

# Lao Filmmakers Break Free from their Cultural Chains

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## Abstract

In this paper I analyze the evolution of Lao National Cinema by looking at several films, including: *Xieng Peun Chak Thong Hai Hin (The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars)*, *Boua Deng (Red Lotus)*, *Pai Thang (At the Horizon)*, and the Academy Award nominee *Neerakhoon (The Betrayal)*. I argue that since 1975, the Lao PDR government has acted as a hegemonic force, controlling the content and creative decisions of Lao film directors. Before the death of Kaysone Phomvihane in 1992, all feature films produced in Laos were propagandistic. Since his death and the collapse of communism in Europe, Lao films have slowly included more representations of religion and spirituality. Though films today still must pass through the Lao PDR Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and receive a stamp of approval before being distributed and broadcast, the tight grip and control of the government has relaxed somewhat. Only recently, with the government's more tolerant views toward the international capitalist market, Lao filmmakers are beginning to tell stories free of complete government control. This has led to a slowly evolving yet unique Lao National Cinema, not quite liberated from the oppressive creative cultural constraints of the political past, but with less creative control exercised by the Lao government. Though present-day Laos is more relaxed than it was in 1975, filmmakers must still navigate a difficult path as they try to create and publish their films.

## Introduction

In their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat wrote, "Just as people of color form the global majority, so the cinemas of peoples of color form the global majority, and it is only the notion of Hollywood as the only 'real' cinema that obscures this fact" (Shohat and Stam 1994). In film studies, *Hollywoodcentrism* replaces Eurocentrism. Teshome Gabriel, the late University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) film studies scholar, takes this one step further when he defines Third Cinema as a cinema of decolonization and liberation. The goal of most National Cinema movements is to find a liberated and unique cultural voice that is different from the dominant Western films and stories found in Hollywood. Liberated National Cinema movements also aim to be creatively free from the control of hegemonic forces, especially those of their own governments. One Lao filmmaker, Som Ock Southiponh, is one of the first feature filmmakers in Laos. As the owner of a French-themed bakery in Vientiane, Som Ock was probably not entirely content leaning on the cultural vestiges of French

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colonial power just to make ends meet. Outside his day job, he has devoted his time to creating a Lao National cinema that does not rely on cultural influences from the West. He originally started out making Lao propaganda films for the government and he has been trying to establish a Lao cinema movement since then; he is still set on creating, as he puts it, a “domestic Laotian cinema culture, one that is independent and that captures the essence of Laos as a country, its people, and its deep-rooted culture and arts.” The landscape of Lao National Cinema has changed dramatically since 1975, and in recent years there has been an increase in Lao films and filmmakers. Many up-and-coming filmmakers built on Southiponh’s foundation and continue to carve out a culturally unique Lao National Cinema.

In this paper, I explore the evolution of Lao cinema from the 1980s to the present and I show that the political and cultural context surrounding the production of each film, and the main theme and content of each film, directly correlates with the shifting ideologies of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). I posit that the cultural and political climate in Laos has changed dramatically since 1975, allowing recent Lao filmmakers to break free from the stylistic and cultural influences of the propaganda of the Lao PDR, even if the political system in Laos has hardly changed since 1975 and filmmakers continue to be constrained by the political system in the country. In addition, I argue that the political, cultural, and creative constraints placed on filmmakers by the hegemonic Lao government buried the filmmakers’ creative voices for over 30 years. I show that the Lao PDR was very much anti-West in its ideologies and was a key to the creation of the Lao PDR’s “new socialist man” ideology. The Lao PDR exerted heavy creative control over films produced in the early post-1975 period. In this way, it severely limited the progression of a unique Lao National Cinema. Lao directors are only beginning to emerge as voices in a national cinema of liberation where they are creating a new wave of Lao cinema that explores neo-royalist Buddhist traditions, revealing a deep-rooted personal and collective spirituality. Lao filmmakers are more readily sharing their unique creative voices and beginning, albeit within a limited scope, to break free from the creative and financial control of the Lao PDR to create an emerging and liberated Lao National Cinema.

I will focus here on several Lao films, all produced after 1975. The fictional films are the first two feature films to appear in Laos after 1975, produced by the National Cinema Department and sponsored by the Lao PDR government both conceptually and financially. *At the Horizon* (2011), is one of the most recent feature films and highlights a new movement coined “the Lao New Wave.” *The Betrayal* (2008) is co-directed by a Lao-American refugee and a member of the American Society of Cinematographers, Ellen Kuras.

### **Dependence on the LPDR “Propaganda” Model**

*Xieng Peun Chak Thong Hai Hin* (*The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, 1983) was the first feature film produced by the Lao communist government after 1975 and was a co-production with Vietnam. The film employed two directors, one from Laos, Somchith Pholsena, and another from Vietnam, Pham Ky Nam. This was the first feature film produced under the financial and cultural control of the Lao PDR. It is no coincidence that, in the creation of their first post-1975 feature film, the Lao PDR

government relied on the same country that helped them overthrow the Royal Lao Government (RLG) . The co-production brought the same entities together that had produced the wartime coup and the government restructuring between the Vietnamese and the leaders of the Lao PDR. Kaysone Phomvihane, the leader of the Lao PDR, was half Vietnamese and educated in Hanoi. His ties were unmistakably Vietnamese, and his leadership represented a clean break from a feudal and imperialist-related past (Holt 2009: 170). The support of the Vietnamese became even more apparent after his death in 1992 when, two years later in 1994, the Kaysone Phomvihane National Museum was made possible by generous grants from the Vietnamese government (Holt 2009: 170). As Holt wrote, “Vietnamese support of a state cult centering on Kaysone was unqualified” (Holt, 2009: 170). The film was not a creative masterpiece by any means. In the vein of Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, this co-production was pure propaganda, supporting Kaysone’s political goals, delivered through a vessel of historical fiction.

The film digs into the past, highlighting a period when the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) and the RLG worked together during wartime. The story in the film takes place in 1958, leading up to the day of decoration when the Royal Lao Government (RLG) recognized the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) for their accomplishments and heroic efforts during wartime. The main conflict in the film stems from the decision of the RLG to allow only one representative from the LPF to receive honor on the day of decoration, fearing that too many LPF soldiers near the Capitol could lead to an armed struggle or an overthrow of the current regime. In the film, the RLG are in control of part of the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang. After being denied their request to send troops to be recognized in the Vientiane, the RLG send troops to enforce the government’s decree that only one LPF soldier receive the honor of decoration in the formal Capitol ceremony. Upon hearing this news, the LPF begin planning a middle-of-the-night escape to flee RLG control. The LPF escape being encircled by the Royal Lao Army troops and wage an attack on them. The LPF’s plan works perfectly, as they team with the Hmong and the Vietnamese to fight against intoxicated RLG soldiers. Depictions of both of these ethnic groups become an important cultural part of the film, as does the portrayal of the RLG and the LPF.

In the opening scene of *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, an RLG army general drives his army vehicle in his usual state of inebriation. After nearly driving off a cliff, the commander pulls over to confront a member of the Patriotic Front riding his bicycle and carrying vegetables picked from the garden. As the soldier salutes the commander, the RLG leader pulls the freshly picked vegetables from his bike and stomps on them repeatedly, yet the LPF soldier sustains his salute to the commander. This portrayal of the RLG commander as drunk and irascible is common in the film. In contrast, the LPF soldier’s calm and stoic response to the RLG commander’s tirade is indicative of the portrayal of the members of the Lao Patriotic Front. It implies that the actions of the LPF working class, as they fight back against their privileged RLG urban leaders by the end of the film, are justified, as was the revolution in 1975. This film acts as propaganda for the government of the Lao PDR as it attempts to bury any positive memory of the influence of the RLG.

The LPF, the precursor to the communist Pathet Lao, are portrayed as orderly, physically fit, diligent, and intelligent. In one scene, the LPF conduct a meeting and

everything at the table is perfectly symmetrical and organized. Each of the soldier's helmets is nicely placed on the table in front of them while they conduct business and plan their revolt against the power-hungry rightist government. This contrasts to the RLG officer meetings that resemble drunken parties more than planning sessions. The LPF are seen consistently training in the scenes leading up to the clandestine operation that occurs at the end of the film. The LPF platoon is also clad in white uniforms symbolizing their purity and nobility, while the RLG officers wear traditional army camouflage with red berets—obviously adopted from the French. On the shoulder of the RLG men is their country name *LAOS*, written in English text, in contrast to the Lao-script patch on the LPF soldiers, a subtle allusion to the RLG's supported from the West.

The film includes many themes indicative of films that film theorist Gabriel calls "Third Cinema." The most prominent themes are "armed struggle, class, and rural vs. urban" (Gabriel 1982:15-20). The entire film leads up to an armed struggle against the RLG upper-class enemies on the home front. The final armed battle shows the Vietnamese joining forces with the LPF and the Hmong<sup>2</sup> to overcome the RLG.

This film follows a traditional Hollywood fictional narrative, where the bad guys are bad and the good guys prevail. The film is mostly a spectacle of propaganda and the tone of the film that of a melodrama with two polarized sides. In this sense, the film is still tied to the Hollywood storytelling model. More important than the comparison to Hollywood, however, is the idea that a cultural constraint is controlling what the filmmaker can or is willing to do, stylistically and creatively. Rather than being controlled by a Western colonial power or being heavily influenced by Hollywood, the filmmakers are constrained by their own government's financial backing and censorship.

There's nothing uniquely Lao about the structure of the story or the way it is told; rather the film replicates Western Hollywood narratives with an emphasis on the formal properties of cinema and the three-act Aristotelian storytelling model. The film results in what Frantz Fanon might call an "uncritical imitation of colonialist culture (Gabriel 1982: 7)." And, more importantly, there is no creative deviation from the Lao PDR's model of propaganda. The Lao PDR acts as a hegemonic force on early Lao filmmakers, controlling their creative choices before, during, and after production.

There is also no religious rhetoric or symbolism in the film. Gabriel wrote, "Third World filmmakers attempt to give religion or spirituality a special significance in their works" (Gabriel 1982:18-19). Filmmakers free to tell stories as they wish without government control or censorship often emphasize spirituality to reflect a national cinema rooted in their own culture. However, this is not the case in *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, probably due to a conscious decision by the filmmakers to obey the political ideology of the Lao PDR government, which discouraged religion among the population in the early years in Laos (Holt 2009). In order to force the country to support the Lao PDR, the government initially removed most religious rhetoric and vocabulary from educational and governmental texts. Similar to this control over texts, the content in the first two feature films produced after 1975 were controlled by the

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<sup>2</sup> It's important to note that the post-1975 Lao government portrayed the Hmong as working only with the Pathet Lao. This was an attempt to rewrite history so that it appeared as if the Hmong supported the Pathet Lao and the 1975 revolution. In reality, many Hmong strongly opposed and were enemies of the Pathet Lao.

Lao PDR and any mention of Buddhism or other religious ritual and rhetoric was explicitly omitted. This omission was meant to erase the history of the RLG. In addition to removing the religious vernacular from historical texts, the Lao PDR also infused non-Lao ethnic groups back into their historiography.

In an attempt to link the historiography of nonurbanized ethnic Lao with the Lao PDR and the revolution, *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars* shows the Pathet Lao working with the Hmong to defeat the RLG. In most of the LPF meetings, a Hmong leader is present and often voices his opinion as they plot to defeat the RLG. One of the most trusted soldiers, a young Hmong messenger, travels by horseback to deliver a message to RLG troops. After delivering the message, the commanding RLG soldier decides to hold him captive and play a cruel game. He tells the Hmong messenger that if he can break a horse that the RLG soldiers have not been able to break, he will be released. The soldiers laugh as the Hmong messenger struggles to mount the horse, but then the messenger quickly controls the steed and rides away from his captors. They begin chasing him throughout their camp and stumble over each other repeatedly as the Hmong boy makes his way effortlessly through the middle of their barracks. In the most significant sequence in this scene, the directors use slow motion to emphasize the importance of the Hmong in the Lao revolution. Immediately after the Hmong messenger mounts the horse, the film begins to play in slow motion to show his importance in the fight of the LPF against the RLG. Even he, the lowliest of soldiers in the LPF ranks, can outwit and outrun the highest-ranking Lao RLG soldiers. Here, the filmmaker is choosing to put the Hmong on a higher level than any RLG citizen. The use of slow motion in the clip glorifies the Hmong and puts them on the same level as the LPF soldiers. Through this portrayal of the Hmong, the Lao PDR tried to unify different ethnic minorities and form a historiography that connects the ethnic minorities with the creation of the Lao PDR-led nation-state.

### **Breaking Free From Creative Control**

Cultural vestiges of France's colonialist influence are still evident in Laos today. In Third Cinema and in the creation of national cinema movements, filmmakers often play with or confront cultural influences of colonialist powers in their films to promote decolonization. Som Ock's film, *Boua Deng (Red Lotus 1987)* has elements akin to Gabriel's second category of Third Cinema, in which the films promote "the decolonization process" or are explicitly anti-colonialist. At the same time, Som Ock was still creatively constrained by the financial and creative control of the Lao PDR government. The government still controlled the film language and the way the story was told and the Lao PDR's ideology and censorship made its structural and creative mark on Som Ock's film. However, *Red Lotus* begins to subtly break free from the control of the Lao DPR with slightly more nuanced acting. Som Ock's wife played the main role and their intimate relationship provided a foundation that allowed Som Ock to direct her less melodramatically. Structurally, however, *Red Lotus* still fits the mold of melodrama.

Like *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, *Red Lotus* seems to fit the cast of a traditional Hollywood melodrama in which two sides, one evil and one good, fight until a male hero saves the damsel in distress, and in this case, goes on to defeat the evil

Royalists. Again, the RLG are portrayed as power hungry and the Pathet Lao as pure-hearted symbols of rural Laos. The Lao PDR guided and controlled the message that Som Ock would deliver in the film.

*Red Lotus* takes place on the Bolaven plateau in southern Laos in 1972, in the time leading up to the takeover and defeat of the RLG by the Pathet Lao, and it follows Boua Deng, a young woman living in a rural village in the countryside. Her father, Siang, a Pathet Lao supporter, is taken by the RLG and then Boua Deng suddenly has a new, much younger stepfather, who turns out to be a spy for the RLG. This stepfather has in fact killed Siang before becoming her stepfather. In a prior scene, the commander of Boua Deng's stepfather ordered him to have Boua Deng wed a wealthy RLG-supporting village member. Boua Deng refused because she was in love with Khammanh, a member of the Pathet Lao revolutionary army. In one scene, prior to the ultimate success of the revolution, Boua Deng and Khammanh meet and express their love on the eve before he leaves to fight.

In one strange sequence in the film, Boua Deng's government-spy stepfather is seen voyeuristically taking pictures of her while she bathes. In this portrayal of RLG officials, they are not only dishonest, they are also immoral and debased. In the end, her stepfather tries to kidnap and then rape her, but Khammanh comes to the rescue and shoots the stepfather while his Pathet Lao comrades back him up. The propagandistic theme throughout this film tells the viewer that the pure and virtuous rural Pathet Lao are more honorable and trustworthy than the RLG. The film also reflects the Lao PDR government's views of socialist morality.

Through this film, Southiponh is sending a message that Western modernity can never replace Lao traditional customs. In the film, the rural comes into conflict with the modern. Boua Deng acts as the cultural symbol of Laos, what it once was, and, ideally, what it should be. She wears traditional clothing indicative of rural Laos, and is a symbol of maintaining the national culture. In another clip, Boua Deng's RLG stepfather approaches her with a bag of Western clothes he purchased in the city, and while standing in front of her house deep in her village in the rural countryside, Boua Deng rejects her stepfather's gift. This is a symbolic representation, in which Boua Deng, a symbol of what Laos should stand for, rejects Western culture. This theme supports Gabriel's theory that "Wherever imperialist culture penetrates, it attempts to destroy national culture and substitute foreign culture: therefore, the struggle to preserve the cultural make-up of a society also constitutes a major area of concern for Third World filmmakers" (Gabriel 1982: 16). Another prominent theme focuses on anti-colonialist and anti-Western sentiments while also exploring the clash between the traditional and modern. This is shown through Southiponh's portrayal of members of the RLG who wear Western clothes and dance to Western music at a popular nightclub in Vientiane. At the club, the rest of the Vientiane locals are dressed in Hawaiian button-downs or short-sleeve, collared Izod-brand shirts with white or khaki slacks. The stepfather and his friends drink foreign beers like Heineken, instead of the state established Lao beer, and listen to a band covering the Beatles. On the dance floor, they gyrate and move back and forth like a group of Americans, with no sign of traditional Lao dance. Here, Southiponh depicts members of the US-backed RLG as Western, clearly forgetting their Lao cultural roots. They act as the antithesis to Boua Deng and Khammanh and the rest of the rural Pathet Lao community.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Lao PDR sought to create a “new socialist man” who possessed a high level of revolutionary morality and culture and was guided by a moral life (Pholsena 2006: 58). This new morality is clearly evident in *Red Lotus* in its depiction of the West in the nightclub, and in Boua Deng’s rejection of the West. According to Evans,

Arguably the interpretation given to the morality of the new socialist man by the LPRP was strongly conditioned by the [ethnic] Lao social environment. That influence explains the highly traditional and conservative as well as nationalistic cast of ideology. Reactions against Western fashion, music and decadent morality, exemplified by prostitution or simply the holding of hands in the street, largely reflected the values of elderly people (whose number included the party leadership), who are traditionally guides in such matters, and sexual conservatism of village culture. (Evans 1995:4)

Som Ock reflected this new morality, this new socialist man, in his film through Boua Deng’s character and his rejection of the West. Including the political ideology of the Lao PDR government in his film is a direct result of being controlled by the government’s political philosophy.

Boua Deng is strong and independent and her character is innovative, representing a woman as a powerful leader in Lao society a depiction that supports another theme common to emerging national cinemas—the emancipation of women. “In most Third World films,” Gabriel writes, “we witness the integral participation of women in all aspects of their struggle for decolonization and liberation, including their participation in actual armed struggle” (Gabriel 1982:18). Boua Deng is no doubt portrayed as an empowered woman throughout the film, yet her strong Pathet Lao lover Khammanh still must save her. At the end of the film, Boua Deng’s stepfather holds her at gunpoint in a marshy area in the countryside. Khammanh and his comrades follow the stepfather and one of them shoots him to free Boua Deng, who falls into Khammanh’s arms.

As in *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, there is little mention of religion in the film. The Lao PDR tried to erase many aspects of religious rhetoric that acted as the backbone of Lao cultural heritage, including any symbol of the king or royalty. The Lao PDR controlled information about the past in order to persuade their countrymen to support their own political philosophy. In *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, Evans wrote that “certain topics are not able to be discussed publicly, and discourses about the past, present, and future are monopolized by regimes which also attempt to control memory and the construction of it” (Evans 1998: 6).

After 1975, the Lao PDR government attempted to change the way citizens spoke. At the National Assembly in 1975, it was decided that the Lao language would be used in an administrative setting and people would be banned from using royal language for daily correspondence unless in poetry or others types of literature (Evans 1998:12-13). Evans wrote, “The abolition of royal language saw the attempt at an egalitarian reform of the language and so honorifics, like *sadet* (prince) or *tan* (sir), were pushed aside by the ubiquitous use of *sahay* (comrade)” (Evans 1998:13). This is evident in *Red Lotus* and *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, in which virtually no royal language is used.

Som Ock Southiponh was constrained financially and creatively by the government of the Lao PDR. He said,

Despite its length of 83 minutes, *Red Lotus* was very difficult to make because we had nothing, really nothing. The big problem in making such a film in Laos is that we didn't have money. *Red Lotus* was made for only about US \$5,000, so we had to use a World War II era Soviet camera that had a tendency to speed up at will and a cast that worked for nothing. I must confess that the budget and the 22-day schedule did not allow for much opportunity to shoot everything the way I wanted to. Due to the lack of equipment in Laos, the film was developed and edited in Hanoi, Vietnam, even though it was shot in Vientiane. (Southiponh 2009)

Som Ock reflected further on his experience making the film,

Making *Red Lotus* did make me feel that I would be better off working outside of the State Cinematography Company. I sensed that the only way I could really do the things I would like to do would be to turn independent. That's why I left the company in 1989 in hopes of establishing a small, private video production company. (Southiponh 2009)

Som Ock probably did not want to openly criticize working under a state-run production company, so he simply left. He was trying to set up his own national cinema within the Lao system, but that did not happen. No features were funded domestically in Laos until 2007, with the film *Sabaidee Luang Phrabang*. A new, government-run organization, the National Film Archive and Video Center, was established in 1991 and was the closest thing to resemble a production company. No independent filmmakers could make a living under the tight creative grip of socialist Laos and the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism. A new group of filmmakers are currently attempting to do what Som Ock always meant to do—create a Lao National Cinema that is commercially successful, uniquely Lao, and free from the creative control of the government.

### Lao New Wave Cinema

The Lao New Wave (which does not currently include Som Ock Southiponh) is a group of young Lao filmmakers trying to establish a new and unique Lao cinematic style. On their Facebook page, the Lao New Wave Collective wrote, “Our first aim is to change the face of the Lao movie industry” and “some of us are native to this country, and some are not, but our common passion is to produce quality images and stories.” I have met with several filmmakers from the Lao New Wave collective, including one of the founders, Xiasongkham Indouangchanthy, who is currently getting a master of fine arts degree in filmmaking at the City College of New York on a Fulbright scholarship. His going abroad to study is significant because it is an example of Lao cinema slowly spreading globally (he previously studied filmmaking in Australia).

One of the Lao New Wave's most prominent feature films, titled *At the Horizon* (*Pai Thang* 2011), reflects the growing movement in Lao cinema with a new emphasis on spirituality and religion. First-time feature filmmaker Anysay Keola directed *At the Horizon* after he completed a bachelor's degree in film in Australia and while in the course of completing his master's degree from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

The film follows the connecting stories of two men, Sin and Lout. Sin is a well-to-do son of a prominent Vientiane family who frequents nightclubs, listens to rap music, and seems intent on wearing Western clothes. One night, after a drunken fight, an intoxicated Sin drives his car through Vientiane. Distracted, he briefly looks up only to hit and kill the wife and child of a mute, rural man named Lout. Lout and Sin's lives collide when Lout tracks him down, aiming to enact revenge for the deaths of his wife and child, an act that is contrary to his kind demeanor as a loving father and husband. The rural and urban collide in this film as Lout confronts Sin and holds him captive while deciding what to do with him.

The film explores themes that juxtapose the urban and rural and the rich and poor. In one scene, the filmmakers cut from Sin listening to rap music in his leather interior Sport Utility Vehicle to Lout, who is seen driving along the countryside on a scooter with his wife and daughter, set against a backdrop of a breathtaking sunset. Keola chose to portray the upper class by setting the characters in a club as was done in *Red Lotus*. Sin's clothing and haircut are trendy, while Lout acts as a cultural symbol of the hardworking lower-class family man, determined to provide a more secure financial future for his daughter and wife.

*At the Horizon* differs from films like *Red Lotus* and *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars* in its exploration of spirituality and religion. In an intense plot twist, Sin's wealthy father and his entourage determine where Lout is holding Sin captive. They kill Lout as Sin struggles to stop them. Sin is torn about what he has done to Lout's family. Sin then makes sense of his situation by visiting his local temple and paying respect to Lout. To show that he has matured, Sin places pink sandals on Lout's altar in a cemetery to pay homage to Lout's daughter, who wore pink sandals in the film when she died. He then burns incense in a Buddhist ritual to pay his respects to the deceased. Themes of karma, afterlife, and reincarnation emerge as the story unfolds. In the final scene, Lout's family reunites as they ride together on their motorbike in what seems to be some sort of Buddhist afterlife or reincarnation. Anysay is clearly recognizing an afterlife and the importance of religious philosophy and thought in Laos. This is much different than in the early years of Lao cinema, clearly showing that today the Lao government is open to recognizing religion in their government-approved cultural products. In order to become more competitive in the international economic scene, beginning in the mid-1980s, the Lao PDR sought to utilize Buddhism, and became more open to the outside capitalist world. Economic and social liberalization favored an atmosphere of regulatory relaxation that led to the resurgence of Buddhist popular practices in everyday Lao culture (Pholsena 2006: 11). The collapse of communism thus led the regime to find a new form of Lao nationalism. As Evans states,

During the liberalization of the 1980s Buddhism, although flourishing, was still subordinate to the party's long-term aim of building socialism in Laos. The collapse of communism in Europe changed all that and the regime has turned increasingly to Buddhism in its search of new ideologies of legitimation, and of a reformulated Lao nationalism. This is especially apparent in the importance the media places on photographic or filming for TV the party leaders making merit during major Buddhist festivals. (Evans 1998: 67)

Evans calls this resurgence of Buddhism a “re-Buddhification of the Lao state” (Evans 1998: 67). The main character of the film isn’t characterized as completely evil or good. He is more complex, and he goes through a process of change and maturity.

*At the Horizon* breaks free from traditional Western storytelling and the stringent creative control of the Lao PDR’s strict political philosophy through its nonlinear story structure and in its reflection of inner spirituality. The film jumps between present reality and the past as it weaves in flashbacks, playing with narrative structure and time. The viewer is left to wonder what time and space they are actually witnessing.

Another film, produced and directed by a Lao refugee living in the United States, also uses nonlinear storytelling techniques, but first begins with the story of coming to America. *The Betrayal*, co-directed by Thavisouk Prasavath and Ellen Kuras, follows the story of Thavisouk’s family as they migrate from Laos to America between 1975 and 1980. The family was separated from their father, who was a soldier in the US-based Royal Lao Army and, as he put it, “told foreigners where to bomb in his own country.” Thavisouk’s family was left to fend for themselves and was ostracized by their community because of their ties to the former RLG. They bribed an official to smuggle most of the family out of the country into Thailand and were then sent to Brooklyn, New York as refugees. The film follows Thavisouk and his family as they adapt to life in the United States and experience the harsh realities of gang life and poverty over a period of 23 years.

*The Betrayal* explores themes of hybrid cultural identity that show the complexity of a Lao refugee living in America who is making sense of his heritage. Thavisouk recognizes his hybridity and uses the film to critique the government of both his homeland and his adopted land. He finds himself somewhere in the middle, not American and not Lao, and his film’s message is critical of both countries.

In the last phase of Gabriel’s theory of Third Cinema, where filmmakers have evolved and become more independent, the filmmakers “aim at a destruction and construction at the same time; a destruction of the images of colonial or neo-colonial cinema, and a construction of another cinema that captures the revolutionary impulse of the peoples of the Third World” (Gabriel 1982: 95). *The Betrayal*, although it was largely produced in the United States, with some scenes showing the author returning to visit Laos, has a tone that is more akin to the cinema of liberation. It fits more with what Gabriel said when he wrote, “It is a cinema founded on folk culture whose role it is to intervene on behalf of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America who must fight equally for political as well as cultural liberation” (Gabriel 1982: preface-8). In *The Betrayal*, Thavisouk is culturally liberating himself from the post-1975 Lao government, not just the Western world.

Thavisouk and Kuras are critical of the post-1975 Lao government and the United States government throughout the film. Not many Lao refugees have the opportunity to make films and they are rarely able express their criticism of the government that forced them to flee in fear. Thavisouk is one of a handful of Lao filmmakers, and the first to my knowledge to create a mainstream film that is openly critical of the Lao PDR. Though the film is more of a personal story, the underlying message of the film critiques the Lao PDR, pointing out on a personal level how the Lao PDR government tore his family apart while enforcing their political ideologies. Because

of the Lao PDR, Thavisouk lost his father, his brothers and sisters forgot their spiritual Lao heritage, and he was forced to fend for himself in America with little community support, either emotionally or financially, all of which is portrayed in his film.

With high hopes early on in the story, Thavisouk's family flew to the United States as beneficiaries of an American fiscal sponsor and were brought to a two-room apartment that they were forced to live in with two other families, one small Vietnamese family and a family of six Cambodians. Their large family of 11 took up the majority of the space in the small apartment. This living situation symbolized his family's struggle to find their own identity. In the film, Thavisouk comments that he feels like he is just another Asian. He says, "They'd call me chink, gook, dirty Cambodian, and slant eyes." And then, "They didn't know who or what a Laotian was." When they first got off the plane, Thavisouk thought they had landed on the wrong continent. He thought they were in Africa, because in Laos they taught him that white people lived in America and Europe and black people lived in Africa. He did not know that the United States was so multicultural. Thavisouk had to make sense of his own identity as part of the Lao diaspora now living in America and a part of that melting pot, and he tries to make sense of his role as a Lao-American throughout the film.

Referring to diasporic and exilic filmmakers, Hamid Naficy, a professor at Northwestern University, writes about diaspora filmmakers. "As partial, fragmented, and multiple subjects, these filmmakers are capable of producing ambiguity and doubt about the taken-for-granted values of their home and host societies. They can also transcend and transform themselves to produce hybridized, syncretic, performed, or virtual identities." He continues, "People in diaspora have an identity in their homeland before their departure, and their diasporic identity is constructed in resonance with this prior identity. Diasporic consciousness is horizontal and multisided, involving not only the homeland but also the compatriot communities elsewhere. As a result, plurality, multiplicity, and hybridity are structured in dominance among the Diasporas" (Naficy 2001: 14).

In Thavisouk's case, he is conflicted about his homeland. He does not idealize his home country, but seeks to navigate his complicated relationship with Laos and with America. He does not nurture a collective memory of his homeland, not idealized per se, but in a poetic and painful way. As he remembers his homeland, he confronts his current identity as a Lao-American fighting back and critiquing both countries. In this sense he is part of the revolutionary impulse evident in the more progressive stages of Gabriel's theories of Third Cinema. Thavisouk is exploring and analyzing the politics of his homeland along with the politics in America.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for Lao living in America is making sense of their role and identity within their own families. Like Thavisouk's family, many members of the Lao diaspora are without one or more of their parents or their siblings and extended family members. In *The Betrayal*, Thavisouk struggles to understand and perform his duty within his own family. In one scene, Thavisouk talks with his mother about making sense of his role as the eldest son trying to step in as a leading figure in the family. Thavisouk struggles because his father, who, many years after the rest of the family, eventually makes it to America, has a new family and Thavisouk's siblings are left without his support. Talking to his mother, Thavisouk says, "All of these crazy problems are tangling with my life and they are your responsibility, not mine."

Thavisouk is left grasping to understand his own identity within his family. This is a more internal type of identity struggle, another layer of complexity added to his situation.

Thavisouk portrays how American culture is invading his Lao heritage and religion as he questions his role as a Lao-American. Gabriel wrote, "Wherever imperialist culture penetrates, it attempts to destroy national culture and substitute foreign culture" (Gabriel 1982: 16). This theme is prevalent in various parts of *The Betrayal*. His sisters and brothers join gangs and Thavisouk struggles against his role in the family in America. Near the beginning, the film discusses America's role in the clandestine war in Laos. The United States was ultimately responsible for dropping hundreds of thousands of bombs in Laos, and then pulled its troops out when the Communists took over. The Royalists were left to fend for themselves and many were sent to concentration camps. In its portrayal of this, the film is a protest against America. Thavisouk blames the United States as the cause of the war that ultimately forced his family out of Laos and into America. In America, gang life helped destroy another part of their family. Through these facts and visuals, the film blames the United States for many of his family's problems. He is frustrated that the transition to America has changed his family culturally and it is clear that by moving there, the family has lost part of themselves, part of their unique Lao culture and heritage.

Thavisouk breaks free from the cultural constraints of the post-1975 Lao government in his representation of and openness about religion and spirituality in the film. Part of this is because he no longer lives in Laos and is co-directing and producing the film with an American. He shows that he tried to hold onto his religion but gangs and life in America soon overpowered his spirituality. The images of the film take on a spiritual quality that differs from mainstream Hollywood films or commercially driven documentaries. There are several lyrical and poetic scenes of fishermen and Lao natives working in the rivers and lakes of Laos. The elderly woman who narrates the scenes with Lao lyrical poetry supports the idea that Lao culture and heritage is rooted in deep layers of connection with ancestors and a life beyond this one. Kuras, a world-renowned cinematographer and member of the prestigious American Society of Cinematographers, shot these scenes in Laos and her shooting expertise combines well with Thavisouk's knowledge of Lao history and lyrical poetry to effectively portray Lao spirituality. The images are breathtaking and help to articulate while at the same time questioning a deep-seeded Lao spirituality. These images help the viewer realize what is at stake—the war started by the Lao PDR and carried out by the United States is now causing this beauty to disappear. These subtle and beautiful spiritual images are an attempt to infuse Lao spirituality and tradition back into their cultural rhetoric and also to critique the Lao PDR's role in destroying a part of the Lao cultural tradition and heritage.

The end of the film connects Thavisouk with his ancestral and spiritual Lao roots, despite the interference of the Lao and US governments. Thavisouk returns to Laos to reunite with his sisters who were left behind when his family came to America. Showing this scene at the end of the film is symbolic because it shows the viewer that he is liberated from the United States and it emphasizes the importance of maintaining and connecting with his Lao roots. He needs to maintain his language, his heritage, and his family. He is not going to let the Lao PDR stop him from staying connected to his

family and his faith. At the end of the film, Kuras elegantly films the most emotional and meaningful moment in the film. Thavisouk arrives at his old house and his relatives point out his grandmother, whom he has not seen since he left and only knew as a boy. They embrace as they both weep. His grandmother is the symbol of the ancient heritage and, after the journey of Thavisouk and his family, this heritage is what is most important. Much of the spiritual connection between relatives and ancestors was lost or buried as a result of the Lao PDR forcing thousands, like Thavisouk's family, to flee the country and bury their religious heritage. The film is Thavisouk's chance to voice his opinion and illustrate the damage done by the Lao PDR and how it changed the lives of citizens who were forced to leave their spiritual homeland. Thavisouk is one of a small group of Lao filmmakers still practicing today.

Another Lao filmmaker, Mattie Do, also managed to break into the international filmmaking community. In May 2014, Mattie, the only Lao female director in contemporary Laos, was invited to participate in La Fabrique des Cinemas du Monde at the Cannes Film Festival and Market. Following the success of her film *Chanthaly*, she was offered the opportunity to apply to the prestigious program that helps filmmakers from developing nations grow their film projects, find funding, and that pairs them with successful film mentors. Mattie talked about the new opportunity: "Laos has never had this opportunity before, and even when I applied, I didn't think it was even a remote possibility I could be accepted. Attending and participating in the activities of the Cannes Film Festival and Market is a dream come true! It's an honor that Douangmany Soliphanh and I can go to represent Laos during this historic event" (Lao 2014). This is the first time a Lao film director has had a formal presence at the Cannes Film Festival. She was accepted with her second feature film, titled *Nong Hak*. Her film is being funded by the Pepsi Lao Brewing Company. This type of private financial backing is a significant change from the point of the first feature film produced in Laos after 1975, *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars*, which was funded entirely by the Lao PDR and Vietnamese governments. This marks a shift in the future of Lao cinema, where filmmakers can break free from the financial control of the state and focus on creating something fresh that does not simply echo the political platforms of the government.

## Conclusions

Lao cinema has evolved dramatically since 1975. During this period, Lao directors have been under the strict direction of the Lao PDR, and have been creatively constrained by their political situation. For over 30 years, the Lao PDR acted as a hegemonic force controlling the content and creative decisions of Lao film directors. The Lao PDR controlled the content, style, and structure of Lao directors' films and censored all films following the 1975 revolution. Though films today still must pass through the Lao PDR's Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and receive approval before going on to distribution and broadcast, the tight grip and control by the Lao PDR has relaxed. Only recently, with the Lao PDR government's more relaxed views toward the international capitalist market, Lao filmmakers are beginning to tell stories without being fully controlled by the government. This new freedom has led to a slowly evolving Lao National Cinema, liberated from the oppressive creative cultural constraints of the political past.

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