam, the latter by way of Muang Phuan or via the Mekong and Khammouane. (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 338)

Pavie and Cupet Sojourn in Paris (13 June-17 November 1889)

Pavie spent most of his time in 1888 working with the French military in Tonkin and coming to terms with the Tai opposition in Sipsong Chau Tai and their Haw allies. By December 1888 he worked out an arrangement with the Siamese to withdraw from

¹⁶ Pavie and his team traveled throughout the region with the protection of Siamese forces who were usually accompanied by Siamese officials who served as “minders” suspicious of Pavie's activities. (Thongchai 1994: 123)

¹⁷ The explorers in Laos faced numerous hardships, sicknesses, and dangers. Cupet observed that “the bad adventures, which marked my last journey, bear testimony to the difficulty of communications during this [monsoon] season, especially by an overland route. Thus I do not recommend excursions during the rains to tourists who worry about their well-being and who are in search of convenience. (Cupet 2000: 96; see Neis 1997: 53-54) Neis, Pavie and others found walking barefoot to be more practical and comfortable than shoes. (Neis 1997: 46; Pavie 1999: 240)

Sipsong Chau Tai¹⁸ and pull-back to Houa Phan. (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 309) In June 1889 Pavie—as well as Cupet—returned to France where Pavie was assigned to lead a new exploratory mission to establish the Siamese border along the banks of the Mekong. (Larcher-Goscha 2003: 219) Leaving Marseilles in November 1889, Pavie returned to Hanoi as the head of his second mission comprised of more than thirty French professionals¹⁹ who were recruited to explore, map and collect intelligence in an effort to extend French influence throughout the Lao territories east of the Mekong. (Stuart-Fox 1996: 21; Wyatt 1984: 203) By that time the pacification of Tonkin was virtually complete and, as Stuart-Fox described it, French “interest in expansion westward became more acute and the riches and commercial opportunities of Laos began to be actively promoted.”²⁰ (Stuart-Fox 1996: 21-22)

Cupet’s Second Mission (January 1890-April 1891) (See Appendix 6 Map)

From the geographical point of view the previous mission reconnoitered most of the territories on the left bank of the Mekong and the Nam Ou and demarcated the dividing line of the waters between the Mekong and the sea. (Cupet 2000: 191) In order to complete the survey of the country, reconnaissance had to be extended in the north up to the border with China and in the south to Cambodia. (Cupet 2000: 191)

Gathered together in Hanoi in January 1890, the enlarged mission was divided into two separate groups, their initial common objective being to meet in Luang Prabang in June to organize the remainder of the exploration. The first group under the command of Pavie was to go by way of the Black River in Tonkin; the other, placed under Cupet’s leadership, was charged with reconnoitering the region between Muang Phuan and Cambodia. (Cupet 2000: 191) Cupet’s group included Messrs. De Malglaive, Riviere, Lugan and Counillon, each of whom was given a different itinerary to follow. (Cupet 2000: 13)

Crossing the Annamite Cordillera from Vinh in Annam to Khammouane in central Laos, Cupet’s first stage charted the territory between Lakhon (now Nakhon Phanom) in Siam and Luang Prabang. (Cupet 2000: 192) Their agenda included sections of Muang Phuan located south of the road from Luang Prabang to Xieng Khouang, the entire province of Tourakhom and the territories of the province of Sayaboury situated on the left bank of the Mekong. (Cupet 2000: 213) Essentially, they linked up this survey with

¹⁸ Pavie signed a Protectorate treaty with the hereditary leader of Sipsong Chau Tai on April 7, 1889. (Michaud 2016: 59)

¹⁹ The names and brief profiles of Pavie’s forty team members (who served with him over time) can be found in Le Boulanger 1931: 335-337.

²⁰ A commercial agency, Syndicat Francais du Haut-Laos, was established in Luang Prabang in 1889 to look after French interests. (Stuart-Fox 1996: 21; Le Boulanger 1931: 292; Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 383)

the itineraries Cupet traveled during his first mission (Cupet 2000: 193), and in so doing he and his colleagues achieved a combined total of about 6,500 kilometers of entirely new surveys, 4,000 of which were overland routes. (Cupet 2000: 229)

In June 1889, Cupet's team rendezvoused with Pavie's group in Luang Prabang before continuing south toward Cambodia to complete their surveys.²¹ After completing the Lower Mekong segment of their expedition, on July 7 1891, the second mission came to an end. Pavie left for France and met Cupet and de Malglaive—who returned separately—in Paris to draft the comprehensive map of the geographic studies at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 547) which was completed in 1893, “precisely at the moment when the events made it most useful...”²² (Pavie 1999 Vol. 1: 266)

McCarthy Returns to Upper Laos (April 1892-June 1893)

During the period 1890-1893, McCarthy continued his ongoing project by mapping the boundaries between Siam and British Burma and then made triangulations from northwestern Laos eastward across Luang Prabang (where he arrived in April 1892) and the areas east and southeast of Luang Prabang extending through Muang Phuan. (see McCarthy 1883?) However, while surveying on a mountain near Borikhane in June 1893 McCarthy learned of the Paknam crisis that broke out in Siam when the French blockaded the Chao Phraya River. (McCarthy 1883?: 270) He was ordered to return to Bangkok before he was able to extend the triangulation project south to Champassak and Ubon. A new life for Siam was about to begin. (Thongchai 1994: 124, 127)

Paknam Crisis (July 1893)

Pavie returned to Bangkok in March 1892 as France's resident minister and consul-general determined to make Laos French. (Stuart-Fox 1996: 13) Following action by three French military columns to force the withdrawal of Siamese military outposts on the left bank of the central Mekong (Stuart-Fox 1996:13), Siamese resistance prompted the French to dispatch two warships to the Gulf of Siam in what became known as the Paknam incident. On July 20 [1893] the French served an ultimatum on the

²¹ Upon his departure from Luang Prabang, Cupet observed that “it was with emotion that I said good-bye, probably forever, to this privileged corner of the earth where customs have preserved an exquisite simplicity... My affection quite naturally went to this Laotian population, so gentle, so peaceful and so confiding that gaiety never abandoned them, not even in the worst disasters.” (Cupet 2000: 232)

²² A copy of the Cupet/Malglaive *Carte de l'Indo-Chine*, published in 1895, can be found at <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agdm/id/5839/rec/13>, last accessed July 3, 2018.

Siamese government demanding the recognition of the rights of Annam to the left bank territories and a list of other concessions. After further exchanges, the Siamese accepted, and on October 3, 1893 a treaty was signed whereby Siam renounced all claims to territories on the left bank and to islands in the river, and agreed to a demilitarized zone 25 kilometers wide the length of the right bank.²³

Although borders would not be more clearly defined until later dates,²⁴ Pavie's team achieved their objective to connect Laos to Tonkin and Annam through geographical barriers and a "jumble of ethnological groups." (Thompson 1937: 111) In so doing, Pavie's mapping projects spearheaded French colonial power, (Thongchai 1994: 122) and he was therefore able to fulfill his promise to King Oun Kham and include Luang Prabang under French protection. (Dommen 2001: 18; Breazeale 2002: 297-329) A statue of Pavie was erected in Vientiane in memory of the "peaceful conqueror of Lao 'hearts' and the savior of this *peuple doux* threatened by expansionist Siamese 'designs.'" (Goscha 2003: 266)

Conclusion

Treaties notwithstanding, disputes over rights of possession emerged in 1893. Laos continued to be regarded as "contested space" by the Siamese (Ivarsson 2008: 60) who, as recently as World War II, strove to regain what they perceived as their "lost territory."²⁵ During the same period, the French sought to "de-link 'French Laos' from 'Greater Siam.'" (Ivarsson 2008: 93-94) Subsequently, the region's geopolitical schemes, which were originally defined by the explorers engaged by France and Siam, gradually unfolded as their profiles were redefined. Concurrently, the 1893 treaty spurred the growth of nationalism and impacted the ensuing historiographies of "Greater Siam" and "French Laos" that evolved over time.²⁶

Soren Ivarsson stated that, "what we can observe here is how two contesting spatial layouts [surveyed by the explorers] were in the making as both parts—Siam and France—adopted the same strategy: transforming premodern systems of dual suzerainty

²³ "In 1893 Lao was incorporated as one of the five associated regions of Indochina, along with Cambodia and Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina in Vietnam. In the north of Laos the Kingdom of Luang Prabang was incorporated as a protectorate. This meant a form of indirect rule in the north while the center and the south were ruled together directly as a colony until 1899, when Laos became a single administrative unit. (Evans 2002: 45-46)

²⁴ "The organization of Laos as a separate administrative unit within Indochina was a piecemeal process. In the years 1893-94 individual commissionerships were established throughout Laos in order to secure co-operation of local leaders. A further step towards organizational consolidation was taken in 1895 when Laos was divided into two administrative parts—Upper and Lower Laos—each administered locally by a Commandant Superieur. Finally, in 1899 the French merged Laos into a single administrative entity under a Resident-Superieur [who was initially based in Savannakhet before relocating to Vientiane]." (Ivarsson 2008: 94)

²⁵ In the decade after the treaty of 1893 France had the opportunity to further extend her Indochinese empire, potentially to include all the Khorat Plateau but refrained from doing so. (Stuart-Fox 1995: 120)

²⁶ For a Thai assessment see Rong 1977: 135-145.

into modern territorial rights and states.” (Ivarsson 2008: 38-39) As pointed out by Thongchai Winichakul, the nationhood of both Siam and Laos was “arbitrarily and artificially created by a very well-known science—namely geography and its prime technology of knowing, mapping—through various moments of confrontation and displacement of discourses.” (Thongchai 1994: x)

Perhaps it can even be said today that although Laos is presently a politically unified and independent entity,²⁷ to a certain extent landlocked Laos continues to be viewed as a buffer zone and crossroads for trade between modern-day Thailand, Vietnam, and China vying for stronger economic and political stakes in Laos against a backdrop of Southeast Asian and Western interests.

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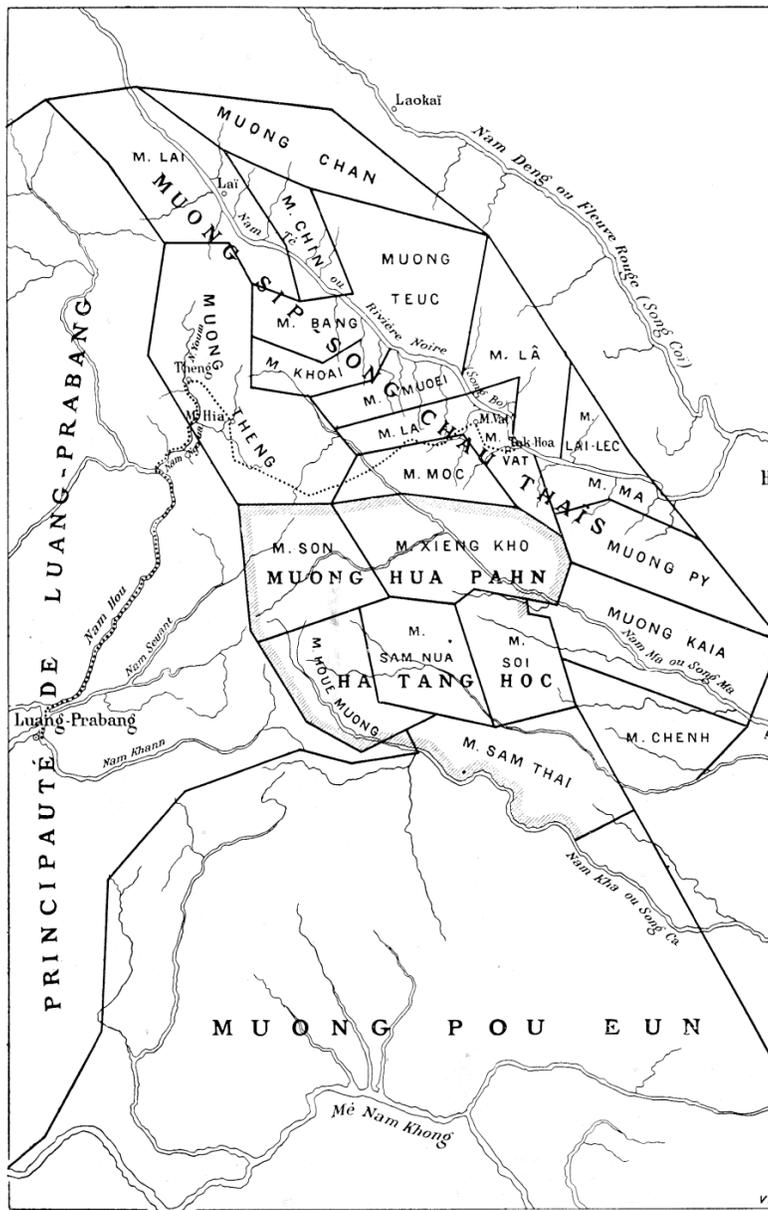
²⁷ On September 15, 1945 Prime Minister Prince Phetsarath issued a proclamation that unified the Kingdom of Luang Prabang with the four southern provinces—Khammouane, Savannakhet, Bassac, and Saravane... (Dommen 2001: 139; Stuart-Fox 1998: 145) The Franco-Lao Treaty of 1953 establishing Laos as an independent member of the French Union. (Dommen 2110: 219) Under the Geneva Conference following France's withdrawal from Indochina after the First Indochina War Laos was granted independence in 1954. (Dommen 2001: 259)

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Appendix 1: Map of Sipsong Chau Tai and Hua Phan Ha Tang Hok (Pavie 1999 Vol. 2: 124)

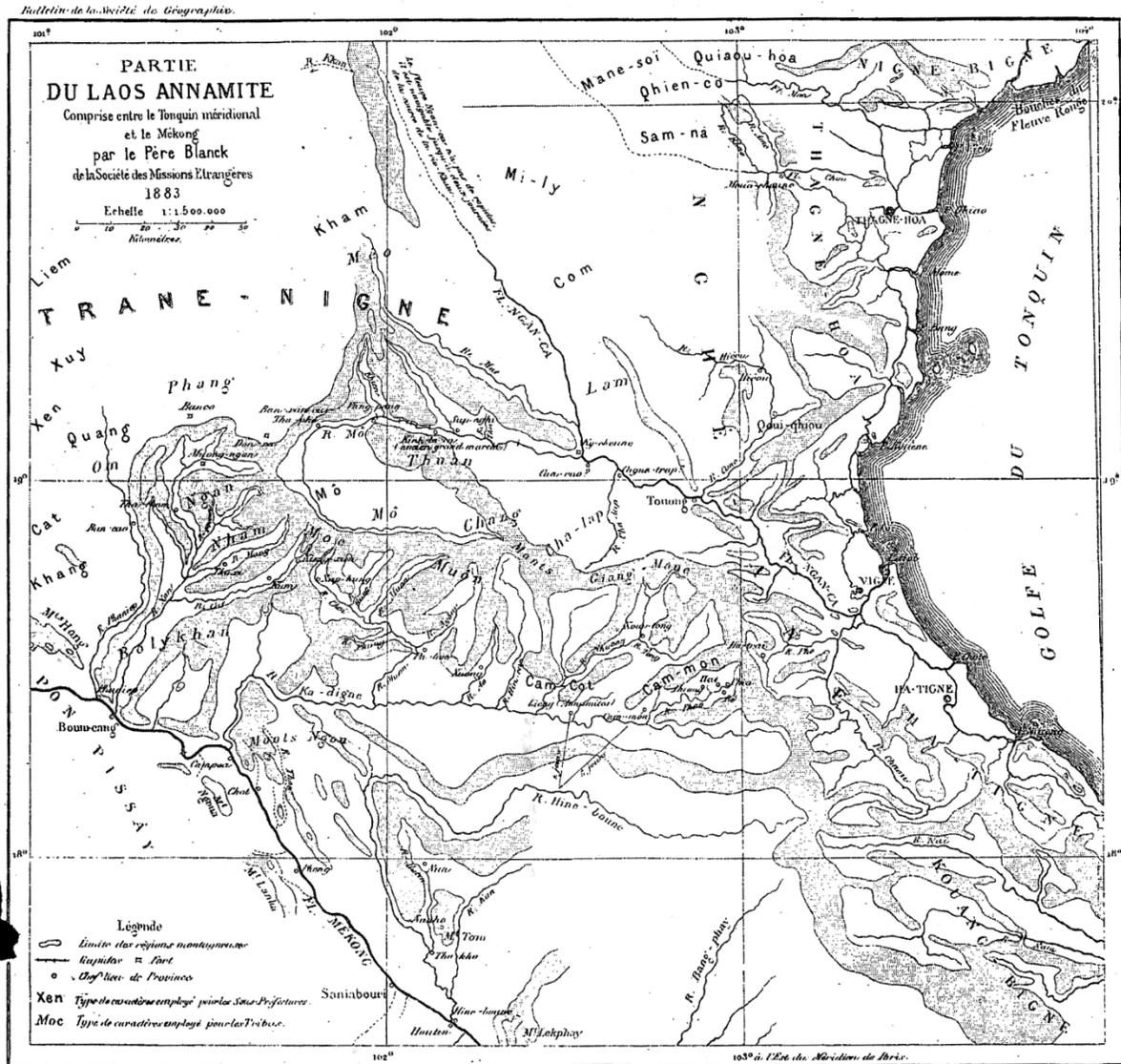


Map 66. Map of the Claims of Siam in the North-East, 1887
 (..... Planned Itinerary from Luang-Prabang to Tonkin)

Appendix 2: Route of Mekong Exploration Commission (Garnier 1873)



Appendix 3: Le Pere P. Blanck's Map of Muang Phuan from 1882 (Blanck 1884)

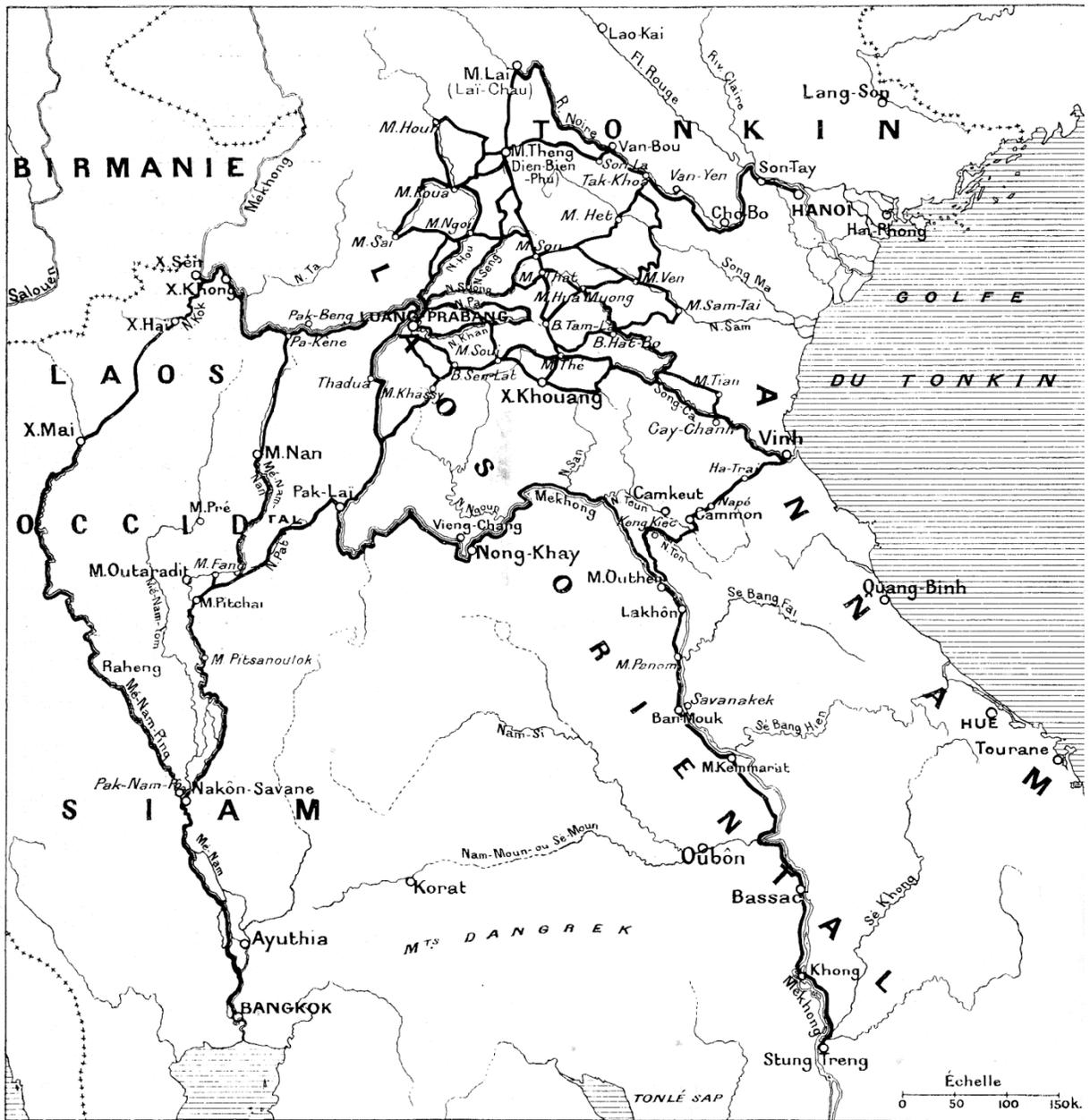


Appendix 4: Itinerary of Neis from 1883-1884 (Neis 1997: 3.)



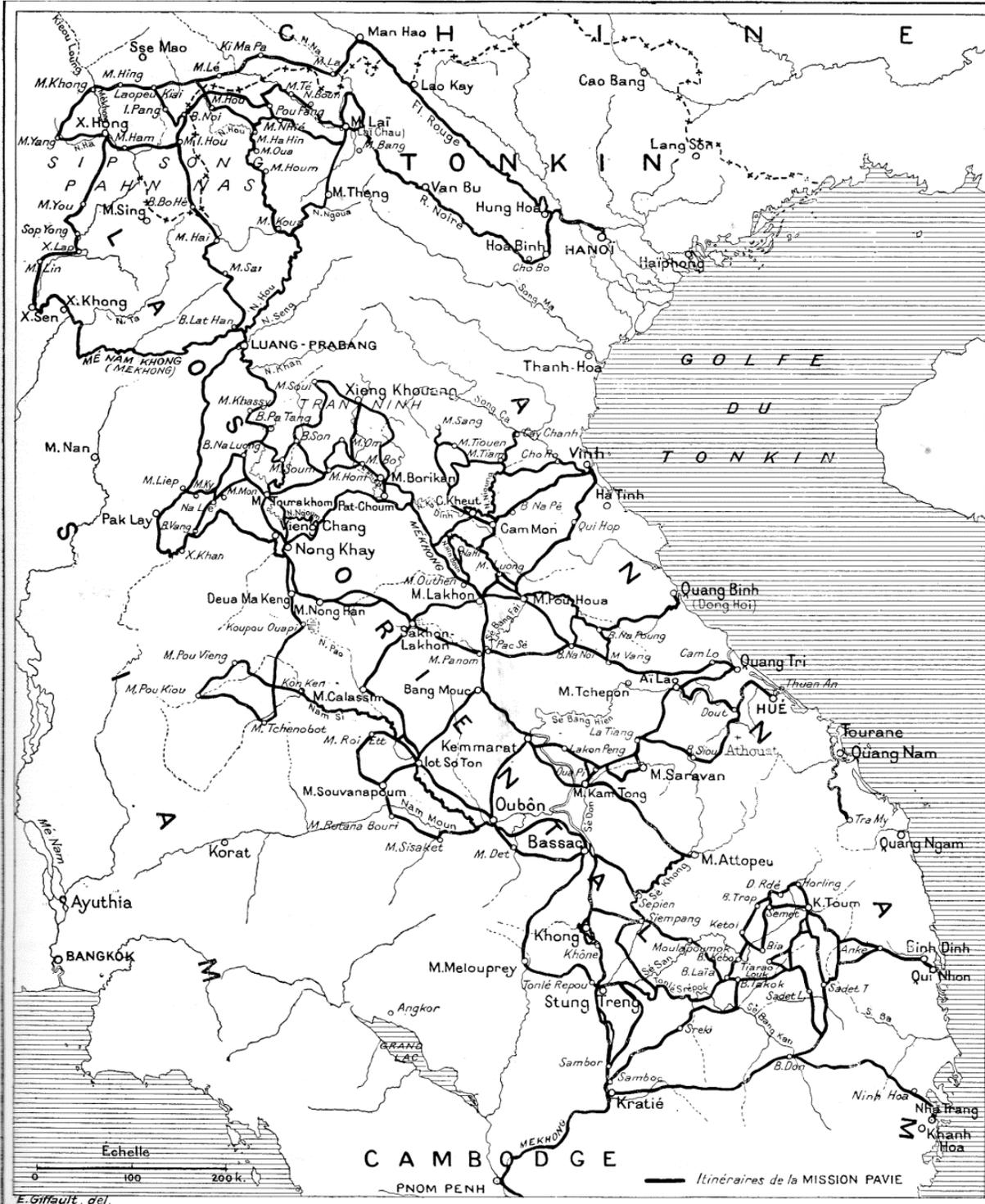
Plate 2 The itinerary of Dr. P. Neis in Laos (broken line).

Appendix 5: Routes Followed by Cupet and Pavie from 1886-1889 (Pavie 1999 Vol. 2: 52.)



Map 17. Itineraries of Messrs. Pavie, Cupet, and Nicolon during the Second Period of the Mission (1886-1889)

Appendix 6: Routes Followed by Cupet, et al. from 1889-1891 (Pavie 1999 Vol. 2: 53)



Map 18. Itineraries of Messrs. Pavie, Cupet, Rivière, de Malglaive, Cogniard, Dugast, Lugan, Counillon, de Coulgeans, Lefèvre-Pontalis, Massie, and Macey during the Third Period of the Mission (1889-1891)

Ethnographic Notes on the “Ordination” of Novices in Mueang Sing (Northern Laos)

Souvanxay Phetchanpheng

Introduction

According to official statistics, 67% of the population of Laos is Buddhist¹; every young man is supposed to be “ordained”² during his life for a fixed period. In Laos, novices are young boys, usually between 10 and 20 years old. They have several names according to different regions and dialects. The Thais call them “*nen*” or “*samanen*” (Pali. *sāmaṇera*) while the Lao more commonly call them “*chua*”. The Lue generally call novices “*pha*” while the Lao use this term to designate monks. The Lue also distinguish recently “ordained” novices, called *pha noi*, from older novices, called *pha long*. Traditionally, at the end of the novitiate, if a boy decides to leave the monastery, the title of *mai* is added to his name.

The monastic community distinguishes novices from monks (Pali. *bhikkhu*; Lue. *tu*; Lao. *khuba*). There are therefore two degrees in the rite of entry into religion. The first phase of the rite is called *pabbajjā* (Lao. *banphasa*). It corresponds to admission to monastic life as a novice. The rite continues for individuals aged at least 20 who want to be admitted as a monk. This second phase is named *upasampadā* (acceptance). For validating the *upasampadā*, it is necessary to have validated the *pabbajjā*. Unlike monks, novices do not receive “ordination” within a space limited by ritual boundaries (Pali. *sima*). Young boys who have been admitted as novices have to follow ten rules while individuals who have been “ordained” as monks follow two hundred and twenty-seven rules.

From the beginning of the 20th century until the 1950s, the monastic institution was the main organization to dispense the learning of writing and reading in Laos (Condominas, 1968; Pathammavong, 1954). In recent decades, the school has gradually become the most popular educational institution in Laos. There were 883,938 students gathered on primary school benches in 2012 and there were 510,940 students in secondary school for the same year³. Preferring to follow public schooling, there are fewer and fewer young Laotians entering monasteries. However, the majority of young boys from Tai Lue villages - a Tai speaking group living in northern Laos - continue to be “ordained”. While the new generation of boys can choose to solely study at public schools,

¹ Lao Front for National Construction, Religions in Lao PDR, Vientiane, Department of Religions, 2008.

² I write here the word “order” and further “ordination” in quotation marks because it imperfectly translates the term *buat* used by the Tai. For the sake of accuracy and not use, I should use only “*buat*” as proposed by Louis Gabaude (2010). The word “ordination” obviously comes from a Western lexicon heir to multi-secular Christian usages. More than “ordination”, the term “*buat*” must be understood as a departure, an exit from the world, to leave one's family voluntarily to take the habit of religion for good or bad reasons. It can also be understood as “to be consecrated”, “to devote oneself to religious life” or “to consecrate an object”. Thus prevails the idea of distinguishing oneself from the common and of setting aside worldly life. However, the common use of the word “ordination” is widely accepted in all research on Buddhism. For these reasons, I keep the term “ordination” to translate the word *buat*.

³ Source: Ministry of Education and Sports Center for Education Statistics and Information Technology.

the young boys from these villages prefer to attend training in the monastery and at school. Why does this young generation continue to enter the monastery, and what does the rite of *pabbajjā* represent for these communities in Northern Laos? The purpose of this paper is essentially ethnographic. It is a question of describing a ceremony specific to this community - the rite of *pabbajjā* - which has been little studied. Indeed, if the ordination rite of Tai Lue monks in Mueang Sing (Bizot, 2000) or the ordination ceremony of Tai Lue Buddhist dignitaries (Lafont and Bitard, 1957) have been well described, an ethnographic study on the admission of young Tai Lue boys to monastic life remains to be done in Laos. The entry into the religious life of Tai Lue monasteries is marked by five phases. Each of these phases will be studied successively. In the first part dealing with the preparation for the novitiate, I will give some contextual information background information, in particular to explain the importance still placed on the rite of ordination in Tai Lue villages. The second part will present the essential role of the lay people who sponsor the ordination ceremony. The interest of this part is also to emphasize the social function of the “ordination” of the novices to Mueang Sing. The third part will deal with the preliminary rites of the rite of “ordination” of the novices. In the

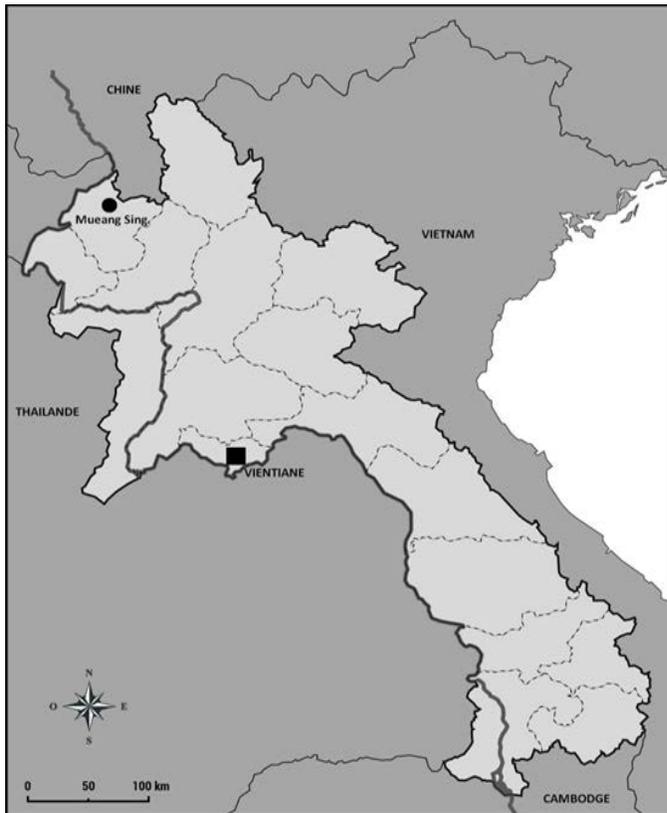


Figure1: Mueang Sing in northern Laos

fourth part, I will describe the ceremony of admission to monastic life as I observed it in a monastery of Mueang Sing in 2010. Finally, this article will discuss the phase of validation of the ordination rite. In order to validate the rite of the *pabbajjā*, the novices must follow a special program called “*kam sam mue*” (acts of three days).

This survey was conducted in Mueang Sing in northern Laos (Fig. 1) over two consecutive years and in two monasteries in the district⁴. Apart from the Lue, whose total number is about 14,000 (figures from the Mueang Sing Planning Bureau)⁵, the population of the Mueang Sing Plain is made up of several ethnic groups, mainly the Tai Neua, the Phounoy, Lao, Tai Dam and some Chinese Yunnan. The inhabitants of the mountain villages

⁴ All the data was collected during my field work for my thesis on didactic practices in Tai Lue monasteries. For that, I carried out two five-month survey visits in northern Laos, the first in 2010 and the second in 2011. As part of a postdoctoral fellowship, I conducted a third survey in 2014 on the social mobility strategies of novices and monks from Mueang Sing.

⁵ According to P-B. Lafont (1973), they were 4519 in 1960 out of the 7000 recorded in the province of Luang Namtha.

are mainly Yao, Hmong and Akha, who belong to the Tibetan-Burmese ethno-linguistic family.

Before presenting some ethnographic notes on the rite of *pabbajjā* to Mueang Sing, it is necessary to first describe the period of preparation of the boy for monastic life. This period is considered by the Lue as important since it determines if the candidate is fit to pass the rite of *pabbajjā*. This phase is particularly marked by the learning of *tham* (the traditional scripture of the Lue), the recitation of formulas and the constituent actions of the rite of *pabbajjā*.

I. The period of preparation for the novitiate

Before passing the rite of the *pabbajjā* (Lao. *banphasa*) that consecrates novices, young boys, often seven to twelve years old, adopt the status of *kha ñom* (monastery boy, candidate for novitiate). Living in the monastery, one of their main tasks is to serve monks and novices. In addition, they have routine activities to perform such as watering plants or cleaning, considered as exercises to practice discipline and create merit. The *kha ñom* learn to read and to write the *tham*⁶ script which is considered a prerequisite for entering religion as a novice. At the same time, they learn the basic principles of Buddhism, such as the five precepts⁷.

The learning of the *tham* is an important factor to pass from the first period (preparation for entry into religion) to the second (the novitiate). The *tham*, the writing used to compose religious or secular texts, is a symbol of Tai Lue identity because they possess their own script, which was used for writing Buddhist texts, legal texts, local chronicles, etc. Learning to read *tham* enables the boys to read manuscripts including Jātaka⁸ or recitations (*sut*) used for rites. For the Lao and the Lue, the acquisition of reading and writing has always allowed the individual to become a literate villager. Often, when a monk decided to leave the monastery, he became an influential person in the village by performing duties as a lay leader of the monastery (*achan vat*)⁹. In this regard, Georges Condominas noted:

“Whether they are *salavat*, *achan* or the master of the *Phi khoun vat* ceremony, their functions are always entrusted to prominent personalities of the village, men of experience enjoying relative ease, and renowned for their honesty, their piety, and, especially for the *achan*, endowed with a good memory (these appear a little, at the village level, as scholars in religious matters); this supposes that they have had long stays under the frock” (1968: 109).

The former monks who are called *nan* in Lue or *thit* in Lao very often became various specialists of the village because they were the only ones who knew how to read and write in *tham*. According to Stanley J. Tambiah, they could also be officiants of non-Buddhist rites such as the *sukhuan* (calling back the souls) or invitation to vital spirits to join the body, specialists in medicinal plants (*mo ya*) or astrologers (*mo du*). Stanley J.

⁶ The term *tham* comes from the Pali word *Dhamma*, which means the law or the teaching of the Buddha.

⁷ Do not kill, do not steal, do not have sex, do not lie, do not drink alcohol.

⁸ Collection of stories of the past lives of Gautama Buddha. The most popular is the Vessantarajātaka.

⁹ The *achan vat* is the one who leads the ritual for the villagers in the presence of the monks.

Tambiah (1968) took a close interest in what a culture of literacy represents in a Buddhist village:

“Except in the case of a few persons, monkhood is of temporary duration. Some of the ex-monks who have reached the level of knowledge and practice of ritual expertise. Buddhism and Buddhist rites are allied to the *mau khwan* (and the art of the physician) because they are rites of auspicious ‘charging’ and do not traffic with malevolent spirits (*phi*). The monk does not practice *khwan* rites; but he is not opposed to them and can himself be the client or patient” (1968: 92).

The culture of literacy acquired in a monastery not only serves Buddhist rites but is also used by the former monks to ensure certain non-Buddhist rites of the village. Finally, the knowledge of the *tham* script makes it possible to copy manuscripts and to partially ensure the preservation of local texts. By reproducing manuscripts, the texts are preserved and are then transmitted to the youngest, the novices, through the monks who essentially teach the art of reading them (Figure 2). The ability to read these texts is thus decisive for the reproduction of rituals.



Figure 2: Learning *tham* at Vat Chiang Chai (Mueang Sing, 2011)

In the first instance, the *kha ñom* must learn the rite of the *pabbajjā* that they have to pass. They have their heads shaved but wear ordinary clothes. They sometimes wear a white scarf over the left shoulder and tied on the right hip. This is a recognizable sign

indicating their status. According to Khuba Kham Ngoen, the head of Vat Doi Daeng in Bokeo Province, *kha ñom* retain this status until they know the formulas of the rite of *pabbajjā* by heart (fig. 3). Generally, they are *kha ñom* for less than a year. Learning the formulas of *pabbajjā* is not enough to pass the rite of admission. The *kha ñom* must also learn the actions accompanying the formulas pronounced during the rite. It is a matter of learning to coordinate bodily positions such as prostrating oneself, kneeling, standing up, with the recitation of appropriate formulas at the appropriate times.



Figure 3: The *kha ñom* of Vat Tin That practicing reciting the formulas of the rite of *pabbajjā* (Mueang Sing, 2011)

Entry into the novitiate must generally be subject to a consensus between parents and children. If the parents decide to “order” their child, he must agree otherwise it would be considered a demerit (*bap*) on their part. Conversely, if the child wants to be “ordained”, parents cannot oppose the “ordination”. If this were the case, it would also be experienced as a source of demerit. Indeed, “ordination” is always a source of merit for parents. The term “*buat thot thaen bun khun pho mae*” meaning “to be ordained to render benefits to the parents” expresses the first motivation of “ordination” among the Lue. Beyond bringing merit to his parents, a young boy who is “ordained” seeks both to live with his friends and to study more easily.

The transition between the status of *kha ñom* and that of *pha* (novice) is marked by the transitory status of *luk kaeo* (*luk*: child; *kaeo*: that which is precious, virtue, the divine)¹⁰. On the day of the ceremony, they adopt the status of *luk kaeo* before they dress for the ceremony. This status can be easily recognized by the dress code worn once in their lifetime. It is especially during this phase that we can observe the relationship that is established between the applicant and his sponsor.

¹⁰ This term refers to the boy who is about to enter religion.

II. Sponsorship of the ceremony of “ordination”

Admission to monastic life as a novice is an important event and the ritual procedure is three days long. The festivities begin the day before the *van sin*, day of the precepts, which takes place on the 8th and 15th days of the increasing and decreasing moons. The Lue, as well as the Yuan of northern Thailand, give as much if not more importance to the “ordination” of the novices as to that of the monks (Fig. 4). Stanley J. Tambiah (1976) advanced as an initial explanation the influence of Burmese monastic traditions. For the Lan Na region, Saeng Chandrangaam (1980) proposed a similar interpretation, “Influenced by the Burmese tradition, samanera (novice under the age of twenty) became more popular than bikkhu ordination (full monk ordination)” (1980: 96).



Figure 4: Rite of the *upasampadā* in the *bosot* of Vat Chiang Chai (Mueang Sing, 2011)

The day of “ordination” is chosen by the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok*¹¹ who sponsor the ceremony of admission of children who are not theirs. Parents do not finance the “ordination” of their own child but that of another child. It seems that the principle is related to the over-accumulation of the merits obtained. A father already acquires merit by allowing his son to enter religion. Moreover, if he sponsors another child to enter religion, he gets more merit. In a way, we can say that he “doubles” his capital of merit. The text *anisong buat* (“the benefits of entering religion”) states that by “ordering” one’s

¹¹ These two terms are equivalent to the Lao terms of *pho hak* and *mae hak* meaning the adoptive father and the adoptive mother.

son, the parent enjoys a life in paradise for four *kappa*¹². The other advantage of such a practice is for the villagers to reinforce self-help or the social bond. Thus, links are created or strengthened between families. The *pho ñok* and the new novice are bound forever. The boy will remain grateful to his donor and the donor will consider him as an adopted son who once allowed him to earn merit. The novice will even help his *pho ñok* work in the fields when necessary. A villager from Ban¹³ Chiang Chai told me, “It’s like a real son but he is not born from us. As soon as there is work to do, he comes to help us”. Through this system of exchange, families help each other in agricultural work as well as participation in marriage expenses.

To allow such a ceremony, the *pho ñok* must agree with the monks. It is also necessary that the donors have saved enough money to finance the ceremony and that the monks ensure that the *luk kaeo* knows the formulas and procedures of the rite well. The cost of “ordination” for a child is between 800 and 1200 dollars. With this sum, the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* buy the novice’s affairs as well as the food to be offered to the guests. The food costs are the highest. This shows that the principle of village solidarity remains very important. In 2012, a *pho ñok* from Ban Donchai spent 7,000,000 kip (800 dollars) to buy a buffalo, 3,000,000 kip (400 dollars) for a pig, three piasters (one piastre equals 350,000 kip or 40 dollars) and 30 to 40 cases of beer (300 to 400 dollars). Finally, the novice’s affairs such as food, utensils and bicycle cost him about 1,000,000 kip (120 dollars). A part of these affairs is placed on a support symbolizing a tree. In the *vihan* (worship building), each *luk kaeo* receives two “trees” near the bed where he will sleep after being “ordained”. He receives the “tree” of his *pho ñok* but also a “tree” of his own father. The *pho ñok* of Ban Donchai has already financed three “ordinations”, the first in the 1980s, the second in the 1990s and another in 2010. The “ordinations” he has chosen to finance are quite spread out over time to allow him to save enough.

Before their formal admission, that is to say until reading the *suvanna pat*¹⁴ (fig 5) which gives them their new identity, the young boys are still called *luk kaeo*. In the following sections, we will see that several rites precede ordination itself.

¹² Kappa in Pali means “world cycle”. Nyanatiloka (1995: 100) says this: “inconceivably long time, one eon, the so-called eternity”. According to Mc Farland (1960: 88), a kappa equals 4 320 000 000 years.

¹³ The term “*ban*” means the village.

¹⁴ The *suvanna pat* (*suvanna*: gold, gold, yellow) is a golden silver leaf on which information about the new identity of the new novice or new monk has been engraved. He mentions in particular the new name of the novice or the monk. This is a Pali name chosen by a monk or *achan vat* using a *tamla* which is a manuscript with various formulas, treaty and memento. He is registered after the real name. Nevertheless, it is rarely used. The date and place of the ordination are also recorded on *suvanna pat*.



Figure 5: Engraving *suvanna pat* in Vat Chiang Chai (Mueang Sing, 2011)

III. Preliminary rites to “ordination”

The first day of the festival is devoted to offerings made at the site of the *ho khaotom*, an altar where offerings of rice cakes wrapped in banana leaf are placed, and the villagers in the monastery are provided with a meal. In the afternoon, the *abhisek* (Pali. *abhiseka*)¹⁵, the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* wash the children in the courtyard of the monastery at the location of the ablution place (*ho song nam*) built for the occasion with banana trunks. The children will not be able to wash during the three days following the “ordination” so that they may meditate on the nature of the body. Once shaved and washed, the *luk kaeo* are made up and dressed. They are brought on the backs of some men in the *vihan* (cult building). The monks come to settle on the flank. A *sukhuan* ceremony (calling back the soul) is performed by a *mo khuan* (officiant and specialist of the *sukhuan* rite) which takes place in honor of the *luk kaeo*. Then a rite of homage is performed by the *luk kaeo* in three directions: the Buddha (*pha chao*, symbolized by the statue installed on the altar), the base representing the Dhamma (*pha tham*), and the monastic community¹⁶ (*pha sangha* or the monks sitting on the flank representing the *Sangha*). It is at this moment that the *pho ñok* asks the fathers of the novices for permission to “order” their children. Sitting face to face, the father and the *pho ñok* join hands.

¹⁵ The *abhisek* is a ritual bath preceding the “ordination” for a new novice or a new monk. In Mueang Sing, the *abhisek* occurs after the haircut and before the candidate wears the *luk kaeo* outfit. *Abhisek* also takes place in a promotion ceremony (Lao. *kong hot*) conferring a grade higher among the sangha’s hierarchy. The *abhisek* can be considered as a rite allowing the transmission of power. Thus, the *abhisek* was the main act of royal coronation in Laos, but also in Thailand (Zago, 1972: 65). *Abhisek* is also known as the sprinkling of statues in order to consecrate them (Zago, 1972: 108).

¹⁶ *Sangha* is the Pali term for the monastic community.



Figure 6: In Ban Donchai, *luk kaeo* are carried on the shoulders to the houses of *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* (Mueang Sing, 2011)

The *pho ñok* makes his request while the father answers him with a formula of blessing to give his agreement. Finally, the *luk kaeo* are carried on the shoulders of young men to the houses of the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* (Fig. 6). Their parents accompany them. Lying on a bed in a corner of the main room, they will sleep in the house of their *pho ñok* and *mae ñok*. The next day, they will return to the monastery, carried once again on young men's shoulders, to perform the rite of *pabbajjā*.

The second day of festivities begins around eight o'clock. The drum is struck to warn the villagers of the event. At Ban Khuang Monastery in 2010, there were twelve boys, aged between ten and thirteen, who were carried on the shoulders of young men. In the past, *luk kaeo* were sometimes carried on horseback. Their height relative to others thus marks the preciousness of the "ordination" and the prestige of such an act in the Tai Lue society. This scene is comparable to that described by François Bizot (1993) about the procession leading the *nāga*, a term referring to the serpent-*nāga* and henceforth designating the young man who comes to receive the "ordination" of the *bhikkhu*:

"The young man is led in procession from the house of his parents to the monastery, dressed in princely clothes, in the image of Gautama riding his palace to become a wandering monk. However, on this staging is added a special ceremony during which the recipient must be called '*nāga*' and dress accordingly. It seems the custom is based on the local interpretation of a story of the canon where the Buddha promises to a serpent-*nāga*, inadvertently ordered, that all future monks will first have to bear his name. (...) Considered a being on the verge of taking a seed, the '*nāga*'

cannot walk: it is carried from the horse to the ‘sanctuary’ *vihāra* (= the matrix)” (1993: 52).

Applicants are followed by their families and villagers. During the procession, the *luk kaeo* can be seen waving scarves in circles (Fig. 6). This scene represents the episode of Prince Siddhartha's Great Departure for ascetic life. This episode follows the four meetings Prince Siddhartha has (the old man, the sick, the dead, the religious). It is said that the four guardians of the world (*lokapala*)¹⁷ would have supported the Kantaka horse's hooves to stifle their noise and thus not wake the guards.

The procession stops in the courtyard of the *vat*, in front of the *vihan* (cult building) (Fig. 7). The children are dressed as Prince Siddhartha. Their faces are made up and each is dressed in a ritual costume consisting of a sarong, a light-colored towel (pink or yellow) under a golden tiara, long-sleeved pink or red shirts (Fig. 8).



Figure 7: The procession enters the compound of Vat Khuang (Mueang Sing, 2010)

¹⁷ The four guardians of the world (*lokapala*) reside in the first paradise (there are six paradises). Indra (or Sakka) presides among the deities. Together, they affect the world of men and animals.

Saeng Chandrangaam (1980) makes a similar observation about the novice procession to Lan Na, a kingdom inherited from a Burmese tradition. “The Samanera ordination is usually performed in a special ceremony. The candidate is decorated as a prince (sometimes in the royal garb of a Prince Burmese) and seated on horseback in order to simulate the great renunciation of Prince Siddhattha. The candidate is living in a long procession full of merriment and din” (1980: 96)¹⁸.



Figure 8: The *luk kaeo* wait before entering the *vihan* to perform the rite of *pabbajjā*

They are barefoot. The twelve children cannot touch the ground so as not to crush insects while walking, and are therefore carried on their chairs for each displacement such as poses for photos taken with their parents. They only touch the ground when they enter the *vihan*, where the old chief of monastery is waiting. He is accompanied by eleven monks from neighboring monasteries (one monk for each novice). As soon as the *luk kaeo* descend from their chairs, they must take care to concentrate on their walk. They have the obligation to trample during the three days of the rites.

Throughout the morning, donations take place in the *vihan*, thus contributing to the prosperity of the monastery and its village. Donors come from surrounding areas, from nearby villages, from Chiang Hung to Yunnan, from Bokeo Province, Luang Namtha, Gnot Ou (Phongsali Province) and Chiang Kok (70 km from Mueang Sing, on the banks of the Mekong across from Myanmar). The donations made by each person are announced on the microphone by the head of the monastery. If daily offerings are not being made

¹⁸ Unlike the *luk kaeo*, we note that the transition from novice status to that of monk is achieved, among other things, by a simple change of dresses. In Mueang Sing, the reference to Prince Siddharta is thus marked only during the “ordination” of the novice.

because of a lack of regular practice of almsgiving, the villagers want the chance to give offerings during these great ceremonies.

The drums of the procession stop for a moment as everyone sits down at the tables. While men eat separately from women, other women continue to prepare food below the monastery. The path leading to the entrance of the *vihan* is left free. Circus tents are placed on each side of the aisle. On the one hand, young men are at the table eating, and on the other hand, older men and women have gathered at several tables. The *luk kaeo* wisely wait for their entry into the *vihan*. According to one host, when three or four children are “ordered”, their friends want to follow them to stay together¹⁹. According to the mother of a future novice, even if they all know each other, the children are not all close friends.

The second day is the “ordination” ceremony. It is divided into three parts, each announced by drummers. The first part of the rite is the *banphasa* (“exit of the world”). According to Tu Ñithone, the head of Chiang Chai Monastery in Mueang Sing, *banphasa* or *pabbajjā*, is the most important part of the rite because it is the *sangha*'s act of validating the “ordination”. The rite of the *pabbajjā* must take place in the presence of at least five monks. The main officiant is the head of the monastery where the ceremony takes place. He recites again the first part of the admission rite of the monk, called *upasampadā*. The second part is the offering made to the new members of the *sangha* (“*vila oen tan pha luang*”). The final part of the rite is the transfer of merits (“*yat nam*”).

In the next section, I will describe the ritual procedure I observed in 2010 in Vat Khuang (Mueang Sing District).

IV. Description of the rite of *pabbajjā* (Vat Khuang on May 13, 2010, Mueang Sing)

In the *vihan* (cult building) the monks are sitting on the bench²⁰ on the left side of the hall (*taeng san*) allowing the monks to be at a level above the *luk kaeo* and the assembly - this arrangement is among others signifying a mark of respect for their status. The villagers always try to position their bodies at a lower level than the monks. Applicants are placed in a line in front of the monks. The congregation is sat facing the altar and the entrance to the *vihan*, up to the first third of the length of the hall. The central axis, from the entrance to the altar, is left open.

Tu Ñithone, the chief of Vat Chiang Chai, helped me to describe the “ordination” ceremony and the use of the texts with the booklet entitled *pabbajjā kam* (act of *pabbajjā*). I give the incipits and some indications on the actions of the *luk kaeo* accompanying their formulas:

1. The *luk kaeo* prostrate themselves before the monks three times.

¹⁹ Louis Gabaude (2010) quotes Banchoy Bannaruchi who exposes several ambivalences of the term *buat*. He refers to the expression “*buat sanuk tam phuean*” meaning *buat* to do as friends.

²⁰ W. Korn, an architect based few years in Mueang Sing, gives a detailed description of the benches: “Benches for the novices and monks are not found in the older or simpler *vihans*, but in the newer or modernized ones. They are arranged parallel to the southern peripheral wall. They measure between one and a half to two meters in depth, between three and five meter in length and with a height between 20 and 40 centimeters. Generally, they are covered by glazed tile. At their western end we find a slightly elevated part for the highest monk or to the Mahakhachai” (2010: 35).

2. Kneeling, the *luk kaeo* recite: *namāmi buddhaṃ* (I pay homage to the Buddha), *namāmi dhammaṃ* (I pay homage to the Dhamma), *namāmi saṅghaṃ* (I pay homage to the Sangha).
3. *Vandā noi* (little greeting)²¹: *vandāmi bhante, sabbaṃ aparādhaṃ khamadhame bhante sadhu sadhu anumodhami* (I venerate you Venerable, may you forgive me all my faults. Good, good, I'm glad about this).
4. *Khamāpana* (request for forgiveness).
5. Candidates get up and take off their costumes.
6. They recite the *vandā noi* (little greeting) again.
7. They squat.
8. *Ahaṃ bhante pabbajjaṃ yācāmi* (Venerable, I ask to be “ordained”).
9. They utter the formula *sakala* (whole, total, all) *noi* (small). This is the short recitation of a formula starting with *sakala dukkha ...* (All the suffering ...)
10. They take the orange robe. Kneeling, they clasp their hands, wearing the dresses on their biceps. Then they put them on their shoulders. At the same time, they recite the *patisaṅkha yoniso cīvaraṃ* three times. This is the beginning of a recitation on the four necessities or means of subsistence: the quest for food, monastic clothing, housing and natural medicines to heal.
11. Then the candidates recite *sakala* (whole, total, all) *long*, the long recitation of a formula beginning with "All suffering ..."
12. They get up and put on the dresses, each helped by a monk (one monk for each candidate).
13. They recite *vandā long* (great greeting): “*Okasa vandāmi bhante, sabbaṃ aparādhaṃ khamadhame bhante maya kataṃ puññaṃ samina anumotitabbaṃ samina kataṃ punnaṃ mayaṃ tathabbaṃ sadhu sadhu anumodhami.*” (I venerate you Venerable, may you forgive me all my faults. May the Master rejoice in the merits that I have done, may the Master convey to me the merits he has done. Well, well, I rejoice in this.)
14. They kneel.
15. They recite *sabbaṃ* (a formula included in *vandā long*) once.
16. They get up and recite *vandā long* again.
17. They get up and bend their heads (looking down).
18. They recite a formula that begins with *anuggahaṃ* three times.
19. They kneel again.
20. They pronounce the request of the refuges and precepts three times: “*Okasa karuna katua tisananena saha siranitetha nibbanti ahaṃ bhante saranaṃ silaṃ yaccami.*” (Please give me the triple refuge and the ten precepts.)
21. Candidates bring offerings of candles, flowers and silver to the monks.
22. The head of the monastery recites the five themes of meditation: *kesā* (hair), *lomā* (body hair), *nakhā* (nails), *dantā* (teeth), *taco* (skin).
23. The *luk kaeo* recite the formula of homage to the Buddha three times. “*Namo tassa baghavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.*” (I give thanks to the wise, to the master, to the illuminated saint.), the taking of the Three Refuges (*saraṇa*) that are the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha then the taking of the ten precepts (*sin sip*

²¹ Abbreviation of the complete formula *okāsa vandāmi bhante* known as the *vandā long* (the great salutation).

in Lao or *desa sīla* in Pali). They repeat after the monks with one voice (each child is kneeling in front of a monk) the ten precepts of the novice.

24. The head of the monastery: “*Imāni dasa sikkhāpadāni samādiyāmi.*” (I pledge to follow these ten precepts.)

25. The candidates say: “*Āma bhante.*” (Yes Venerable.)

26. The monk and *luk kaeo* repeat this short dialogue three times.

27. The candidates repeat three times: “*Imāni dasa sikkhāpadāni samādiyāmi.*” (I pledge to follow these ten precepts.)

28. They stand up and then recite *vandā long* three times while tilting their heads down.

29. Then they recite three times: “*Anuggahaṃ katvā nissayaṃ detha me bhante anukampaṃ upādāya.*” (I ask you to accept me out of compassion for me.)

30. They crouch and repeat three times: “*Upajjhāyo me bhante hohi.*” (May you become my preceptor.)

31. The head of the monastery answers: “*Paṭirupaṃ.*” (It is appropriate.)

32. The *luk kaeo* answer three times: “*Sathu sampaṭicchāmi!*” (Well!)

33. They then kneel one last time and recite *vandā long* three times. The rite ends thus.

After this, the head of the monastery reads the *suvanna pat*²² informing the identity of new novices (where the “ordination” takes place, when, how, by whom...?). The *suvanna pat* is then wrapped around the thumb of the new novice. The final act, called *Nattichatutthakammavaca*, consists of a triple proclamation of motion and resolution. The second part comes after a break. This break is the moment when the head of the monastery calls the villagers to come and make offerings to the new members of the monastic community. The third part is a rite of transfer of merit through a libation of water (*yat nam*). It is preceded and accompanied by various recitations of *Metta sut* (*metta*: benevolence; *sut*: recitation) and *Mangkhala sut* (*mangkhala* in Pali or *mongkhun* in Lao: auspicious, festivity)²³.

On the third day, new festivities take place between the villagers. The number of people is three times smaller than the two previous days. The villagers eat and drink together from noon until the evening. The meal ends with a collection of money for the head of the monastery (Fig. 9). According to Tu Ñithone, the money will be donated to the head of the monastery to thank him for taking charge of new novices and teaching them his knowledge; this money can serve the interests of the village community at any time, and can be used for activities such as the construction or renovation of the monastery building. A group of women accompany a *mo khrap*²⁴ with drums and encouragement. By singing, a woman calls to the generosity of ten donors. Similarly, a troop of men is formed around their singer and also goes around the tables collecting donations. The *nai ban* (head of village) will put cigarettes and 50,000 kips (6 dollars) on the plate, a sum that shows his generosity.

²² See note 14.

²³ The recitations are: *metta*; *yatsa nophavato* (the rite of *yat nam* is performed at this time); *karani*; *atapama*; *ahan sukito homi*; *sabbe purati*; *buddho sapan*; *yo tañano*; *ili ota*; *panchangel*; *buddho mangkhala*; *dhammo mangkhala*; *sangho mangkhala*.

²⁴ The *mo khrap* is a specialist of “*khrap*” which is a traditional Tai Lue song.



Figure 9: The collection of money in Vat Khuang (Mueang Sing, 2010)

For validating the rite of the *pabbajjā*, the novices must respect certain rules during these three days. I will now describe what the Tai Lue call *kam sam mue* or acts of three days.

V. Validation of the “ordination” rite of the novices: acts of three days (*kam sam mue*)

According to F. Bizot, who observed the ritual of “ordination” of a monk at Ban Tin That (Mueang Sing) in 2000, the recitation formulas follow the Pali rite. He also notes that the validation of “ordination” must be done over several days. “What is interesting is the program that takes place after their recitation [ritual formulas], under the name of “acts of three days” (t. *kamm sam mü*) or “acts of seven days” (t. *kamm cet mü*). To be valid, the ordination must extend over several days: four for the monasteries affiliated to the tradition of ‘Wat Suandok’, eight for those of ‘Vat Padeng’” (2000: 516).

It is also noted that these three-day acts (in the morning of the fourth day, novices no longer have to follow these particular rules) also apply to the new novices of Mueang Sing. New novices at Vat Khuang have to sleep in the *vihan* for three nights and are not allowed to wash during this period. According to Kuba Kham Ngoen, a monk from Tonpheung District (Bokeo Province), the aim is to make novices aware of the true nature of the body. This information can be found in François Bizot's observations about the monk's “ordination” in Mueang Sing. “(...) the ritual unity of these days is signified by the

obligation of the recipient to keep his clothes continuously for the required time, without even undoing them for a moment to wash” (ibid.).

An elder ensures that they respect these rules, including shuffling and the individual pronunciation of daily prayers (during these three days) using a rosary. Novices from their “ordination” must move by shuffling, which forces them to go slowly and fix their attention on their walk. According to the monk of Vat Chiang Chai, the goal is to develop attention (*sati*). Also, they use a rosary made of 108 pearls quite frequently with their left hand (the right hand remaining in the gesture of *nop* here signifying benevolence) in order to fix their attention on the recitation of formulas. To develop their concentration, they recite to each pearl taken between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand “*buddho*” (Buddha) and repeat this action 108 times. After finishing, they can continue in the same way by repeating the word “*dhammo*” (Dhamma). Then, they will continue using the Pali word “*Sangho*” (Sangha). We also note the repetition of short formulas which are intended to send merit to hisparents and the monk responsible for their education. This is what the Lue call by the term *khun* which must be understood as an act bringing merit to the other, to show him his gratitude. Thus, according to Tu Ñithone, the recurring recitation “*pita kunang*” (*khun pho*) is used firstly for his father “because he is a man”, says the monk, meaning that he has authority and priority over the wife. After this, the novice can use the recitation “*mata kunang*” (*khun mae*) to each pearl, as a tribute to his mother. Finally, he will not forget to honor his master (*khuba achan*) using the formula “*acariya kunang*” (*khun achan*).

During these three-day acts, novices can only eat twice, once at eight o'clock and again at noon after the authorization given by a *pha long*²⁵. Their mothers come to bring them food. Unlike the new monks who have to collect alms in the morning, the novices receive their food in the *vihan*. Novices recite greetings (*sut phone*) to their mothers before taking the meal. Like the new monks, they cannot wash during the three days of ordination. They also retain the *pha pat* (piece of fabric worn on the dress and passed on the right shoulder and under the left armpit) and *pha khao* (piece of white fabric) worn the same way under the orange dress. Unlike the monks who have to pay tribute to the Three Jewels by recitation, the novices have not yet learned to do so. They will soon learn it from their new masters. They do not have to say a formulae to name their clothes (*athitthana*) as new monks do. After these three days of rites, the boys will return to the school benches with a new identity, that of *pha* (novice). From this moment, a new period of learning begins.

Conclusion

The “ordination” of the novices in the monasteries of Mueang Sing presents a number of specificities that do not exist or that have disappeared in Lao monasteries. Firstly, the period of preparation for the novitiate in the Tai Lue monasteries has become almost unique in Laos. To my knowledge, it no longer exists in Lao monasteries. This preparation for the novitiate may be destined to disappear in some monasteries located

²⁵ Unlike Lao monks and novices who cannot consume solid foods after noon, the novices and monks of Mueang Sing have the freedom to eat at any time of the day. Some take their evening meal at the monastery and others eat with their families before returning to sleep at the monastery.

in the province of Luang Prabang. In the Tai Lue monasteries of Nam Bak District (Luang Prabang Province), the time given to candidates for learning the rite of *pabbajjā* is becoming shorter and shorter, sometimes reduced to two or three weeks. According to an elder from Nayang Tai Village (Nam Bak District), the boys used to remain until they could read the *tham*, perform and recite the formulas of the rite of *pabbajjā*. From now, the novitiate's stay seems to be done more for the sole purpose of developing the necessary skills to validate the rite of *pabbajjā*. One of the reasons for this abandonment of learning to read and recite is the lack of monks in village monasteries. In a survey conducted in 2011, Ban Nayang Tai Monastery had none. The last monk had gone the year before to study in a monastery in Vientiane, and so there was no monk to train the youngest to learn *tham*²⁶.

Moreover, we have seen that the ordination rite in Mueang Sing is based on the sponsorship principle. Parents do not finance the ordination of their own child but that of another child. Villagers seek to educate their children at the monastery while gaining merit, and additionally, they maintain and reinforce the bonds of village solidarity through this system. Once ordained, one of the main learnings of the novice is the memorization and reading of texts. They will gradually adopt the *tham nong* (melody, style) or the vocalization of the senior monks of the monasteries of the region. Generally, they leave the monastic life definitively at the age of 25 years²⁷. Unlike the Lao, a new ordination as a novice or monk is rare in the Tai Lue monasteries. In general, villagers consider that individuals who return to the Buddhist clergy seek above all a solution to improve their socio-economic conditions of existence.

If these few ethnographic notes on the admission of young boys in Mueang Sing to the monastic life show a number of peculiarities of Tai Lue Buddhism in northern Laos, they also testify to the importance of ordination in the perpetuation of Buddhist practices in this region. To better understand this, I will give a brief overview of how Buddhism and Tham script participate in cross-border relations between the communities of Laos and China²⁸.

In the late 1970s in Laos, monks received political training to adhere to the communist ideas of the new regime. Due to political pressure, many monks left the country, fled to Thailand or settled in Vientiane. Mueang Sing monasteries did not have a single monk in the mid-1980s (Keyes 1992: 41). This period of repression was followed by the revival of Buddhism. The resurgence of religion in Mueang Sing was then encouraged by the renewal of Lue Buddhism in Sipsong Panna (Keyes, 1992; Cohen, 2000; Formoso, 2008)²⁹. In the aftermath of the Chinese cultural revolution, there were again numerous boys to be ordained in the monasteries of Sipsong Panna. As soon as

²⁶ This phenomenon is common in the Huai Hit region. According to data from the local administration of Neo Lao Sang Sat (Lao Front for National Construction), 77 monks were allowed that same year to leave their monasteries to study in the urban centers of Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

²⁷ The stay in the monastery is rarely definitive and the exit from the religious life does not lead to any blame. The duration of the stay depends essentially on the willingness of each person.

²⁸ In this regard, the anthropologist P. T. Cohen (2000) spoke of the existence of a transnational moral community between the Lue from Laos and China.

²⁹ In Sipsong Panna, the Chinese cultural revolution (1966-1976) banned all religious practices and the writing of *tham* was forbidden (Casas, 2011). Many monks left the monastery or fled to neighboring countries. Most Buddhist texts were burned and images of the Buddha and monasteries were destroyed or damaged.

Buddhist practices were allowed in the 1980s³⁰, boys preferred to study in monasteries by becoming novices rather than learning Chinese writing and language in state schools. Due to the absence of monks, the “ordination” ceremonies of the novices were conducted by the lay leaders of the monastery. These lay leaders also played the role of preceptors by teaching the texts to the novices. The monasteries of Mueang Sing have also become active centers and frequented by villagers. The Lao Front for National Construction of Mueang Sing registered 267 novices in 2011 and 291 novices in 2014. As for the monks, they were 20 monks in 2011 against 21 in 2014³¹.

Today, due to economic conditions, which are not the same between the Tai Lue families of Mueang Sing and those living in China, education strategies differ. Due to a relatively higher standard of living, the families living in Sipsong Panna favor public schooling. It is for this reason that several monasteries in China are currently lacking novices. To fill this void, several donors from Sipsong Panna regularly invite monks and novices of Mueang Sing to join their monasteries. Many novices from Mueang Sing take the opportunity to live in a Tai Lue monastery in the neighboring country for two or three years to learn Chinese. It is essentially informal learning since novices and young monks learn the language with the local population. Some learn it in primary schools, monastery schools in Mueang La and Chiang Hung or in private classes. When they come back from China, they are usually able to speak Chinese fluently. Some of them hope to find a job in a Chinese company or become an interpreter after leaving the monastic life.

These exchanges between the Tai Lue monasteries from China and Laos are very active nowadays and contribute to the maintenance of a Tai Lue cultural identity through the diaspora. The dynamism of the Buddhist traditions of the Lue of Laos and China as well as the education opportunities that the monastic stay provides to the younger generation are some of the reasons why the ordination rite continues to be practiced every year in the region of Mueang Sing.

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³⁰ According to a survey conducted by Hasegawa Kiyoshi (2000) in Sipsong Panna in 1990, the number of monks was about 740 and that of novices 5600 in the 1950s. In 1981, the number of novices was 655 and no monk was recorded. It is only from 1988 that the number of monks increases to 643 and that of novices to 4980 (Hasegawa Kiyoshi, 2000).

³¹ These numbers explain the fact that in monasteries that do not have monks, it is the *pha long* (older novices) or sometimes lay leaders of the monastery who take on the role of teacher.

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***PuYer-YaYer*: Myths and Rituals of Ancestor Spirits with Buddhism in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR**

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of the dynamics of meaning of the ancestor spirits of Laos in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. Two types of data were analyzed: myths and rituals on *PuYer-YaYer*. It was found that *PuYer-YaYer*'s myths and rituals reflect the complexity and diversity of the religious beliefs in the Lao society. It begins with the folk belief about the royal spirits of the *Lao Lan Xang* Kingdom or Luang Prabang. Then their status has changed to be the guardian spirits of the city called "*Devata Luang*" which is based on Buddhism. In the past, myths and rituals about *PuYer-YaYer* were widespread only in the city of Luang Prabang. Then they were spread to other regions. Myths, beliefs and rituals of Laos in Luang Prabang reflect that *PuYer-YaYer* are not only the ancestor spirits, but they are also cultural heroes who are very important. They are also the creators of the land of Laos, which relates to a Lao view of the universe. Moreover, the meaning of *PuYer-YaYer* in myths and rituals reflect that citizens of Luang Prabang maintain their cultural identity by defining the meaning of their identity via the identity of "*PuYer-YaYer*" which are worshipped by all the people. Therefore, *PuYer-YaYer* is a distinctive way for people in Luang Prabang to co-create self-awareness and a symbol of the social group associated with being Lao in Luang Prabang.

Keywords: *PuYer-YaYer*, Myth and Ritual, Ancestor Spirit, Buddhism, Lao PDR

Introduction

The Songkran Festival or New Year celebration has been practiced for a long time. In this festival, people make merit, celebrate and splash water on each other. Songkran Festival in Luang Prabang is distinctive and different from others in the same region since the ancestor spirits 'PuYer-YaYer' from the myths of Luang Prabang also take part in this festival. *PuYer-YaYer* represent the palladium of the city and is the symbol of the ancient civilization of the Lao Kingdom. The image of *PuYer-YaYer*, who are the guardian spirits, is a cultural creation of Lao people in Luang Prabang.

Since Luang Prabang became a world heritage site in 1995, *PuYer-YaYer* in Songkran in Luang Prabang have been recognized regionally and internationally. *PuYer-YaYer* are ancestor spirits who are similar to a "mascot" of the New Year festival in Luang Prabang. The whole city celebrates with water fights and a parade of *PuYer-*

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YaYer in order to give blessings to the people and the city. Although Songkran festival is influenced by Brahminism-Hinduism and Buddhism, myths such as ancestor spirits like *PuYer-YaYer* have played an important role in the New Year festivals of *Luang Prabang* up until today.

PuYer-YaYer are holy characters who appear in folk tales. However, they never appear in the legend of Songkran. The question is why they are used in the Songkran celebration of Luang Prabang to the point that they have become a distinctive symbol of Songkran in Luang Prabang. The objective of this paper is to study the symbolic meaning of *PuYer-YaYer* in the myths and rituals of Luang Prabang in order to find the rationale behind the link between the ancestor spirits and the religious beliefs and to have a better picture of the complexity of folk Buddhism of Luang Prabang. Myths and rituals are used as the resources of the study.



Figure 1: *PuYer-YaYer* in Songkran Festival or New Year in *Luang Prabang* (Left photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan and right photograph: from Patrick Gay. 1997: 48)

Sources of *PuYer-YaYer* Myths

It was found that *PuYer-YaYer* appear in both the literary tradition and oral tradition that have been documented. Sixteen myths are introduced below.

Myths 1-5 appear in the book “*Wannakadee Lao*” (Lao literature), researched and edited by Bosangkham Wongdara et al. (1987: 32-40), published by the Ministry of Education, Vientiane, Lao PDR. There are five myths in this book: 1) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s coming to earth 2) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s killing monsters 3) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s cutting *Khrua Khao Kaat* tree (a giant tree) 4) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s taking fire for humans 5) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s building the city.

Myth 6 appears in the article “*PuYer-YaYer: ancestor legend, the city’s holy spirits and changing contexts in Luang Prabang*” by Damrongpon Inchan (2544-2545: 56). In this article, *PuYer-YaYer* are angels sent from heaven to earth to save humankind by cutting down the giant tree that was covering the earth and ridding it of darkness.

Myth 7 appears in the article “Religious Structure in Laos” by Charles Archaimbault (in Damrongpon Inchan, 2544-2545: 56). According to this article, *PuYer-YaYer* were thralls of *Khun Borom* when they were in *Thaen* City. They had power to kill demons. The citizens then called them “royal spirits” (superior spirits) and built a tower of royal spirits as a worship place.

Myth 8 appears in the book “The Legend of temples in Luang Prabang” by Chao Khamman Wongkotrattana (2506, in Theerawat Kaewdaeng, 2545: 6). In this book, *PuYer-YaYer* came down from heaven to cut the giant tree to save humankind and lost their lives as a result. They then became the ancestor spirits of Laos in Luang Prabang.

Myth 9 appears in the article “Ritual and Social Hierarchy: An Aspect of Traditional Religion in Buddhist Laos” by Frank E. Reynolds (1978: 167-168). According to this book, *PuYer-YaYer* have peculiar faces. They used to live in heaven but were expelled to live on earth. But at that time, the earth was covered with water and there was no land. When they stepped on the water bubbles, the bubbles turned into land. That is how the cities were formed. People worship them as “royal deities”.

Myth 10 appears in a French book called “Tresor du Laos” or “The Treasure of Laos” edited by Patrick Gay (1997: 48). This publication contains a short description of *PuYer-YaYer*. They were creators of land who planted *Maak Namtao Poong* trees. These trees had human offspring of various races, including Lao.

Myth 11-13 appear in the journal “*Muong Lao*” in a short article written by Thanongsak Wongsakda (1999: 18). There are three myths: 1) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s being royal deities in the period of King *Faa Ngum* 2) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s being ‘*thaen*’ (angels) in heaven and 3) the myth of *PuYer-YaYer*’s having *Sing Kaew* and *Sing Kham* as their pets.

Myth 14 appears in the book “*Khruea Khao Kaat*” told by Suban Luanglad (1999: 1-15) which talks about the origin of Laos. The book contains the images of *PuYer-YaYer* as guardian spirits who help Laotians.

Myth 15 appears in the book called “*Yod Ruang Lao Jak Lao*” (top stories from Laos) in a tale called “*Phuthao Jai Ded*” (courageous old man) told by Kiriboon (2549: 174-176). In this tale, *PuYer-YaYer* has a role to protect humans. Lao also call them by the name “*Pu Mod* and *Ya Ngaam*”.

Myth 16 appears in the book “*Old Luang Prabang*” by Betty Gosling (1996: 8-19). This book uses the term *Pu No* and *Na No* for *PuYer-YaYer*, who, equipped with shovels, hoes, and axes, demolished the earthly vegetation and any hostile peoples who hindered their progress. When the royal party reached what would later become

Luang Prabang, *PuYer-YaYer* became the future city's *devata luang*, or royal tutelary gods, more powerful by far than the fifteen naga (serpent deities) that had previously protected the area.

Next, the myths about *PuYer-YaYer* were analyzed for their meaning and it was found that they have a clear role in Songkran of Luang Prabang. This customary folklore is relevant to the myths presented above. In interpreting the image of *PuYer-YaYer* that appears in myths and rituals, we will consider three factors: 1) *PuYer-YaYer* and their role in how the Lao view the universe 2) The religious significance of *PuYer-YaYer* in the Songkran festival in Luang Prabang and 3) *PuYer-YaYer* as a symbol and its role in identity building of Lao people in Luang Prabang.

***PuYer-YaYer* and Their Role in How the Lao View the Universe**

In the previous section, we presented a synopsis of *PuYer-YaYer* in different myths. These myths are known throughout Laos, especially among Lao people in *Luang Prabang* and its surrounding areas. Although the details may be different, the plot and main features of the characters are very similar.

The role and importance of *PuYer-YaYer* are found to be linked to the Lao way of life in at least two respects. First, the myth of *PuYer-YaYer* describes the building of *Luang Prabang* city at the beginning of time and the root of the Lao dynasty. It portrays *PuYer-YaYer* as the ancestors exhibiting the kindness of the original society. *PuYer-YaYer's* myths make Lao aware of their ethno-identity. They also create religious beliefs. Lao in the past worshipped these two spirits because they were guardians who had power to protect the city. Moreover, they created life, especially human beings. They also created peace and harmony and make the world a place for humankind to live by destroying demons and darkness on earth.

Second, Laotians think that *PuYer-YaYer's* myths are related to Songkran, or New Year, in Luang Prabang. To celebrate, people will wear *PuYer-YaYer's* costume in the parade. Lao consider them sacred beings that have existed for a long time. They bring prosperity and abundance to people and the city. That is why Lao people wear *PuYer-YaYer's* costume in the Songkran parade, which is the celebration for the New Year.

Nonetheless, the link between *PuYer-YaYer* and Songkran only appears a short time ago. It may have happened after the change in regime from constitutional monarchy to Socialist in 1975. Later, two customs have been added, the "*Liang Phii Muang*" (a ball for the city's spirits) tradition and the "*Hae Nang Sang Khan*" (a parade of Miss Sang Khan) tradition. Notice that Songkran was never mentioned in any of the myths about *PuYer-YaYer*. We will talk later about how they have been involved with Songkran.

Having analyzed *PuYer-YaYer's* myths, we found that the main theme is about the conflict between humans and supernatural powers. *PuYer-YaYer* represent the ancestors of humankind and the maker of the land and all beings. They also destroyed

Khruea Khao Kaat trees, the giant trees that covered the earth with darkness. Humans suffered from the lack of sunlight. *Phaya Thaen Luang* ordered *PuYer-YaYer* to come down to earth to save humankind. Therefore, *PuYer-YaYer* are related to “*thaen*”, angelic beings. They are also symbols of an old belief in “*phii*” (spirits) that has been in the Loatian belief system for the longest time. *Phii* are supernatural beings that can be malevolent or beneficent.

When we consider the relationship between the three characters: *Thaen*, *PuYer* and *YaYer*, we find that they are closely related. *PuYer-YaYer* have the same status as *Thaen*. According to Tai and Lao belief, there are many types of *Thaen*, such as *Thaen Tang*, *Thaen Sii*, *Thaen Luang*, etc. Some of the *PuYer-YaYer*'s myths indicate that “*PuYer-YaYer* are *Thaen*'s who come from heaven.” Some folk tales mention that *PuYer-YaYer* sprang from the power of *Thaen Luang* who lived in heaven. *Thaen Luang* ordered both of them to come down to earth to create lands so that all beings have a place to live. Notice that heaven is the original habitat of *PuYer-YaYer* and *Thaen Luang* who was almighty ordered the two old angels to come to earth to save humankind. Some myths mention that due to their peculiar appearance, they were expelled from heaven and *Thaen Luang* sent them to live among human beings. This shows a close relationship between *Thaen* and *PuYer-YaYer*.

PuYer and *YaYer* were a couple who came down to earth together. Their peculiar faces got them expelled from heaven, the land of *Thaen*. When they came on earth, it was full of water and there was no life. So, they stepped on the water bubbles to make land. The act of stepping on the water bubbles to create land is considered a sacred function. We interpret this event as a symbol of the unity between humans and nature. *PuYer-YaYer* represent humans and the water bubbles represent nature. When the two combine, land is created. As such, in the Lao view, their land was created by *PuYer-YaYer*'s steps. So they are regarded as sage men and the ancestors of Laos.

At first glance, the fact that *PuYer-YaYer* stepped all over the water bubbles turning them into land may be viewed as a conflict between humans and nature. However, the hidden meaning of this myth is actually the relationship between humans and nature. It creates a balance so that lives can be created on earth.

Another interesting point is that Lao people view *PuYer-YaYer* as the creators of life. The myths of old couples being creators of life can be found in many ethnic groups along Mekong River. This reveals that they all share one common idea: Tai people, including the Lao, are the offspring of heaven. *PuThaen-YaThaen* or *PuYer-YaYer* or *PuSangkasa- YaSangkasee* come from heaven. They have high status. Humans were created by *Thaen*'s power by magically molding soil and turning it into humans. *Thaen* turns water and land into the earth. Humans and all other beings were created later (Siraporn Na Thalang, 2545: 78-79). All of these myths show that humans believe that they are “heaven's offspring”. In some myths, after the land was created, the earth was covered by a giant tree called *Khruea Khao Kaat*. This giant tree is full of thick leaves that cover the whole place, even *Thaen*'s city. The earth was

darkened and it was cold. This event emphasizes that nature can be dangerous and can destroy humans.

Nonetheless, the myths show that conflict with nature or attempting to destroy nature will lead to death and disaster. This can be seen from the fate of *PuYer-YaYer*, who died after cutting down the *Khruea Khao Kaat* tree because the tree fell down on them. But this is not the end of the story, it is actually the beginning of them becoming the ancestor spirits who guard the city. They become the symbol of the sacred beings of Luang Prabang city. They hold the status of “*Phii Luang*” (royal spirit) who protects the city and the kingdom of Luang Prabang. With an influence from Buddhism, *PuYer-YaYer* are referred to as “*Dewada Luang*” (royal angels). Another distinctive point to be made is that nature destroyed the symbol of the creation of the society. The hidden meaning is that the land’s creation is symbolic of city building in old times. The conflict between humans and nature is merely a scene. The hidden meaning is that nature is the protector of the land. Stepping on the bubbles symbolizes the relief of violence and humanization. The union between the bubbles and *PuYer-YaYer*’s steps represents the union between humans and nature. It signifies human adaptation to the new environment, namely the change from nothingness to creation of land, lives and vitality. This is the Lao way to construct a view of the universe that creates balance in the world.

Besides myths, we find that many rituals are integrated in the Songkran tradition, such as *Song Nam Prabang* (bathing the Buddha statue), *Nang Sang Khan* parade, Bang Fai (rocket fireballs), water fights, worshipping of the city’s spirit, people’s teasing each other or monks splashing water at laymen. On the surface, this seems like chaos. If we look at it symbolically, it represents going back to the old times when there was no social structure and the society was chaotic. Therefore, the chaotic picture represents the pre-creation of the earth. The social structure happened afterwards. Micea Eliade calls this phenomenon the cosmic night (Eliade, 2003: 354). Splashing water is considered a symbol of freshness and abundance. However, it can also reflect the myth of the flood, in which the original state of the earth is covered with water. But the water is chaotic and not suitable for bearing life.



Figure 2: *Nang Sang Khan* or *Nang Songkran* in New Year Festival in Luang Prabang (Photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan)

Two types of Songkran celebration can be distinguished: religious and worldly. Worldly celebration such as water splashing, powdering, playing in mud and drinking alcohol reflects chaotic and free society. Religious celebration such as the parade of *PuYer-YaYer*, *Nang Sang Khan*, and *Prabang Long Song* reflects the order in the society. The religious celebration combines the ideology of many religions such as Buddhism, *Phii* worship and Brahmanism. Victor Turner suggests that all rituals include a special time. For example, in a carnival or a mature ritual, the chaos in a ritual serves to mock the social structure. A man may be dressing as a woman. The king may become a slave. This special time allows people to ruin the social structure and create other possibilities and the members of the society will realize and revise their rules in their daily life. Turner refers to this phenomenon as “*Communitas*” (Paus. A Erickson, 2001: 130-135).

As mentioned above, it is interesting that the Songkran tradition has its source from Brahmanism and Hinduism and had nothing to do with *PuYer-YaYer*. The question is how these two unrelated concepts coexist in one ritual. There must be a systematic relationship between myths and rituals such as Buddhist rituals, ancestor spirit worshipping, *PuYer-YaYer's* myths, Songkran myths, the *Nang Sang Khan* parade or the *Prabang* parade. They are all founded on the need to create peace, harmony, abundance and happiness in society.

PuYer-YaYer and Sacred Behaviors in Songkran in Luang Prabang

In this section, we attempt to show the link between rituals and myths. *PuYer-YaYer* is symbolic of the Songkran festival in Luang Prabang. This shows that *PuYer-YaYer* are the most important guardian spirits. Another name for *PuYer-YaYer* is “*Dewada Luang*” (royal angels), which may be influenced by Buddhism. “*Songkran*” itself does not involve *PuYer-YaYer* because it is not associated with beliefs in Buddhism or Brahmanism-Hinduism. However, after having participated in this event, we found that *PuYer-YaYer* played an important role in the festival. We can even say they are the main characters of the event while *Nang Sang Khan* or *Nang Songkran* is the protagonist. This reveals the association between three systems of beliefs: Brahmanism, Buddhism and *Phii* (folk belief). Next, abundance and city building will be shown to be linked to the Songkran festival.

Another distinctive ritual in Songkran Festival in *Luang Prabang* which shows that *PuYer-YaYer* follows Buddhism is the fact that *PuYer-YaYer* splash water onto “*Prabang*”. This symbolizes that Buddhism has the power to change the folk belief, which is based on worshipping ancestor spirits. Villagers believe that splashing water on “*Prabang*” will bring abundance and prosperity. Therefore, having *PuYer-YaYer* splash water on “*Prabang*” changes their image from the ancestor spirits to the guardian spirits who follow Buddhism. Lao still worship *PuYer-YaYer* as they are deities and guardian spirits of the city of *Luang Prabang*. Having participated in the *Songkran* festival in *Luang Prabang*, we have noticed that Lao splash water onto *PuYer-YaYer* with respect. The elderly would pour water onto their feet and gently rub them. They would then rub their head or their grandchildren’s head. Sometimes, they would take hair fallen from *PuYer-YaYer*, made of hemp, to wrap around the children’s wrists. They believe that *PuYer-YaYer*’s hair on their body is sacred and can protect them from misfortune and danger.

Three things are found to be religious symbols in Songkran festival in Luang Prabang. First, *Nang Sangkhan* represents Brahmanism-Hinduism. *Prabang* represents Buddhism and *PuYer-YaYer* represent folk belief on ancestor spirits. Their presence in one place is complementary. They represent unity in the society in order to bring prosperity and abundance to the city. It is also unites the representative of each belief to make an aggregation and creates unity among the people.

Another role of *PuYer-YaYer* is the role of mediator between human and supernatural power. According to certain myths, *PuYer-YaYer* come from heaven. However, some myths say that they were humans living on earth. The kinship terms “*Pu*” (grandfather) and “*Ya*” (grandmother) also indicate that they are closely related to humans. After they became Buddhist, people referred to them as “*Devata Luang*” (royal angels). The original terms “*Phii Luang*” (royal spirits) have become obsolete from the society. Moreover, *PuYer-YaYer* are important in Songkran Festival in that there is a parade that goes around the city with them being the main theme. They always dance with their adoptive children “*Sing Kaew*” and “*Sing Kham*” while walking in the parade.

The dance of *PuYer-YaYer* and *Sing Kaew* and *Sing Kham* is another cultural event. The dance and movement is a form of ritual, celebration and entertainment. It shows ethno-identity at the same time (Levinson and Ember, 1996: 309-312). Dancing is a code and a sign of *PuYer-YaYer's* importance and their holy status. According to myths, they can communicate with *Thaen* who live in heaven. Dancing and movement symbolize pleading to the Holy Spirit or *Thaen Luang* to give blessings and abundance to the *Luang Prabang* community. Another symbolism of *PuYer-YaYer's* dancing is to remind people of the myth about them turning water into land by stepping on water bubbles. The ritual dance reminds people of how the earth and land were created.

Frank E. Reynolds (1978: 167-168) proposes that *PuYer-YaYer's* dance not only depicts natural phenomena or land creation but also decorates the land and turns it to a kingdom. This action creates a system and order in the universe. This shows that this couple not only assists humans but they also assist holy creatures of later times because they are the ones who turn nothingness into lands. They are thus the first beings on earth. Notice that in Songkran Festival, *PuYer-YaYer's* dance takes place in the temple. That means that they create lands for religious places in Buddhism too.



Figure 3: The tower of *PuYer-YaYer* or “The tower of royal angels” *Wat Aaham, Luang Prabang*, Lao PDR. (Photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan)

Moreover, *PuYer-YaYer's* shrine, known as “*Hor Devata Luang*” (the tower of royal angels), is also located in the temple (*Wat Aaham*). This shows that there is a compromise to install a shrine in a temple by calling it a tower instead of a shrine. It is interesting that the spirits have their place in a temple. Their status has changed to be more complicated. They are the guardian of the temple, the guardian of the city, who have the power over everything in the city, and royal angels. In an important ritual such as Songkran, *PuYer-YaYer* are the first people to pour water onto “*Prabang*”. This reflects their social status and power. Their role has been transformed to be influential in Buddhism too.

The relationship between *PuYer-YaYer* and Songkran festival can be seen in many other details which can be directly or indirectly associated. However, they are

based on the merge between different religions. To be more specific, we will now talk about the legend of Nang Songkran, which is based on Brahmanism-Hinduism. In the legend, a rich man was defamed because he was childless, so he prayed for a child. God Indra granted his wish and his wife became pregnant. Their son was named

“*Dharmabala Kumara*”. The son grew up to be skillful in many things. So, Brahma came down to earth to test his knowledge. *Dharmabala Kumara* could understand the bird language so he overheard the solution to the problem that Brahma asked. *Dharmabala Kumara* won the bet so Brahma had to cut off his own head as a punishment. However, his head was so powerful that it could destroy the earth but it could not be destroyed itself. Therefore, his seven daughters must keep his head up on *Krailas* Mountain. Each year, they rotate to be the one to bring their father’s head down to walk around *Meru* Mountain and take it back to heaven. So the daughter who takes the head in each year is called “*Nang Sang Khan*” or “*Nang Song Kran*” (Office of Culture Committee, 2533: 9-10).

When we compare the legend of *Nang Songkran* to the myth about *PuYer-YaYer*, we will see a similar paradigm. In the legend of *Nang Songkran*, the head of Brahma must be carried so that it does not destroy the earth. If it touches the ground, the earth will be destroyed by fire. If it touches the air, there will be drought. If it touches the ocean, the ocean will dry up. The purpose of Songkran Festival is to bring the head of Brahma to be proceeded in a clockwise parade in the *Ubosot* of Chiang Thong temple. The event’s purpose is to bring peace and abundance to the earth. It is also held in a Buddhist temple, which shows the relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism-Hinduism. Likewise, the parade of *PuYer-YaYer* is a ceremony to satisfy the guardian spirits. There are also worshipping rituals for *PuYer-YaYer* inside the temple. At the same time, “*Prabang*”, which is the palladium of the city, is also part of this ritual.

The legend of *Prabang* is as follows. *Phra Chulanaga* of Lanka city was thinking of building a Buddha image in the Dispelling Fear mudra. People in the city also raised money for the project. This Buddha image is called “*Prabang*”. *Phra Chulanaga* installed *Phra That* (relics of The Lord Buddha) inside the Buddha image. Since then, *Prabang* has shown all kinds of magic. Later, the ruler of *Intapat Nakorn* requested to bring *Prabang* from Lanka to be placed in *Intapat Nakorn*. After many wars, *Prabang* was enshrined in Bangkok. After that, the king of Laos asked to have it back to be enshrined in Luang Prabang (see more details in the chronicle 4, 2507: 315-369). *Prabang* represents Buddhism and also the Luang Prabang community. It is also related to the abundance and prosperity of the city. Therefore, *PuYer-YaYer*, *Nang*



Figure 4: *Nang Sang Khan* is carrying the head of Brahma in Songkran Festival in Luang Prabang. (Photograph: Pathom Hongsuwan)

Sang Khan and *Prabang* all belong to the same paradigm, which is about the guardian spirit protecting the city. Although these symbols come from different beliefs, they are well accepted and simultaneously worshipped among the Lao people. This is an interesting way to show the relationship between humans and supernatural power.

PuYer-YaYer'S Myths: Buddhism and the Identity of Luang Prabang Laos

There are two main groups of *PuYer-YaYer's* myths. One depicts *PuYer-YaYer* as the creator of the *Lao Lan Xang* Kingdom. The other depicts *PuYer-YaYer* as the ancient guardian spirits. Their role is to protect and safeguard the citizens of Laos. The image of *PuYer-YaYer* traveling from heaven, or *Muang Thaen*, symbolizes a king of Laos from the old time, which is the time where the city was built to become the *Lan Xang* Kingdom. After *PuYer-YaYer*, they have *Khun Borom*, who was the first king of Laos. *PuYer-YaYer* are considered cultural heroes who are respected and worshipped in Lao society until today. *PuYer-YaYer* are adoptive parents of *Khun Borom* when they were in heaven. *Khun Borom* later became the famous ruler of Laos or "*Chao Mahachiwitkhong Lao*" (the king of Laos). He is also the founder of the Lao nation. This is an attempt to transfer the power of the characters to the actual city of Luang Prabang and the nation of Laos. *PuYer-YaYer* are sacred beings who laid the foundation of the Lao civilization and the *Lao Lan Xang* Kingdom of Luang Prabang, which eventually became the nation of Laos.

After *PuYer-YaYer* created lands, they passed away and people elevated their status to royal angels. *Khun Borom* who was their adoptive son became the ruler of Laos and founded the Lao dynasty (Frank E. Reynolds, 1978: 167-168). It is believed that the successive generations of the *Lao Lan Xang* Dynasty such as King Fa Ngum, King *Chaiyachetthathiraja* or King *SaamSaen Tai* all descended from *PuYer-YaYer*, the great ancestor spirits who came from heaven or *Muang Thaen*.

Luang Prabang city was created by *PuYer-YaYer* according to the myths so they were the creator of the Lao Kingdom. They also destroyed the giant tree which covered the earth making it unlivable for humans. *PuYer-YaYer* realized that it was their responsibility to protect human beings so they fought against misfortune to protect the citizens of Luang Prabang. After they cut down the giant tree and made room for the sun to shine upon the earth, they were crushed by the tree itself. They sacrificed their life even though they knew they would die from doing so. However, that was just the beginning of the story of how they became royal angels, almighty spirits of the city, and the palladium of Luang Prabang. *PuYer-YaYer* is a symbol of being a citizen of Luang Prabang, which is related to being a citizen of heaven. The word "*Lao Muang Luang*" means Lao people who live in Luang Prabang, the first capital city of the *Lan Xang* Kingdom. Lao people in other regions refer to those from Luang Prabang as "*Lao Muang Luang*". It is also the self-identifying term for Lao from Luang Prabang. The word "*Khon Muang Luang*" (a person from Luang city) is related to "*Phii Luang*" (royal spirits) and "*Devata Luang*" (royal angels) which means *PuYer-*

YaYer. So their self-identification implies that they are descendants of *PuYer-YaYer*, who are the royal spirits of this old capital city.

It has been suggested that places are social inventions. Places originate from imagination and do not by themselves exist naturally (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1991: 685). This idea reveals that language has an important role in giving meaning to a place. Language makes an overlooked object apparent or known. The word “*Luang*” or “*Luang Prabang*” was made specific only for the people in this region in order to mark their identity as the Lao of *Luang* city.

Conclusion

PuYer-YaYer's myths are where the word “*Muang Luang*” (capital city) is derived. It is the name of an ancient city. The definition of “*Luang*” was given through the myths of *PuYer-YaYer*. They are “*thaen*” (angels) traveling from heaven. People call them “*Phii Luang*” (angelic spirits). By calling the city “*Muang Luang*”, it reminds people that the city was made by “*Phii Luang*” and is the city of *Phii Luang* as well. Therefore, the word “*Muang Luang*” means the city of angelic spirits, or *PuYer-YaYer*.

It is said that King *Faa Ngum* respectfully invited *Prabang* from the Khmer nation to be installed in the city of *Luang Prabang*. Later, the city was renamed to “*Muang Luang Prabang*”. This shows that the word “*Luang*” was integrated with the word “*Prabang*”. The word “*Luang Prabang*” reflects the meaning of spirits that are paired with Buddha image. *Luang* is linked to *PuYer-YaYer* and *Prabang* represents Buddhism. The name of the city shows a trace of mixed beliefs in the same place. Buddhism is the mainstream of the society. When people hear the word “*Luang Prabang*”, they think of a city of the Buddha image “*Prabang*” even though local people would perceive it as a city of *PuYer-YaYer*, which is the folk belief hidden in it.

The study reflects the ideology of folk beliefs about ancestor spirits, angelic spirits or *Phii thaen*, mixed with Buddhist concepts, which is the mainstream religion. This shows that there is a compromise and cultural transformation where the outside culture coexists with the inside culture. This is a cultural mechanism to maintain the cultural characteristics of the Lao in *Luang Prabang*.

In conclusion, the myths and rituals of *PuYer-YaYer* function as the space for expression of imagination. It has been recited among Lao for the longest time. These myths are not merely fables. They are in fact the legend of the palladium of a city since the beginning of the city or *Lan Xang* Kingdom. Therefore, myths and rituals about ancestor spirits are confirmation of the holiness of the area, of the city of *Luang Prabang*, which is the physical space represented by the characters of *PuYer-YaYer* who are the guardian angels. They are important in that they make *Luang Prabang* a spiritual space influential in creating an abundance for the people and the community. Myths, beliefs and rituals surrounding *PuYer-YaYer* indicate that they are important in Lao society. Meaning transfer or invention is still a phenomenon and expression of the existence of myth in the contemporary culture.

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