

“Important Kings of Laos”: Translation and Analysis of a Lao Cartoon Pamphlet

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Abstract

The search for national heroes and a glorious national past is a crucial aspect of nation-building strategies in many postcolonial states (cf. Anderson 1991; Smith 1999). In the case of Laos, especially the history of the old kingdom of Lan Sang provides heroic figures that are highlighted as examples for modern state leaders. Interestingly, some of the famous kings have been celebrated under the constitutional monarchy as well as under socialist rule in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR). With the re-traditionalization (cf. Evans 2002a; 2008) of Lao politics in recent years, the country faces intensified state activities dedicated to the creation of an official national hero pantheon. Most notably, the LPRP erects statues of so-called national ‘ancestors’ (Lao: *banphabulut*) including both prominent revolutionary leaders and outstanding kings from pre-colonial times such as Cao Anuvong (cf. Ministry of Information and Culture 2002). However, this project is inherently ambivalent since it emblemizes the LRPR’s attempt of utilizing the legacy of the old Lao kingdoms and the Lao Buddhist cultural heritage as one source of historiographical and iconographical strategies of selflegitimization. The historical role of the revolutionary struggle – the hitherto main legitimacy base for the present regime – then appears ambivalent as well since the revolution of 1975 marked the end of Lao monarchic traditions and entailed a period of cultural-religious decline. Yet, the state project of uniting selected kings and revolutionaries alike into a single genealogy of ‘patriotic ancestors’ of the Lao nation emphasizes historical continuity. One striking project is a statue of the famous king of Vientiane who fought against the Siamese in the early nineteenth

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century: Cao Anuvong. He belongs to the illustrious row of heroic Lao kings from the pre-colonial past who are remembered today as brave and patriotic leaders of the so-called “Lao multi-ethnic people” (see Grabowsky forthcoming; Tappe 2008). The selection of Anuvong as a role model for the present leadership remains, however, highly problematic as his insurrection against Bangkok culminated in a crushing defeat and the almost complete destruction of Vientiane. To explore this issue, the authors here offer a close study of a lavishly illustrated booklet entitled *Sat lao khon lao: adit lae pacuban* (Lao nation, Lao people: Past and present). The book, written by the amateur historian Dr Phuthòng Saengakhom (2000), portrays Lao history as a sequence of ‘great kings’ starting with Fa Ngum, founder of the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang. Though the twentieth-century Lao monarchs are excluded, the inclusion of Prince Phetsarat, the former viceroy of Luang Prabang and father of Lao independence and the ‘Red Prince’ Suphanuvong, figurehead of the Pathet Lao movement and the first president of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) ensures a continuous line to Kaysone Phomvihane and his heirs (e.g., Choummaly Sayasone and Bouasone Bouphavanh). The appendix to the article provides the full text of the original document.

“Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes.”

Bertolt Brecht

Introduction

In the run-up to the celebrations of the 450th anniversary of Vientiane in 2010, several projects to commemorate the great past of the Lao capital have been carried out by the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP). One striking project is a statue of the famous king of Vientiane who fought against the Siamese in the early nineteenth century: Cao Anuvong.¹ He belongs to the illustrious row of heroic Lao kings from the pre-colonial past who are remembered today as brave and patriotic leaders of the so-called “Lao multi-ethnic people” (see Grabowsky forthcoming; Tappe 2008). The selection of Anuvong as a role model for the present leadership

¹ Vientiane Times, 26 June 2010. Other projects concern the renovation of the temple Vat Sisaket and the construction of a pavillon at the location of the historic city pillar (see Vientiane Times, 5 August 2009).

remains, however, highly problematic as his insurrection against Bangkok culminated in a crushing defeat and the almost complete destruction of Vientiane. In addition, the statue of this great adversary of Bangkok might cause irritation among the Thai given the improved relationship between the former class enemies in recent years.

The search for national heroes and a glorious national past is a crucial aspect of nation-building strategies in many postcolonial states (cf. Anderson 1991; Smith 1999). In the case of Laos, especially the history of the old kingdom of Lan Sang provides heroic figures that are highlighted as examples for modern state leaders. Interestingly, some of the famous kings have been celebrated under the constitutional monarchy as well as under socialist rule in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). With the re-traditionalization (cf. Evans 2002a; 2008) of Lao politics in recent years, the country faces intensified state activities dedicated to the creation of an official national hero pantheon. Most notably, the LPRP erects statues of so-called national 'ancestors' (Lao: *banphabulut*) including both prominent revolutionary leaders and outstanding kings from pre-colonial times such as Cao Anuvong (cf. Ministry of Information and Culture 2002). However, this project is inherently ambivalent since it emblemizes the LRPR's attempt of utilizing the legacy of the old Lao kingdoms and the Lao Buddhist cultural heritage as one source of historiographical and iconographical strategies of self-legitimization. The historical role of the revolutionary struggle – the hitherto main legitimacy base for the present regime – then appears ambivalent as well since the revolution of 1975 marked the end of Lao monarchic traditions and entailed a period of cultural-religious decline. Yet, the state project of uniting selected kings and revolutionaries alike into a single genealogy of 'patriotic ancestors' of the Lao nation emphasizes historical continuity.

Due to the fact that these strategies have their precedents during the time of the monarchy, it is useful to compare contemporary official choices of national heroes to the ones promoted under royalist rule. After having gained independence in 1953/54, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) adopted various historiographic and iconographic strategies to define and foster Lao national identity. This identity politics came under considerable pressure during the Lao civil war (1958–1973)

and the rising of the communist movement supported largely by ethnic minority groups. In this article, we would like to present a rare example of the aforementioned strategies of identity politics in war-torn postcolonial Laos, namely a colorful cartoon pamphlet: “Important Kings of Laos” (*Pha maha kasat ong samkhan khòng lao*) published by the royal Ministry of Information, Propaganda, and Tourism [sic] in 1970. The short booklet, comprising only 25 pages, illustrates the biographies of seven outstanding kings of the Lao past. It provides valuable insights into the RLG’s ideas of Lao national identity and of the relationship between precolonial history and present political circumstances. By analyzing the depiction and characterization of these kings, we shall furthermore discuss continuities and differences between the choice of national heroes under the RLG and the LRPR. We argue that some kings carry the potential of being timeless national ancestors regardless of the dominating political ideology whereas other kings appear as ambiguous under certain circumstances. The configuration of a national hero pantheon is a highly ideological task and linked to the respective political situation. Before focusing on the cartoon, we would like to give a short survey on Lao national historiography and iconography.²

National historiography and iconography under royalism and socialism

Shortly after independence, Lao nation-building was sustained by several projects of historiography and iconography.³ In 1957, the first statue of a former

² It would be an interesting topic to discuss when and how cartoons were introduced to Lao popular culture. According to our knowledge, this topic has not yet been properly researched. However, a cursory review of Lao magazines published during the 1960s show that cartoons were at least occasionally used for propaganda purposes. One striking example is the article “The infiltration and destructions of the Communists in South Vietnam” (*Kan saeksiim lae bòn thamlai khòng khòmmunit nai wiatnam tai*) published in one of the 1964 issues of *Lok Patchuban* (“Contemporary World”), a propaganda magazine of the Lao Royal Government. The twelve cartoons, accompanied by short explanatory texts, resemble in their style and layout the cartoons of the 1970 pamphlet.

³ Evans (2002b: 70–71) stresses that the Lao nationalism emerging in the post-World War II period owed much to earlier French endeavours to create the notion of a Lao cultural identity as “it was the French who brought the idea of the modern nation to Laos”. Ivarsson (2008) discusses how the Lao perception of the past builds on the historical narratives that came into being during the French colonial period. He also highlights the inspiration that modern Lao nationalism received from the Thai, the ‘historical enemy’ in contemporary LPDR historiography.

king was erected in Vientiane. The king was Sai Setthathilat, who transferred the Lao capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane around 1563 and who built the That Luang (“great stupa”) for this occasion (cf. Stuart-Fox 1998). This stupa, modelled after the Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai, is regarded as the most important national symbol of the Lao and has been used to embellish banknotes and the state emblem of contemporary LPDR. To this day Sai Setthathilat is enthroned in front of the That Luang and figures prominently in the collective memory of the Lao. Further iconographic activities in the 1960s were largely confined to bronze statues of the late king Sisavang Vong (r. 1904–1959).⁴

Parallel to the erection of Setthathilat’s statue, the Royal Lao Government commissioned the construction of the *Anusavali* (literally, “monument”) on a hill looking down towards the *Hò Kham* (the former Royal, now Presidential Palace). The monument was completed in the early 1970s, though much of the interior design has been left unfinished to this day. The *Anusavali* was named the “Monument to the Unknown Soldier” (*anusavali thahan bò mi sü*) to commemorate the war dead on the royalist side of the Lao civil war. After 1975 the new communist regime thus had ambiguous feelings concerning this monument. That changed in May 1995 when the *Anusavali* was declared a “national heirloom” and renamed *Patu Sai* or the “Arch of Victory” in commemoration of the victims during the pro-Communist uprising in Vientiane on 23 August 1975 (Evans 1998: 119–120).

These iconographic endeavours coincided with the publication of the first comprehensive history of the Lao nation, entitled *Phongsawadan Lao* (“History of Laos”), written by Maha Sila Viravong (1905–1987). The book covers the whole period from the mythical origins of the Lao to the beginning of French colonial rule. Maha Sila, an exceptional traditional scholar and respected by all political camps as a Lao patriot, was probably the most influential scholar in shaping modern Lao

⁴ The bronze statues of Sisavang Vong in Luang Prabang and Vientiane were presents from the USSR to the Lao people after the constitution of the second coalition government of Laos (1962). Thus both statues (in front of the former royal palace in Luang Prabang and at Vat Si Müang, the site of the city pillar (*lak müang*) of Vientiane) were spared by the revolutionary iconoclasm of the years 1975–1979, unlike the statues of two prominent figures of the royal government, Katay Don Sasorith and Prince Bun Um (Evans 1998: 116–118). A modest statue of Kou Voravong still overlooks a garden in Savannakhet. Kou was assassinated in 1954 after he approved negotiations with the Pathet Lao.

historiography (maybe only comparable with Prince Damrong Rachanuphap in Thailand). The *Phongsawadan Lao* is based mainly on the royal chronicles of Luang Prabang and focuses on ethnic Lao culture and history – thereby sidelining regional histories of the different ethnic minorities. It has to be noted that a considerable part of Maha Sila’s work found its way into the contemporary LPDR historiography shaped by Phoumi Vongvichit (cf. Chalong 2003; Lockhart 2006).⁵

After the revolution of 1975, royal and Buddhist icons fell into disrespect and socialist realism dominated banknotes and propaganda billboards. However, the memorial busts of the late party leader and state president Kaysone Phomvihane, produced by North Korea and erected in the second half of the 1990s in the national, provincial and district capitals, already betrayed the resurgence of Buddhism for creating a shared identity among the Lao.⁶ Each of these Kaysone busts was placed on a pedestal decorated with lotus motifs and surmounted by a roof shaped like a nine-tiered parasol (*chattra*), a symbol of Buddhist kingship. Since 1997, Kaysone dominates the Lao Kip – in combination with Buddhist icons such as the That Luang and Vat Xieng Thong (cf. Tappe 2007). This iconographic composition represents a symbiotic relationship between post-socialist state power and Buddhist religion. It is evident here, that the LPRP links itself with the history of Lan Sang and claims the former role of the king as protector of the Lao cultural heritage. This is reflected by a lavishly illustrated booklet entitled *Sat lao khon lao: adit lae pacuban* (Lao nation, Lao people: Past and present). The book, written by the amateur historian Dr Phuthòng Saengkham (2000), portrays Lao history as a sequence of ‘great kings’ starting with Fa Ngum, founder of the Lao kingdom of Lan

⁵ Also in 1957, the RLG published a small booklet that propagated a policy of national independence and strict neutrality in the Cold War confrontation between East and West while at the same time defending an anti-communist state ideology. The cover shows the Lao royal red flag with a three-faced albino elephant in its centre. In front there is King Sisavang Vong’s portrait (r. 1905–1959). Next to him we see a Buddha image and a folded manuscript (*cia sa*) bearing the word *latthathammanun* (constitution). See Anonymous 1957.

⁶ The main bust in Vientiane was inaugurated on 20 November 1995. Evans (1998: 35–36) observes: “Furthermore, the spatial location of these statues across the country is revealing. Larger busts of Kaysone (1.2 m) are installed at the provincial level, while the smaller (0.75) busts are installed at the district level. (...) One can see in this layout shades of the older *müang* structure, with smaller units being subordinate to and incorporated by larger and more central units, culminating at last in the main statues in Vientiane — in the National Assembly and in the museum.”

Sang. Though the twentieth-century Lao monarchs are excluded, the inclusion of Prince Phetsarat⁷, the former viceroy of Luang Prabang and father of Lao independence and the ‘Red Prince’ Suphanuvong, figurehead of the Pathet Lao movement and the first president of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) ensures a continuous line to Kaysone Phomvihane and his heirs (e.g., Choummaly Sayasone and Bouasone Bouphavanh).

As mentioned before, the official configuration of a Lao national hero pantheon reveals the same strategy of creating a historical continuity from the kingdom of Lan Sang to the LPDR and a genealogy of both royal and revolutionary national ‘ancestors’. In 2002, the Ministry of Information and Culture (MIC) published a list of yet-to-built statues that illuminated the tendencies of late-socialist identity politics.⁸ The statues represent a selection of Lao patriots (*nak hak sat*) as examples “for the education of the national spirit of the Lao multi-ethnic people” (MIC 2002: 6). Presently, the old statue of Setthathilat has four additional companions: Fa Ngum (1316–1370), the founder of the kingdom of Lan Sang in 1353, Kaysone Phomvihane (1920–1992) and Souphanouvong (1909–1995), the most popular protagonists of the revolutionary movement, and – as a somewhat exceptional case – the legendary hero of Khammuan, Lord Sikhottabong.⁹ Fa Ngum was honored with a statue in the city centre of Vientiane, inaugurated 5 January 2003 on the occasion of the 650th anniversary of the founding of Lan Sang. Souphanouvong’s statue was erected in his birthplace Luang Prabang in 2007. The prince is dressed in modest suit and applauds as was his habit when meeting the ‘people’ (Le Renovateur, 12 December 2007). According to the plan from 2002, a second statue for Souphanouvong will be erected in the vicinity of the That Luang (Ministry of Information and Culture 2002:

⁷ For a critical assessment of this crucial figure of early Lao nationalism see Ivarsson and Goscha (2008) and Grabowsky’s introduction to the biography of Phetsarath written by Maha Sila (2003).

⁸ The original plan for this ambitious project, however, dates back to a party decision in 1996 (MIC 2002: 8).

⁹ The construction of this statue in Thakhaek was not part of the original plans of the government to erect statues for “national ancestors” and must be regarded as a rare example of regional history-building. Lord Sikhottabong is remembered as having saved the predecessor settlement of present-day Vientiane from ravaging elephants in the sixth century (Vientiane Times, 4 February 2009).

11).¹⁰ Kaysone, already honored with a huge statue in front of his museum in Vientiane and at his birthplace Savannakhet, will receive another one in Viengxay (Houaphan province) where he and his comrades sought shelter inside caves during the nine years of constant American bombing.¹¹

Cao Sulinyavongsa and Cao Anuvong are, besides Fa Ngum, two monarchs also to be honoured through this state cult of national heroes. The reign of the former (r. 1647–1694) is collectively remembered as the “golden age” (*nyuk thong*) of Lan Sang, a period of peace and prosperity, though we possess little contemporaneous historical evidence (e.g. inscriptions) from this period. Soon after Cao Sulinyavongsa’s death, Lan Sang disintegrated into three separated kingdoms: Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak. As mentioned before, Cao Anuvong launched an ill-fated uprising in 1826/27 against the Siamese who had forced the three Lao kingdoms under their suzerainty half a century earlier. The fact that his statue is prioritized over the one for Sulinyavongsa suggests that Anuvong’s reign fits better into the official historical narrative of the Lao “liberation struggle” than the peaceful and less eventful era of Sulinyavongsa.

Further memorial sites are envisaged for three members of the first post-revolutionary politburo, Phoumi Vongvichit, Phoun Siphaseut and Sisomphon Lovansay, and for the military leaders Sithon Kommadam, Faydang Lobliayao and Thao Tou.¹² The latter three revolutionary heroes represent the ethnic minorities’ support for the national “liberation” and will be honored with statues in their respective home provinces: The Hmong military leaders Faydang and Tou – father of

¹⁰ In 2006, a museum was opened in Souphanouvong’s former residence and office rooms close to the Ministry of Defense in Phonkheng village. Less pompous than the Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial, the museum contains photos and various objects that document the revolutionary career of the prince.

¹¹ For a recent assessment of the present regime’s strategies of self-legitimization that link the Buddhist cultural heritage with the revolutionary legacy, see Tappe (forthcoming).

¹² It can be expected that the recently deceased Nouhak Phoumsavan (1910–2008) will also be honored with a memorial in the near future since he is considered as one of the LRPR’s central figures and Kaysone’s right hand during the revolutionary struggle (Vientiane Times, 15 September 2008). Although only a few of these commemorative sites have been realized already, the Vientiane Times (22 May 2010) recently announced additional plans for statues of protagonists of ethnic uprisings during the French colonial period (Pho Kadam, Ong Kaeo, Ong Kommadam, Cao Fa Pachai). Vietnamese intentions to donate a statue of Ho Chi Minh to be placed in the city center of Vientiane currently provoke protests among Lao exiles.

politburo member Phani Yathotou – in Xieng Khouang (Siang Khuang), Sithon as the leader of the southern Mon-Khmer-speaking groups in Salavan province. Phoumi, Phoun and Sisomphon were members of the first politburo after 1975 and belonged to the leadership of the LRPR from its beginnings in the 1950s. Moreover, Phoumi Vongvichit is regarded as the chief ideologist of the LRPR.¹³ These six prominent figures stand for the ‘anti-imperialist struggle’ against French and American domination and represent the LRPR as the leading core of the so-called ‘Lao multi-ethnic people’ (*pasason lao banda phao*, the leitmotif of present-day historiography).

Before analyzing the RLG’s selection of national heroes in the cartoon “Important Kings of Laos”, we would like to take a short glance at the representation of the four most popular historical kings in the *Pavatsat Lao* (“History of Laos”), the comprehensive history book authorized by the LRPR (MIC 2000; see Lockhart 2006). Despite its clear dedication to historical materialism and Marxist-Leninist vocabulary, the chapters on the history of Lan Sang reveal the ongoing influence of Maha Sila’s *Phongsavadan*. Fa Ngum, Setthathilat and Anuvong are characterized as great military leaders who managed to unite the ‘Lao nation’ to ward off external aggression or to guarantee cultural and economic prosperity. They appear as proto-revolutionary fighters on behalf of the ‘Lao multi-ethnic people’ threatened by ‘feudalists’ and ‘imperialists’ – a somewhat anachronistical transfer of revolutionary jargon into the pre-colonial past. Since Soulinyavongsa is lacking spectacular military activities, his reign is represented as a period of highly developed state-building (cf. Tappe 2008). Some of the more ambivalent aspects of these kings, such as Anuvong’s spectacular defeat at the hands of the Siamese, will be further discussed in the analysis of the cartoon.

All four kings that are now considered as ‘patriotic’ leaders of the ‘people’ in pre-colonial times belong to the pantheon described in “Important Kings of Laos”. As we will show with the following translation and analysis, there are parallels and differences to the narratives found in the *Pavatsat Lao*, partly explicable by the historical circumstances of the 2nd Indochina War. For an adequate assessment of the incorporation of monarchic aspects in contemporary Lao historiography as a

¹³ Already during the civil war, Phoumi (1968) published an official history of the ‘liberation struggle’: *Le Laos et la lutte victorieuse du peuple lao contre le neo-colonialisme americaine*.

legitimatory device, it thus appears to be useful to examine how the *ancien régime* regarded its historical traditions. It will turn out that a kind of Buddhist mainstream culture – represented by ‘heroic kings’ (*vilakasat*) of the Lao past – is postulated as the basis of Lao society and culture. Moreover, “Important Kings of Laos” provides information about an interpretation of Lao history serving to legitimise the ruling regime in times of national crisis. In many respects it might contribute to a better understanding of the present Lao policy of collective remembrance and of politics of self-legitimization.

Translation of “Important Kings of Laos”¹⁴

Foreword by His Majesty Suvanna Phuma, Prime Minister

Dear fellow citizens,

I feel the greatest joy at having seen the coloured historical book “Important Kings of Laos” which you are now holding in your hand.

While our fatherland is exposed to the danger of foreign attacks, we should remember the valour of our ancestors and their courage in sacrificing [themselves], as well as the heroic kings of Lan Sang. Thanks to the courage of these rulers in sacrificing [themselves], until today the Lao soil [still] belongs to us. Therefore it is the obligation of all of us to protect and defend the entire territory of the Lao kingdom so that it will not disappear from the map.

In my capacity as the leader of the government of His Majesty, the King, and as a nationalist (*nak satninyom*)¹⁵, I appeal to all my fellow countrymen to read this book carefully and then pass it on to [others] for reading.

The nation (*sat*) remains the nation and Laos remains Laos only if every Lao untiringly shares the burden [of national responsibility] and is willing to make

¹⁴ Since we aimed at remaining close to the original in our translation, some sentences might appear odd to English native speakers.

¹⁵ Contemporary Lao historiography prefers the concept “patriotism” (*khuam hak sat*; literally: love to the nation) as one of the key values within official Lao national discourse (see MIC 2002: 6). The front organisation of the Communist Party was until 1975 named “Lao Patriotic Front” (*naeo lao hak sat*).

sacrifices like our ancestors once did. We descendants should unfailingly keep in mind their glorious deeds.

Vientiane, 1 January 1970

(Signature)

Cao Suvanna Phuma

(Cao Kommana)¹⁶

Phacao Fa Ngum: Father of the Lao nation (B.E. 1859–1917, A.D. 1316–1374)

Although many countries exist in this world, there are not many states that are as old as the kingdom of Laos. We know too well that the founder of this kingdom was Phacao Fa Ngum.

Phacao Fa Ngum was born in the year 1859¹⁷ (A.D. 1316/17) of the Buddhist era in Müang Sua, the present day Luang Prabang. At that time a Lao kingdom was non-existent, but there were various polities (*müang*), which were kingdoms of smaller domains struggling with one another for supremacy. Müang Sua belonged to one of these polities.

The king of Müang Sua came into a conflict with his son over a concubine. So he ordered the son and grandson to leave, and so Cao Fa Ngum deserted the *müang*.

Cao Fa Ngum and his father boarded a boat and fled by water down the Mekong. After many weeks [they] reached Angkor Vat in the land of the Khmer.

Cao Fa Ngum was brought up by Pha Maha Pasaman and he learned from him the knowledge of all kinds of arts and sciences. He studied diligently and every day he studied seriously for many hours.

Cao Fa Ngum was endowed with diligence and ingenuity; thus [finally] the ruler of the Khmer kingdom gave Princess Nang Kaeo to him to be his wife.

Cao Fa Ngum cherished the hope of returning to Müang Sua in order to unite the small rival principalities (*anacak*). Together with his father, [Cao Fa Ngum] requested an army of 10,000 men from the ruler of the Khmer.

¹⁶ This is an honorific title, formerly the title of the department (*kom*) of agriculture.

¹⁷ The original says B.E. 1959, obviously a typing error.

Together with his father, the prince led an army into the territory of the present day kingdom of Laos. When the people learned that the prince was coming to unite the Lao and to stop the fighting, they gave him an overwhelming welcome.

The map shows the routes from [the land of the] Khmer that Cao Fa Ngum’s army had taken to invade and unite Laos.

Cao Fa Ngum’s father passed away during the campaign and Cao Fa Ngum succeeded in capturing Müang Sua.

Phacao Fa Ngum ascended the throne as king of Lan Sang and [thereby] he established the first kingdom of Laos in the year 1896 of the Buddhist era (A.D. 1353).

The rulers of the various *müang*, which were located within the kingdom of Laos, except Phanya Phao, the ruler of Müang Phai Nam¹⁸, which is present-day capital Vientiane, submitted to Phacao Fa Ngum [and regarded him] as the great king (overlord) of the kingdom of Laos.

Phacao Fa Ngum hoped to unite the various *müang* into a united kingdom of Laos. So he mobilised [his] army to attack Müang Phai Nam, but he could not capture [it] because the city was surrounded by a thick bamboo palisade.

The prince employed a trick to capture the city. He ordered [his troops] to cast gold and silver arrow-heads and to shoot them into the rows of bamboos.

The soldiers of Müang Phai Nam saw that the gold and silver arrow-heads were more valuable than the rows of bamboos, which acted as a rampart to protect the city, so they cleared the bamboos together to recover the arrows.

Then Phacao Fa Ngum led his troops [into the city] and captured the *müang* without difficulty. For the first time in the history all *müang* could be united in a single kingdom, namely the kingdom of Lan Sang. The king moved his army further southwards, captured Müang Khorat and incorporated it into the territory under the kingdom of Lan Sang.

¹⁸ Literally, “City of the thorny bamboo”.

As for Müang Phai Nam (the present day city of Vientiane), [the people] gave Phacao Fa Ngum big triumphal celebrations at the place where the present technical school of Vientiane is located.

Fa Ngum's soldiers gave him a blessing [and said]: "Your Majesty has led us and made us brave warriors who could gain victory over other *müang* in a proud way. We invite you to ascend the throne of Lan Sang again."

Phacao Fa Ngum warned the people to beware of the danger of an invasion by the enemy and [told them] that everyone who learned about the movements of [troops] from the enemy side should inform the country (*ban-müang*). He ordered: "As soon as you hear of a foreign enemy planning an attack on our kingdom, you should deliver the message and make a report; do not simply conceal this bad news!"

We should bear in mind the orders of Phacao Fa Ngum because at present North-Vietnam is giving pressure and threatening our kingdom.

Phacao Fa Ngum invited his former teacher Pha Maha Pasaman from the kingdom of the Khmer to come here to teach the Buddhist religion (*pha phuttha satsana*) in Laos so that the people would cease the worship of spirits (*phi*).

Pha Maha Pasaman, accompanied by monks and scholars, brought with them the statue of the Pha Bang, which was 1,000 years old, as well as Buddhist scriptures (*khamphi pha taipidok*) and a seedling of the Bodhi tree.

Many decades later Müang Sua, the capital during the reign of Phacao Fa Ngum, was renamed Nakhon Luang Prabang, after the name of this sacred (*saksit*) Buddha statue.

Although Phacao Fa Ngum passed away in the year 1917 of the Buddhist era (A.D. 1374), and almost 600 years have passed since then, his fame and deeds remain in the memories of all the Lao people, because he was the founder of our beloved kingdom of Laos.

Phacao Sam Saen Thai: the king who created the Lao nation (1899–1958 B.E., 1356–1415 A.D.)

Phacao Sam Saen Thai was Cao Fa Ngum’s son and he ascended the throne at the age of 18 years in the year 1917 of the Buddhist era (A.D. 1374/75).

Three years later he ordered that a register of able-bodied men for military service be compiled. It showed that there were a total of 300,000 Lao men in the census rolls. For this reason the ministers (*sena-monti*) gave him the name “Phanya Sam Saen Thai”¹⁹.

Phacao Sam Saen Thai, who succeeded Phacao Fa Ngum to the throne, realised that the territory of the kingdom of Lan Sang was very extensive. Unless he organised a powerful army he would not be free from danger. Hence he founded a strong military regime, which depended on all the people of the land being united in the kingdom.

The troops which protected Phacao Sam Saen Thai’s kingdom of Lan Sang were divided into various units, and these were elephant-units, cavalry, infantry, and guards for internal peace, as well as village militia.

Phacao Sam Saen Thai’s troops took care for the people and helped them in a noble way. The people praised and loved [their ruler]. The news of his valour and courage in battle spread to the neighbouring countries. Eventually no country (*pathet*) dared to attack [Laos].

Phacao Sam Saen Thai saw the importance of the administrative system of the state. So he promoted education, transportation and the military.

The king told his people to support the nation-state through being prepared to work and willing to pay taxes; the price of what they got from their homeland (*ban-müang*) was prosperity and peace.

At the present moment the organisation and the defence of the homeland ought to be given further attention. If Phacao Sam Saen Thai were able to return to look at the present kingdom of Laos, he would be proud of our soldiers and government.

¹⁹ “Lord of 300.000 T(h)ai/ commoners”.

Phacao Suvanna Banlang (“Golden Throne”): Conqueror of the Vietnamese (2021–2033 B.E., 1478–1490 A.D.)

In the year 2022 of the Buddhist era (A.D. 1479/80), the ruler who had the authority (*amnat*) over the Vietnamese kingdom made preparations to march his army to attack Laos because he was discontented about a [certain] matter.

Phacao Sainya Cakkapat Paenpaeo had received a white elephant which was a gift given by the governor (*cao müang*) of Müang Kaen Thao. When the king of Vietnam learned of the news, he entrusted an envoy to ask for the hair and toenails of the elephant.

So the king ordered that the hair and toenails of the elephant be cut, and he put them in a golden casket and sent them to the Vietnamese ruler.

However, the viceroy (*maha upahat*) disagreed with the delivery of the hair and toenails to the Vietnamese king; instead of it he took elephant manure and put it into the casket.

The Vietnamese ruler opened the box and as he saw that it was elephant manure he was furious.

For this reason the ruler of Vietnam led an armed force of 550,000 men across the border to attack Laos.

The Vietnamese army crossed the mountains and advanced southward to the city of Luang Prabang. Indeed the Vietnamese army was able to capture various *müang* along the route because of its military supremacy.

On the roads of the city (*müang*), the sound of crying and wailing people were heard and the monks chanted prayers (*sutmon*) that the land could be spared from devastation.

As the strength of the Vietnamese army was immense, the Lao army lost the battle and the king fled the city of Luang Prabang.

That Cao Thaen Kham, the son of the king, disagreed that Laos became a vassal (*müang khün*) of Vietnam was a lucky coincidence (*bun*) for Laos.

Although some disagreed and considered that there was no successful way to repulse the Vietnamese, nevertheless Cao Thaen Kham recruited soldiers and commanded the troops he led to charge at Luang Prabang.

Due to the courage and determination of Cao Thaen Kham, the morale of the Lao soldiers was remarkably high. Hence, they could defeat the Vietnamese army that occupied Luang Prabang. Of the 4,000 Vietnamese army officers (*nai thahan*) only 600 men returned [to their country].

So the ministers crowned Cao Thaen Kham as the liberator of the nation. He ascended the throne of Laos under the name Phacao Suvanna Banlang.

Now the North Vietnamese are the ones who have invaded and threatened our country. They know perfectly well that the Lao people do not want to harm the North Vietnamese and that they desire to live in peace.

The North Vietnamese should know very well that they will be defeated and repulsed, as Cao Thaen Kham fought [against them] once in the past, and North Vietnam should be able to remember this lesson[, if they continue to molest Laos].

Phacao Phothisalalat Cao: “Solidarity is the source of strength” (1501–1550 A.D.)

After the king had ascended the throne at the age of 19 in the year 1520, he went to a monastery as a devoted Buddhist for a period [of time].²⁰

Phacao Phothisalalat was a powerful monarch because his kingdom was united. The Vietnamese king feared and respected him because the rulers of [both] kingdoms were powerful and harmoniously allied with each other. Thus the Vietnamese king sent official gifts (*lasa-bannakan*) to the [Lao] ruler.

When the leader of the province (*khwaeng*) of Siang Khwang rose in revolt, Phacao Phothisalalat defeated the rebel so as to restore order and maintain the stability of the kingdom.

²⁰ *Upasombot* describes the ceremony of ordination, or taking the vows of the Buddhist brotherhood.

In the year 1540 the king of Ayutthaya attacked Vientiane. Phacao Phothisalalat ordered King Saen Luang of Thakaek²¹ to send soldiers for support. King Saen Luang, who was a loyal man, sent his troops to Vientiane immediately to protect Laos, even though his kingdom had not been molested. The soldiers of both sides helped each other to fight the Ayutthayan troops [until the latter] fled in disorder.

The ministers of the city (*nakhòn*) of Chiang Mai were aware of the strength and unity of the Lao kingdom. Thus they asked Phacao Phothisalalat to send [his son] Cao Setthawangso to become the [new] ruler of Chiang Mai. After the prince had been crowned the king of Chiang Mai, Phacao Phothisalalat brought the *pha kaeo mòlakot* (Emerald Buddha) to Vientiane.

In 1550 Phacao Phothisalalat invited envoys of fifteen different countries to come to witness how he caught wild elephants with a lasso. Phacao Phothisalalat was very experienced in riding decoy-elephants to catch wild elephants; however, that elephant was very angry and the ruler was thrown from the back [of the decoy-elephant]. He was stomped by the elephant and passed away seven days later [because of his injuries].

Phacao Sai Setthathilat: the king who erected temples and conquered the Burmese

The Lao people often remember Phacao Sai Setthathilat as the great king who founded Vat Phra Kaeo and the That Luang in the city of Vientiane.

Now we have erected a statue of this king in front of the That Luang. Another heroic deed of the king that the Lao will never forget is the victory over the Burmese invaders.

At the moment (i.e. now), Burma is our good friend. During the time of Phacao Sai Setthathilat, however, King Bayin-naung invaded Laos.

The strength of the Burmese army was mighty. Therefore, Phacao Sai Setthathilat had to withdraw his army twice. The first time he retreated from the city

²¹ Maha Sila (2001: 64) calls this ruler *Cao miang nakhòn* without reference to Thakaek.

of Luang Prabang [and] the second time from the city of Vientiane down to the mouth of the Nam Ngüm.²²

But all the people in the country still devoted their loyalty to Phacao Sai Setthathilat. They did not submit to the Burmese without resisting.

The able-bodied men of Laos thus established guerrilla troops and lay in ambush to attack the Burmese.

The women agreed to neither provide food nor render the Burmese any help. Moreover, they spied on the movements of the Burmese troops and smuggled the news to Phacao Setthathilat.

The Burmese troops were weakened and discouraged, not only because of lack of food but also because of lack of support by the population of the surrounding land.

When Phacao Sai Setthathilat learned that the Burmese troops were demoralised, he ordered his soldiers to attack. As a result the Burmese army was defeated, many Burmese were taken prisoners of war and countless elephants were captured.

Phacao Sai Setthathilat led the Lao people to stage a rebellion against the Burmese until a victory was eventually gained. This is a lesson to teach us that when we are attacked by an enemy, even if his forces are superior, we can still destroy him as long as the Lao people show love and respect to their great king, support the army and do not collaborate with the enemy (*satu*). We must now remember this important lesson because we are threatened by an external enemy, and it is the invaders from North Vietnam.

Phacao Sulinyavongsa: the last great king of Laos in the ancient time (2180–2237 B.E., 1637–1694 A.D.)

After the death of Phacao Sai Setthathilat, Laos began to decline. Its power (*amnat*) dwindled and [the land] disintegrated not long after. The country was

²² Situated approx. 50 km east of Vientiane.

reunited in the era of Phacao Sulinyavongsa and the army was restored to its former strength.

When the Lao army had regained its [former] strength and the unity of the nation was attained, Phacao Sulinyavongsa negotiated treaties of friendship with Thailand (Siam) and Vietnam; both countries respected the treaty that they had concluded.

In the treaty signed between Laos and Vietnam, they agreed that houses built on piles and with verandahs belonged to Lao territory and that houses built on ground level belonged to Vietnamese territory.

The Vietnamese accepted the treaty because Phacao Sulinyavongsa had established a military unit that guarded the paths along the mountains against intrusions into Lao territory.

During the reign of Phacao Sulinyavongsa three Europeans travelled to Laos. One of them was the Dutch tradesman Gerrit van Wuysthoff; the other two were [Father] Leria, a Catholic priest of Italian origin, and the Portuguese [priest] de Marini. Together the three men are regarded as the first group of Europeans who visited Laos.

In view of the affluence and splendours that Wuysthoff, Leria, and de Marini often encountered, they were very touched. The books they wrote provide evidence that the kingdom of Laos was once a great nation and had a high civilisation a long time before it became a colony.

When Phacao Sulinyavongsa passed away in the year 1698, the vast [domain of] Laos disintegrated into three kingdoms: 1) the kingdom of Lan Sang Luang Prabang, 2) the kingdom of Lan Sang Vientiane, and 3) the kingdom of Nakhòn Champassak.

Phacao Anu (1804–1828): A fighter for the freedom and unity of the kingdom

Long after Laos had disintegrated into three kingdoms, the kings of the respective lands had neither enough strength nor the ability to maintain their independence (*ekalat*). In the year 1778 all three Lao kingdoms fell under the

authority of the Thai, and parts of the central Lao kingdom (i.e., Vientiane) were under Vietnamese control.

Phacao Anu, the ruler of the kingdom of Vientiane, read about the fame of Laos at the time when Laos was united and free from foreign domination.

Phacao Anu was dissatisfied with the foreign domination. He often thought that such a situation would continue unless the land was reunited. Hence the king decided to unite Laos and fight for independence. He launched a popular movement to battle against the Thai (Siamese).

Phacao Anu often thought that he would not be able to free Laos from the supremacy of the Thai (Siamese) and restore freedom unless he could reunite the three kingdoms. Thus he ordered his son, the ruler of Champassak, to launch the popular movement of the Lao Thoeng (Kha) and to fight against the Thai (Siamese). The king also sent a letter to Cao Manthatulat, the king of Luang Prabang, to persuade him to join the struggle for national liberation.

In 1827, Phacao Anu heard the rumours that England had attacked Bangkok and realised that a very good chance to regain freedom had come. The king led his troops against Bangkok, and his son²³ led the Kha troops of the southern region [of Laos] to attack the Thai (Siamese).

However, Cao Manthatulat of Luang Prabang unfortunately could not send troops to help Cao Anu, because the troops that were protecting his territory on the northern border with Burma had been attacked by Burmese troops.

Moreover, the Thai had also occupied Vientiane and Champassak; they devastated [the city] of Vientiane and had taken away the sacred Pha Kaeo [image] of the Lao. As for Phacao Anu, he fled with his soldiers to Vietnam.

Cao Latsavong (Ngao), son of Cao Anu and military commander of the Lao, fought with Phanya Bodin, the commander of the Thai [troops]. Phanya Bòdin lost his grip and fell from his horse. Cao Latsavong had stabbed him with a short lance and hit his thigh, nailing him to the ground, and was about to strike [him] with a sword. However, the younger brother of Phanya Bòdin hurried to help [him] and

²³ Yo, the ruler of Champassak.

was cut into two by Cao Latsavong. Phanya Bòdin seized the chance to free himself and Cao Latsavong was also shot from the back of the horse. The soldiers of both sides rescued their respective commanders and fled.

Phacao Anu realised that the Vietnamese and the Thai were always at war with each other. He thought that Lao neutrality and independence from the Thai and Vietnamese could lead to peace. Therefore he returned from Vietnam to negotiate with the Thai.

He achieved no results, because the Thai (Siamese) did not agree to accept Cao Anu's compromise. As the king saw that the situation was bad, he mobilised the troops for a final battle aimed at ousting the Thai (Siamese). However, he had several dozen troops less [than the Thai], and he lost as a result. He finally saved his skin by fleeing to Siang Khwang.

The Thai (Siamese) troops finally set [the city] on fire and devastated the city of Vientiane, forcing thousands of Lao families to resettle in the northeast of Thailand.²⁴

Phacao Anu was taken prisoner in the year 1829 at Müang Phuan in the province Siang Khwang and escorted to Bangkok,²⁵ where he passed away broken-hearted. The hope to give the kingdom of Laos national reconciliation and freedom had to wait another 100 years before it could be fulfilled.

Later the French came and ruled over Laos for a period of more than 50 years.²⁶

But during the whole period of partition and foreign rule all the Lao people remembered the unity and independence of their ancestors' land under the leadership of their great kings in the good old times.

Being conscious (lit. feelings) of the greatness [of our land] in former times inspires us to unite together until independence is regained. Now [these feelings] serve as the impetus [for us] to build our country rapidly and defend it.

²⁴ More than 15 million ethnic Lao, one quarter of the total Thai population, live today in this region.

²⁵ There the Lao king was kept in an iron cage where he died under pain and humiliation. See Mayouri and Pheuipanh 1998.

²⁶ 1893–1953, a period of 60 years.

Analysis

The publication of the booklet fell in a time when the second Indochina-War (1964–1973/75) had strongly affected the Lao nation-state. Following the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam (1968), North-Vietnamese troops operated more and more on Lao territory to safeguard the supply lines – the so-called “Ho-Chi-Minh-Trail” – to the south. The United States who officially withdrew from active warfare after Richard Nixon had assumed office in 1969²⁷ intensified their massive area-bombing that accounted for 2.1 million tons of ordnance between 1964 and 1973, i.e. one bombing mission every eight minutes for nine years, turning Laos into the most bombed country in history (see Khamvongsa & Russell 2009: 282). At the same time Vang Pao’s Hmong forces²⁸ were supported financially and materially by the CIA to ward off the communist Lao People’s Army which was aided by Vietnamese ‘volunteers’. Meanwhile the neutralists of Suvanna Phuma were extremely polarised, resulting in the outbreak of a grim civil war between the rightist and communist units, especially in the strategically important Plain of Jars. Lao fought against Lao, and within national minority groups like the Hmong, internecine warfare broke out as well.²⁹ Unity among the Lao people was literally non-existent.

In retrospect, the long-standing Lao Prime Minister Suvanna Phuma, who almost helplessly stood up against the disintegration of the Lao nation during the 1960s, appears as a tragic figure. His decision to authorise American aerial interdiction signified that the Vientiane regime was going politically bankrupt. The regime became paralyzed by corruption and nepotism, while the communists increasingly gained sympathy among the population of the Lao highlands. It was not before the cease fire in 1973 that the communist forces started to gain control in the

²⁷ This tendency within the US foreign policy was manifest in the so-called Nixon Doctrine (22.1.1970). It stated that the US would reduce its presence and involvement in other states. The main responsibility for defence and development should be in the hands of the respective states, although certain obligations of alliance were to be maintained (Valone 1995: 158–159). For Indochina this meant a retreat of US ground troops parallel with continuing financial support and aerial bombings.

²⁸ Since 1959 the US intelligence recruited highlanders for reconnaissance missions into Communist controlled territories. Vang Pao, the only Hmong officer in the Royal Lao Army at that time, became the leading figure in the Hmong forces trained and supported by the CIA (Evans 2002b: 140).

²⁹ Long-standing internal clan rivalries among the Hmong led to division into pro-communist and rightist factions (Evans 2002b: 136–139).

cities along the Mekong, during the establishment of the short-lived third coalition government (Stuart-Fox 1997: 157).

Thus, the text published on 1 January 1970 by the royal “Ministry of Information, Propaganda, and Tourism” must be read in the context of civil war and propagandistic competition. The circumstances of its publication and its wide circulation indicate that it had the authorisation of the highest governmental circles. 100,000 copies were printed, an unusually high circulation in a country with then hardly more than three million inhabitants.³⁰ Some passages are similar to Maha Sila’s *Phongsawadan Lao*, so it could be assumed that the Lao chief historian personally authorised or even edited the booklet. On the other hand, one could claim the opposite because the text includes thorough falsifications of history with which Maha Sila should have disagreed. The introduction to *Important Kings of Laos*, written by Prime Minister Suvanna Phuma himself, clearly shows its pedagogical intent. It states: “The nation remains the nation and Laos remains Laos only if every Lao untiringly shares the burden [of national responsibility] and is willing to make sacrifices like our ancestors once did. We descendants should unfailingly keep in mind their glorious deeds.”

An interesting aspect of the text is the inconsistent use of ‘royal language’ (*lasasap*). In pre-socialist Laos this special vocabulary was used for the king and members of the high aristocracy. The use of this semantically elaborated vocabulary is worth examining, as is the use of the administrative key words that attained significance in the political arguments of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, we would like to demonstrate how the protagonists of the “Lao struggle for freedom” (from the perspective of the royalists) are represented and which political message is transferred to the reader, especially to the Lao youth. Finally the characterisation of each ruler will be analysed – in both its historiographic as well as in its iconographic dimensions.

³⁰ Nowadays, most books published in Laos, with a population of six millions, have a circulation of not more than a few thousand copies. Yet, even these smaller circulations often state exaggerated numbers and thus suggest that the claim for 100,000 copies of the cartoon should be taken with a pinch of salt.

Language

Compared to the Thai “royal language” (*rachasap*, Skt.: *rāja + śapta*), the Lao equivalent (*lasasap*) is less elaborated. The Lao language shows a less frequent and consistent use of royal vocabulary. Although the author of the text takes some effort, this language is not consistently employed. In the constitution of predicates, the use of “royal language” is reduced to the prefix *song* (also *thong*; Khmer: *trông*, “shape, form”) in front of usually genuine Lao verbs. This is also the case when there is a Khmer, Sanskrit or Pali loan-word or a corresponding Lao “royal word” available. In this way the use of genuine “royal language” regarding verbs is reduced to a minimum in the present text. Among the few exceptions are:

- *savoei lasa-sombat*: *savoei* = “to eat, consume” (Khmer); *rāja + saṃpati* = “royal property” (Pali) = to rule; the genuine Lao form would be *kin müang* = “consume the polity”.
- *ansoen* (Khmer: *añjoeñ*) = “to ask, request” (Lao: *soen*). *Ansoen* is used for members of the royal palace and for monks and Buddha statues.
- *pasut* (Pali: *pra + sūti*) = “to be born, to bear” (Lao: *koet*).
- *sulakhot* (Pali: *sura + gata*) = “gone [to] the gods”, a euphemism of “to die” (Lao: *tai*).

In the case of the nouns, the spectrum of words classified as “royal language” is much wider. Examples:

- *lasa-olot* (Pali: *rāja + urasa*) = royal son (Lao: *luk/luksai*).
- *lasa-natda* (Pali: *rāja + nattar*; Skt. *naptr*) = royal grand-son or nephew (Lao: *lan*).
- *pha bida* (Pali: *brah + pitar*) = royal father (Lao: *phò*).
- *lasa-banlang* (Pali: *rāja + pallaṅka*) = royal throne (Lao: *thaen*).
- *lasa-bannakan* (Skt./Pali: *rāja + varṇakāra/varṇakāra*) = tributes and official gifts to the king (Lao: *suai*).

It should be stressed again that compared to traditional historic texts the use of royal vocabulary is restricted. An excessive use of such words could be considered an obstacle for the less-educated to understand the text, and thus would have unfavourable effects on mass propaganda.

The most frequently used keywords in the administrative field are *müang*, *pathet*, *anacak* and *kasat*.

- a.) The term *müang* reflects the central concept for polities of the Lao and other Tai people and is used here in its entire semantic width. It denotes a city (e.g. Müang Sua, the former name of Luang Prabang) as well as the whole kingdom of the Lao (Müang Lao). Often the composite *ban-müang* (“village” + “city/domain”) occurs in the meaning of “homeland”.³¹
- b.) The term *pathet* (Pali: pra + desa) means “land” or “country” but is rather seldom used with the ethnonym “Lao” here. So we find as designations for “Laos” the expressions *müang lao* and *(lasa-)anacak lao* more frequently than *pathet lao*. It should be mentioned that the modern expression *pathet lao* (“Land of the Lao”) also represents the pro-communist organisation under the leadership of the “red prince” Suphanuwong, the half-brother of the prime minister Suvanna Phuma. *Pathet* is used predominantly as “land” without reference to the Lao nation. So the last sentence of the text says: “The consciousness of former historic grandeur [...] is the impetus to rapidly build and defend our country (*pathet*).” Referring to the glory of King Sam Saen Thai it is said that it spread down to the neighbouring countries (*pathet khang-khiang*).
- c.) The term *anacak* (Pali: āṇā, “command, authority” + cakka, “wheel”) is synonymous with “kingdom”. *Anacak* means the range of intervention of a ruler and thus has connotations similar to the Sanskrit term maṇḍala (“circle”, Lao: *monthon*). Usually the term *anacak* is part of the composite *lasa-anacak*, “kingdom”. However, it is also used once for the different Lao principalities (*anacak nòi nòi*) before Fa Ngum founded Lan Sang.

³¹ As to a detailed discussion of the term *müang* see Grabowsky 2004: 4–9.

d.) For “ruler” and “king” there are some quite different terms. The most important are *Phacao/Cao* (in combination with the ruler’s name like Phacao Anu) and *kasat* (Skt.: *kṣatriya*, “ruler, lord, member of the caste of the warriors”). The usual designation for Lao kings, *Cao maha sivit* (“lord over the great life”), contrary to what one might expect, never occurs. This is quite unusual and needs explanation. Possibly this traditional royal designation was regarded as too “feudal” and remote for the people. The characterisation of the kings as “kings of the people” was indeed very important within the ideological dispute with the communists.

Protagonists of the Lao struggle for freedom

The Lao army (*kòngthap lao*) is the active organ of the Lao struggle for freedom. According to the cartoon, it will be able to gain victory over powerful enemies (Vietnamese and Burmese) as long as they have the support of all people. The reader has been repeatedly admonished toward this effect, for example in the last sentence of the chapter on King Setthathilat. His armed resistance and success in fighting back the superior military of the Burmese invaders would have shown that it is possible to defend one’s independence, “as long as the Lao people show love and respect to their great king and support the army and do not collaborate with the enemy.” (p. 18). The unity of the king, the army and the Lao people (*pasason lao*) is repeatedly affirmed. Although the Lao term *pasason* for “the people” is politically and not ethnically based, the question of the historical role of the non-Lao population should be examined.

Important Kings of Laos almost fails to mention the so-called “Kha”,³² a generic term used to signify the autochthonous Mon-Khmer speaking population of Laos (c. 25–30 % of the total population) and other minorities such as the Hmong. According to the Lao chronicles, the census initiated by King Sam Saen Thai at the end of the

³² This pejorative term – often translated as “slave” – is only mentioned shortly in the chapter about Cao Anu where “Kha” troops are led by Cao Anu’s son.

fourteenth century showed 300,000 Tai (or Thai) and 400,000 “Kha”.³³ However, the latter are pushed aside in *Important Kings of Laos* which singles out the Buddhist culture of the lowland Lao as the only culture relevant for the genesis of the Lao nation-state. Religious and other cultural concepts of ethnic minorities are ignored, although the cartoons frequently illustrate persons who wear the typical dress of the “Kha” and the Hmong: The lower picture on the first page of the chapter on Cao Anu shows several Hmong women. This is really an anachronism as at the beginning of the 19th century the Hmong had just started to settle on present-day Lao territory and were thus not yet part of Lao society. The lower picture on the last page of the booklet shows two Hmong (husband and wife?) but only one male Khmu wearing a slouch hat. Do these iconographic representations – perhaps unconsciously – reflect strong considerations of the Royal Lao Government for the Hmong. Though only making up ten per cent of the population, the majority of the Hmong, led by General Vang Pao, gave crucial support to the anti-communist struggle of the Vientiane government.

The ethnic diversity of the Lao people remains a thorny subject for any serious effort to construct a Lao national identity. The present-day Lao government recognises that ethnic Lao constitute only slightly more than one half of the total population. Even if other so-called ‘tribal’ Tai groups, such as the Tai Lü, the Phuthai and the Tai Yuan, are included, less than 65 per cent of the population belong to the dominant Tai-Lao-Buddhist mainstream. Recent iconographic representations of the Lao people – above all the icon of the three women dressed in traditional clothes – underline that the current regime is well aware of the ethnic balance (cf. Vatthana 2006, Rehbein 2007). Yet, the revival of Buddhism (and the culture of the ethnic Lao) could marginalise the non-Buddhist ethnic groups that constitute one third of the entire population of Laos and have been the back-bone of revolutionary forces in many regions before 1975.³⁴ The plans to build memorial sites for Sithon

³³ See Souneth 1996: 209, fn. 462.

³⁴ Conflicts between the central Lao government and the ethnic minorities became manifest in millenarian uprisings during the early years of the French colonial period. Later the Lao communists in their highland bases took advantage of these traditional resentments and gained popular support in outlying regions through programs of land reform and improvement of education and public health. This strategy was accompanied by the – until today only inadequately fulfilled – promise of promoting national

Kommadam, Faydang Lobliayao and Thao Tou might be only a superficial recognition of the historical inter-ethnic solidarity.

The description of Laos' neighbours

- *Burma*: Burma is the great adversary of Sai Setthathilat (r. 1548–1571). The Burmese are shown as brutal hordes attacking Lan Sang. The official, Marxist-inspired Lao historiography calls them “Burmese feudalists” (*sakdina phama*) (cf. Ministry of Information and Culture 2000) whereas in our booklet they are described as rude and uncivilised – quite in contrast to the cunning Lao monarch and his brave people. However, since the end of the sixteenth century relations with the Burmese neighbour saw little conflict. The royal government after 1953 as well as the following socialist regime cultivated good relations between the neighbours.
- *Vietnam*: Contrary to the Burmese antagonists of the sixteenth century who are clearly separated from the modern Burma, the Vietnamese are mentioned repeatedly as the present enemy of Laos even in the context of former conflicts. A connection is made between former Vietnamese attacks on the Lao sovereignty and the military operations of the North Vietnamese in 1970. Moreover, the chapters with other enemies than the Vietnamese also refer to the North Vietnamese enemy and postulate bravery, courage, and unshakable loyalty to the king.
- *Siam/Thailand*: Relations with the big neighbour have always been characterised by strong rivalries, which in 1828 culminated in the devastation of Vientiane and the deportation of the population after the revolt of Cao Anu against the domination of Bangkok. Although this story dwells painfully in the collective memory of the Lao, including the royal government and the historian Maha Sila,

solidarity and creating an multi-ethnic society with equal rights for all nationalities (cf. Ireson and Ireson 1991). The national census of 2000 distinguished 49 ethnic groups, distributed between the four ethno-linguistic categories Lao-Thai, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien and Sino-Tibetan. However, the toponyms Lao Lum (“Lao of the valley”), Lao Thoeng (“Lao of the mountain slopes”) and Lao Sung (“Lao of the mountain tops”) – an assimilatoric classification already established in the fifties and officially abandoned today – are still widely used in Laos (cf. Vatthana 2006).

the Siamese get off lightly in comparison with the Vietnamese. That is no surprise, since Thailand was the most important military partner of the royal government next to the US when fighting the communists backed by North Vietnam (cf. Evans 2003).

- *Khmer*: The Khmer only play a role in the chapter of Cao Fa Ngum. Fa Ngum brought with him from his exile in Angkor a strong army and the Buddhist culture personified by monks and scholars – the basis of the Lao civilisation. Beyond this cultural affinity there is no hint concerning relations between Lao and Khmer and no mention of the political situation in Cambodia up to the end of 1969.³⁵

The description of the different rulers

The choice of seven “important” Lao kings was the result of deliberation. The share of pages of each chapter may reflect the importance of the different kings in the text:

- a) Fa Ngum (1316–1374): 7 pages
- b) Sam Saen Thai (1356–1415): >2 pages
- c) Suvanna Banlang (r. 1478–1490): 4 pages
- d) Phothisalalat (r. 1501–1550): 3 pages
- e) Sai Setthathilat (no years of reign given)³⁶: 3 pages
- f) Sulinyavongsa (r. 1637–1694): 2 pages
- g) Phacao Anu (r. 1804–1828): 4 pages
- h) French rule: 1 page

³⁵ When the brochure was published (1 January 1970) Cambodia was not yet directly involved in the second Indochina war. In spite of secret American bombings in the sparsely populated provinces in the Cambodian Northeast to disturb the North Vietnamese “Ho-Chi-Minh Trail,” the kingdom of Cambodia kept its neutrality. This did not change until Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown by the pro-U.S. military in March 1970.

³⁶ According to most historical sources Sai Setthathilat’s reign is dated from 1548 until 1571. See Stuart-Fox 198: 148.

Remark: Some of the dates refer to the life span of the rulers, some to the time of reign (Lao: *latchakan*, Skt. *rāja-kāla*). Both Buddhist (a, b, c, f) and Christian (d, g) eras are used. There is no recognisable logic behind it. Certain carelessness by the revising editors may be assumed.

By which criteria was this choice made from many more Lao kings (cf. the list of Lao rulers in Stuart-Fox 1998)? Why these seven “great and important” kings and not others? The following analysis of each characterisation of the rulers will give some explanation:

a) Phacao Fa Ngum: Father of the Lao nation.

This is by far the longest chapter. Here, the founder of Lan Sang is celebrated as the unifier of the obviously fragmented and warring Lao *müang*. Fa Ngum appears as a strong ruler with intelligence and far-sightedness which are reflected by his success in battle. The main point here is the military enterprises of Fa Ngum, though the introduction of Theravada Buddhism (via Cambodia) is also mentioned.³⁷

In the cartoon, Fa Ngum is not described as greedy for power but as filled with the noble desire to unite Laos.³⁸ Thus he appears as a forerunner of Suvanna Phuma in his aspiration for Lao unity. Moreover, Fa Ngum’s route to victory appears quite linear, as the map on page 2 suggests (from south to north): Starting point Angkor Thom, Pak Kop (Champassak), Müang Viang (Vientiane), Pha Nam Hung, Siang Thòng (Luang Prabang). The borders of the kingdom (from Stung Treng in Cambodia to Sipsòng Panna in China, from Dalat in the south of Vietnam to Khorat and Chiang Mai in Thailand) are not drawn on the map – unlike maps in today’s Lao National Museum.³⁹

³⁷ The Khmer origin of Lao Buddhism is a myth as Theravada Buddhism did not get its roots deep into Lao society prior to the mid-fifteenth century, when Buddhist monks from Lan Na came to Laos to spread the new religion (Grabowsky 2007).

³⁸ Fa Ngum’s image as the charismatic founder of the first united Lao kingdom is still propagated by the official Lao historiography in present-day Laos (see Ministry of Information and Culture 2002).

³⁹ This map and another one, showing the political situation in the early eighteenth century after the disintegration of Lan Sang, are obviously based on a Thai map showing the borders of the administrative circles (*monthon*) of the central Mekong basin. See the “historical” maps reproduced in Phuthòng 2000: 13, 33, and 56.

The conquest of Vientiane is presented with more complexity by Maha Sila, who mentions two cities. According to his account, Phanya Pao did not entrench himself in Vientiane but in the sister town of Viang Kham. Obviously the cartoon tries to suggest that the conquest of Vientiane was the result of extraordinary military tactics, so that its establishment can indirectly be traced back to Fa Ngum. There is no reference to the fact that already in the middle of the fourteenth century, the Lao had settled on both banks of the Mekong (e.g. in the region of Nòng Khai and Udonthani). This could have been done out of consideration for their Thai allies, and thus indicates that the Lao Royal Government accepted the borders with her western neighbour.

In the cartoon, Fa Ngum's inglorious end – his deposal by the aristocracy and the subsequent banishment as a result of the king's increasingly autocratic rule (Maha Sila 2001: 48) – is not examined in detail, as mention of Fa Ngum's downfall surely would have tainted his image as founder of the Lan Sang kingdom.

Finally, we would like to refer to some political guidelines Fa Ngum is said to have taught his subjects. The cartoon says how the king warns of enemy attacks and advises the people to bring him all relevant information. In the *Phongsawadan Lao*, Fa Ngum also stresses the importance of the common defence of the realm (Maha Sila 2001: 44–45). However, the appeal to collective spying is missing. Presumably the editors of the cartoon modified Fa Ngum's principles with regard to North Vietnamese activities in Lao territory in order to make the population more sensitive to the perceived external threat.

b) Phacao Sam Saen Thai: the king who created the Lao nation.

This section deals with King Sam Saen Thai's administrative reforms to consolidate an overexpanded kingdom (due to Fa Ngum's conquests). The first Lao census (*sam saen thai*: 300,000 Tai/commoners) is credited to this king. The pamphlet introduces here the modern term "nation" (*sat*, Skt.: *jāti*) and interprets the kingdom of Lan Sang as a nation-state embodied in a powerful military, and tax and public education systems. One is reminded of Benedict Anderson's (1988) and Thongchai Winichakul's (1994) observation that taking a census was in many cases a prerequisite for any viable nation-state. Significantly, Sam Saen Thai is depicted in

front of the Lao national flag before 1975.⁴⁰ Maha Sila only reports the census: the national interpretation of the Lao *müang* of Lan Sang is doubtless a product of nationalist discourse in Laos with its focus on the historical rooting of the present Lao nation-state.

Above all, the description of the military organisation is more detailed in the cartoon than in Maha Sila’s presentation. The glorification of the Lao military power pervades the whole text like a red thread. The army is socially and ideologically valorised – something that is understandable in times of war.

c) Suvanna Banlang: Conqueror of the Vietnamese.

Sam Saen Thai’s reign was followed by a time of internal disturbances which did not end before the middle of the fifteenth century. In 1479, the invasion by the Vietnamese (the pejorative term *kaeo* is used throughout the text) presented a great challenge for Lan Sang. This attack, also mentioned in contemporary Chinese sources (*Ming Shilu*),⁴¹ almost put an end to the existence of the Lao *müang*. In accordance with traditional Lao historiography (cf. Maha Sila 2001), victory over the hated Vietnamese is credited to the bravery of a young Lao prince who was able to reorganise Lan Sang as the “ruler of the golden throne”.⁴²

The escalation of the conflict had its origin in an argument about a white elephant that had been given to the Lao king Cakkaphat by one of his vassals. In the cartoon, the Vietnamese king claims this symbol of sovereignty and power but is opposed by the Lao *upahat*. The *upahat* provokes him by sending him a box with elephant dung, so the Vietnamese mobilise their troops and attack Laos. This story is largely similar to the *Phongsawadan Lao*. Maha Sila, though, writes that the Vietnamese ruler just planned to show the elephant to his people for a limited time (Maha Sila 2001: 56–58). It is obvious that the editors of the booklet wanted to describe the Vietnamese king as an arrogant aggressor. The devastation of Luang

⁴⁰ The flag shows the emblem of the Lao monarchy: a white three-headed elephant under a nine-tired parasol.

⁴¹ For *Ming Shilu* (The Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty) as an invaluable source of Southeast Asian history see Wade (2000).

⁴² This was an important precondition for the later rise of Lan Sang at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Prabang by the Vietnamese and the counterstrike by the Lao prince is presented spectacularly. Moreover, the contribution of Lan Na to the “anti-Viet liberation struggle” is not mentioned.

The Vietnamese enemy of the royal Lao government is highlighted in this chapter. This may explain why the chapter on King Suvanna Banlang runs over four pages. The position of the Vietnamese kings is now occupied by communist North Vietnam. The cartoon even illustrates Vietnamese soldiers shooting at (Lao) women and children. Note that a recently published popular illustrated history of important Lao kings and revolutionary personalities deals with Suvanna Banlang’s reign in just three lines, without even mentioning the Vietnamese invasion.⁴³

d) Phacao Photihsalalat Cao: “Solidarity is the source of power”.

Under this ruler, Lan Sang was consolidated as a Buddhist kingdom⁴⁴ and as a regional power on an equal footing with Vietnam and Ayutthaya (Siam) respecting Lao sovereignty. In the cartoon, Vietnam in particular appears as a submissive neighbour sending gifts to the Lao king – the antithesis to the relation of Laos and Vietnam in the year 1970. The influence of Laos then reached to Chiang Mai, and Maha Sila describes Cao Phothisalalat as a self-confident king who even sought confrontation with Ayutthaya.⁴⁵ In contrast, the cartoon describes this as mere defence of Laos and deals with the episode only roughly. We suppose that former conflicts with Siam were a critical issue for the RLG allied with Thailand, a situation also reflected in the subsequent chapter on Cao Anu.

A large illustration with a comparatively detailed text is dedicated to Phothisalalat’s spectacular death during an elephant hunt.⁴⁶ The intention of the

⁴³ “In A.D. 1478, Thao Thaen Kham ascended to the throne before his father’s death, because at that time his father (i.e., King Chakkapha Phaen Phaeo) was very ill. After ascension to the throne, the ministers and councillors bestowed upon him the name ‘PhaCao Suvanna Banlang’. The king ruled the country (*ban-müiang*) only seven years when he died in the year A.D. 1485 at the age of 41” (Phuthông 2000: 21).

⁴⁴ Institutionalised Buddhism was promoted and the still widespread *phi*-cults were opposed.

⁴⁵ In this context the mention of the selfless support of Thakaek should be understood as emphasis on the ideal of the loyalty of Lao vassals.

⁴⁶ The official Lao historiography (Ministry of Information and Culture 2000: 179) just mentions that the king died because of an unspecified accident.

editors here is not clear. Perhaps a dramatic scene was required for the cartoon, a scene which could somehow be embellished.

In this chapter the successor of Phothisalalat appears: his son Setthawangso, better known by his royal name Phacao Sai Setthathilat. According to Maha Sila he was called to the throne of Chiang Mai because the ruler there had died without male offspring. The cartoon ignores this detail and explains the reverence towards the prince as resulting from the power of his father’s kingdom. The chaotic situation – close to civil war – in Chiang Mai (cf. Wyatt 1984: 81–82) remains unmentioned.

e) Phacao Sai Setthathilat: the king who erected temples and conquered the Burmese.

In the first illustration the statue of Setthathilat, erected in 1957, sits in front of the That Luang. The artist exercises interpretive freedom in placing Hò Pha Kaeo beside it. This building was erected by this popular king to house the Emerald Buddha. Today both buildings embody the capital of Vientiane as the center of the Lao nation.

The theme of this chapter is the defensive fight against the Burmese, who are portrayed as wild hordes. The fact that Burma, unlike Siam, was never able to conquer Lan Sang completely and was finally forced to leave Lao territory is extolled as a great victory. However, one should notice the fact that the three Tai kingdoms of Lan Sang, Lan Na and Ayutthaya were unable to resist the Burmese expansion because of internal disputes. Setthathilat resorted to guerilla tactics, with which he successfully repulsed the Burmese invaders from his kingdom. Perhaps this is a subtle reference to the Hmong “secret army” of Vang Pao – supported by the suspiciously frequent appearance of the characteristic Hmong head dress in the cartoon. Moreover, loyalty to the king in times of crisis is propagated, something which is especially evident in the historically questionable illustration of a Lao group praying and presenting offerings to an image of Setthathilat.

As in the case of Fa Ngum, the reader does not learn about the end of Setthathilat. However, to this day it remains obscure how the king found his death.⁴⁷ Instead, this chapter concludes with slogans for the continued resistance of the Lao population, which is therewith called to defend the nation according to the example of Setthathilat and to stay loyal to the king. The North Vietnamese are mentioned explicitly as the aggressors against which the people must resist alongside the king and the army.⁴⁸

f) Phacao Sulinyavongsa: the last great king of Laos in ancient times.

As mentioned before, the era of Sulinyavongsa was characterised by a long epoch of peace. In addition, visitors (Marini, van Wuysthoff) from Europe arrived and were impressed by Lao culture and civilisation. The end of this epoch is dealt with quite briefly, though, because it is not very impressive from a military point of view. And it is indeed this military aspect which counts for the editors of the brochure. There is only a reference to the consolidation of the army as the basis of the prosperity of Lan Sang under Sulinyavongsa.

In that time Laos was on an equal footing with Vietnam and Siam – presumably an ideal image also for the Lao rulers of 1970 particularly because Laos was increasingly squeezed between its more powerful neighbours. Another reference to the Indochinese war is the comment about the protection of the border with Vietnam. It implies that in 1970 the royal government identified the intrusion of North Vietnamese soldiers into Lao territory as the main problem of the political situation of the time.

The decisive stain on the glorious image of Sulinyavongsa – his authorisation of the execution of his own son and only successor because of adultery – remains unmentioned, although (or perhaps because) this was the first step of the disintegration of Lan Sang.

⁴⁷ Maha Sila (2001: 85) tells of an ambush against Setthathilat at Müang Ongkan. The location of Müang Ongkan is still not discussed. Was it situated on Cambodian territory or should it be identified with Attapü as some scholars suggest (Phuthòng 2000: 36)?

⁴⁸ For the North-Vietnamese military recruitment and training activities on Lao territory see Goscha (2004) and Vatthana (2008).

g) Phacao Anu: Fighter for regaining the freedom and unity of the kingdom.

Stressed here is the patriotic goal – Lao freedom and independence – of this probably most tragic Lao king.⁴⁹ Cao Anu (r. 1804–1828) managed to raise Vientiane to the position of most powerful vassal of Bangkok. However, his attempt to re-establish independence not only of his own principality but of all Lao *müang* failed. The anti-Siamese direction of his policies is not really accentuated in the cartoon, unlike his futile diplomatic negotiations after a successful Siamese counter-offensive. Here Cao Anu appears as a diplomatic strategist characterised by farsightedness and willingness to compromise (cf. Evans 2003: 105). However, such an interpretation reflects wishful thinking rather than historical reality.⁵⁰ And it is in stark contrast to present-day Lao historiography, which stresses Cao Anu’s image as a fearless and battle-hardened warrior (Souneth 2002, Houmphān 2003). *Important Kings of Laos* considers the use of military means as the last choice after all other options had failed. To highlight Cao Anu’s image as a diplomat, his son Latsavong Ngao acts as a warrior. The role of king Manthathulat, the ruler of Luang Prabang, is interesting as well. His neutrality is excused with the indication of the threat to Luang Prabang from Burmese troops. This description is contrary to Maha Sila’s (1957) and present-day Lao historiography, where the treacherous “stab” by Manthathulat is stressed.⁵¹ The cartoon depicts a sanitized version of Cao Anu’s end.

⁴⁹ An illustration on page 21 shows him contemplating a map depicting the whole of mainland Southeast Asia with the single inscription “Siam”.

⁵⁰ Mayouri and Pheuiphānh Ngaosyvāthn (1998), in their analysis of Cao Anu from Lao perspective, paint a contradicting image of the last king of Vientiane, who on the one hand bravely resisted the Siamese supremacy and on the other hand disciplined his troops harshly. Moreover, Maha Sila writes in his first edition of his *Phongsawadan Lao* (1957), which is much more detailed with regards to Cao Anu, how the Vietnamese ruler instead of supporting Cao Anu militarily recommended him a (never accomplished) visit of apology to Bangkok. This diplomatic effort of Vietnam remains unmentioned in the cartoon because they would emphasise Cao Anu’s inconsiderate behaviour due to damaged pride.

⁵¹ The official history of Laos, authorised by the LPRP (Ministry of Information and Culture 2000), dedicates a large chapter to the reign of Cao Anu and his “righteous struggle for liberation” against the “Siamese feudalists” (pp. 379–460). A propagandistic brochure about the “200 years of the great battle” of the Lao against Siamese supremacy, published during the Lao-Thai border conflicts in the 1980s, shows a map with the main military operations during the years 1827 and 1828. This map not only identifies Northeast-Thailand (Isan) as part of the Lao political and cultural space but also North-Thailand (Chiang Mai). The legend of the map says: “The Lao troops [of] Lan Na, tributary to Siam, were recruited by force to support Siam (*thiuk bangkhap ken suai sanyam*)”. Regarding the position of Luang Prabang the brochure states that a couple of thousand soldiers were sent to support Siam

Instead of sitting in a cage, humiliated by the Siamese, he appears here guarded by two soldiers with his head proudly raised – without signs of aggression or revanchism.

h) The French colonial period is dealt with very briefly, probably because the anti-colonial movement was not led by any “heroic Lao king”. The reader receives almost no information about this time, except the reference to the memory of the merits of the old kings regarding the unity and greatness of Laos – a memory that was essential for the later re-establishment of independence. There are no explanations about colonial politics. Obviously the reader was not to get a chance to make the comparison to the American presence with its military advisors and U.S. aid.

i.) A large number of rulers have been left unrecorded in the genealogy of “heroic kings”. Between 1416 and 1442 not less than nine kings are mentioned in the Lao annals but most of them had been on the throne for very short periods of time, notably during the Queen Maha Thewi’s “reign of terror” in the 1430s. The last three decades of the sixteenth and first three decades of the seventeenth century had also seen short-lived reigns of nine more kings of whom very little is known from historical records. Since the main purpose of the cartoon was the promotion of national unity and the glorification of resistance against foreign invaders, no Lao ruler of any of the three successor states of the Lan Sang kingdom (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang) was considered worth of being depicted as “heroic king”, apart from Cao Anu for reasons explained above.

Conclusion

The cartoon analysed here describes chosen Lao kings as outstanding protagonists of the Lao struggle for sovereignty, unity and independence. They are characterised as dynamic and daring heroes. Thus we may conclude that they were to serve as models for the Lao youth. The glorification of the kings is attained by different means, for example by the frequent use of words referring to bravery and

(Anonymous 1988: 111) – a statement that echoes Maha Sila (2001: 138) but is absent in Mayouri & Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn’s (1998) more balanced work.

self-sacrifice for the people and homeland (*ka-han, ong-at* etc.). The Lao kings personally participate in battle at the risk of their lives. Accordingly, the great victory over the Vietnamese invaders in the fifteenth century was explained with the “resolute bravery” (*khvam ka-han det diao*) of Suvanna Banlang, which strengthened the morale of the troops.

Even where the military aspect for the historical judgment of a ruler is of secondary importance (as for Phothisalalat), the cartoon stresses the audacity of the king. King Phothisalalat was famous for his skills in catching wild elephants. Lacking greater military challenges, finds his death when pursuing this sport. In the case of Soulinyavongsa, however, his peaceful reign is characterized as a time of economic and cultural prosperity. The king appears as an “elder statesman” caring for the well-being of his people.⁵²

In addition, the glorification of the kings is realised by iconographic means. The kings are mostly represented at younger age as resolute, sometimes fierce-looking heroic figures with striking features. This is also the case with Cao Anu, who reached the apex of his power only at an advanced age. King Sulinyavongsa is an exception here. His long reign (almost 60 years) was completely peaceful according to the old chronicles, and is dealt with only briefly in the cartoon. His face reminds one more of an intellectual or poet than a warrior. There is a striking physical resemblance to images of the Siamese poet king Rama II (r. 1809–1824).

The veneration and loyalty (*khvam conghak phakdi*) of the people is a prominent leitmotif of the text. The people even called Fa Ngum to ascend the throne. And although king Setthathilat had abandoned Vientiane to organise the guerilla war against the Burmese invaders in the middle of the sixteenth century, the population of the city did not accept cooperation with the occupying power, but instead remained loyal to the king. Moreover, the text implies that Laos at present has still the potential to regain its former greatness. The memory of the heroic kings was to stimulate bravery and solidarity – two attributes that in retrospect rather were limited to the revolutionaries in the north of Laos.

⁵² This narrative is still present in contemporary Lao historiography. Yet, in the newly built Army Museum, King Soulinyavongsa appears on an oil painting as commander of the troops who took advantage of the lack of military confrontation to consolidate and train his army.

The fateful question is posed: Are the Lao people strong, loyal and righteous enough to resist the “enemy”? In the Buddhist context this question appears as a question of the collective karma of an entire people. Like Suvanna Banlang, who, as an emanation of the religious merit (*bun*) of the Lao (cf. p. 11), could successfully fight the Vietnamese, the royal government will be able to protect the country – as long as the Lao people hold to essential virtues like national solidarity and loyalty to the king.

The portrayal of the Vietnamese as the main enemy of Laos both in the past and the present is striking. What is more, while the Burmese appear as uncivilised looters – unlike the cold-blooded Vietnamese expansionists – conflicts with Siam are rather played down. Such a perspective is quite different the official historiography of contemporary Laos depicting the “Siamese feudalists” (*sakdina sanyam*) as the main historical enemy whereas the Vietnamese are praised for being a reliable ally for centuries.⁵³ Consequently, Suvanna Banlang is disqualified for the official hero-pantheon of present-day Laos, as his war of resistance against the Vietnamese is in contradiction with the socialist rhetoric of a “special” historical relationship and solidarity between Laos and Vietnam.

Important Kings of the Lao gives consideration to neighbouring Thailand, for which reason the text and two maps lack any revanchism. On the first map (p. 2), showing the thrust of Fa Ngum’s military campaigns, borders – a sensitive issue in the Thai-Lao-relation even today – are totally missing. The second map (p. 20) is designed to show the division of Lan Sang into three partial kingdoms after the death of Sulinyavongsa. It shows, however, the borders of the modern Lao nation-state, and for this reason the map is anachronistic. The historical borders of Vientiane and Champassak, which reached deep into present Thai and Khmer territory, are not even indicated. It seems that at least during its final years the royalist regime considered the geo-body (cf. Thongchai 1995) of Laos as strictly confined to the borders drawn by the colonial powers. There was no territorial

⁵³ The Ministry of Information and Culture (2000) identifies the “Dai Viet feudalists” (*sakdina dai viat*) as the antagonist of Suvanna Banlang. It is crucial that this official history mentions the term “Dai Viet” corresponding to the Vietnam of the fifteenth century. In the Lao Marxist historiography, the expansionism of Vietnamese “feudalists” is not regarded as inherent to the character of the Vietnamese people but interpreted as politics against the friendship of the peoples of both countries.

irredentism discernible towards either Thailand or Vietnam. That is in contrast to what some rightist Lao exile groups seem to advocate. The book entitled “One thousand years of Lao-Vietnamese wars” written in Thai by a Lao scholar in exile, Ngaokaen Kanimkaeo (1999), includes maps showing territorial losses to Vietnam but none concerning the much more substantial losses to Thailand/Siam. One map, reflecting the geo-political situation during the early eighteenth century, recognises the larger part of Tonkin, sections of Annam, and even the Shan state of Chiang Tung (Kengtung) as part of the Lao lands but not a single place in present-day Thailand (Ngaokaen 1999: 29).

On the other hand, in historical maps displayed in book publications or in museums of the LPDR, the large territories lost to Siam are still acknowledged as “Lao”. Some of these maps even include the eight provinces in the far north of Thailand as “Lao Lan Na” (Ministry of Information and Culture 2000) on the grounds that they once were united with Lan Sang during the reigns of Phothisalalat and Sai Setthathilat in the sixteenth century (see Phuthong 2000: 13, 33). Of course, there is no reason why a map showing the geopolitical constellations during the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries should not be allowed to indicate the then valid political borders. However, our pamphlet does not dare to indicate any historical borders that might hurt the feelings of political elites in neighbouring countries, on whose military and economic support the Vientiane government very much relied. Such an attitude might even resemble self-denial and, at any rate, demonstrates that Lao nationalism during the royalist regime was largely defensive.

Finally, the text is a plea for solidarity among the Lao *müang* to protect the sovereignty of the entire Lao nation. Disputes must not be tolerated, as the taking of action without compromise against Vientiane (by Fa Ngum) and Müang Phuan (by Phothisalalat) clearly demonstrate. Loyalty is emphasised, personified, *inter alia*, by the ruler of Thakaek, with his support for Phothisalalat against Ayutthaya. The relation to the tragic failure of Suvanna Phuma’s efforts for national unity and neutrality becomes especially obvious in this context. The desired national solidarity is represented most clearly by the final image, which depicts Lao soldiers and monks gathered together harmoniously around the national flag with members of ethnic minorities. The flag with the royal emblem (three-headed white elephant below a

nine-tiered parasol) stands for the national unity of Laos under a common king – an ideal for what the kings in the cartoon fought and died.

Parallels in the historical reconstruction of the cartoon are obvious: It was the threat to Lao independence and unity that prompted most of the Lao kings to take the necessary military measures. Moreover, the cartoon-pamphlet attributes the strategies of modern nation-building to ancient kings like Sam Saen Thai. This is a reflection of the difficult situation of searching for national identity and stability in post-colonial Laos, though through the means of strong propagandistic prejudices.

Now and then, the chosen kings of Lan Sang serve as the tools to boost the status of the respective government and to legitimatise its authority as heirs of the great Lao kingdom of Lan Sang. Thus, by erecting monuments of Fa Ngum and other heroic figures of the past, the Lao government today assumes the role of a defender of the Lao nation and traditional Lao culture – at the expense of the ideological construction of a socialist “multi-ethnic Lao people” (*pasason lao banda phao*) and again marginalizing the minorities in the national discourse. Yet, the ideal of the revolutionary struggle still pervades the official historiography of the LRPR. Because revolutionary criteria have priority within the choice of national heroes, only a careful selection of the former kings seems to be acceptable for the government. The Party increasingly appears to be symbolically close to the abolished monarchy, though. It is still hard to predict to what extent this strategy of self-legitimization by an upgrading of the royal past of Laos might undermine the legitimacy of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

The historiographic and iconographic reconstructions of Lao history and identity that are analysed in this article refer to the search for national heroes in times of social, political, and cultural crisis and change. National heroes may function as outstanding examples for the population, as ancestors of present-day rulers or as representations of central ideas and values of the national identity. In the case of Laos they represent values of traditional Buddhist statecraft (e.g., the ideal of the righteous ruler) as well as modern political and military strategies. This is the core of the relevance of former kings of Lan Sang for the Lao nation-state under the Royal Lao Government and the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party respectively.

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